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COM 337 Case Study

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Case Study: The Differences in the Reporting of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman Case between “Politics Nation” by Rev. Al Sharpton and Reporters from The New York Times

1. INTRODUCTION

After researching and studying twelve transcripts of Reverend Al Sharpton’s TV show on MSNBC titled “Politics Nation,” and twelve news stories from The New York Times of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, I conclude that “Politics Nation” belongs to the commentary section of the information neighborhood. I also conclude that the coverage from “Politics Nation” did not follow four principles in the Elements of Journalism, which are verification, independence, forum for public criticism, and comprehensive and proportional, in comparison to New York Times’ coverage of the case. Throughout 2012 and 2013, both “Politics Nation” and the New York Times consistently reported on and covered the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. On February 26, 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot dead by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. Zimmermann, who was a neighborhood-watch volunteer, saw Martin walking around the neighborhood and thought he looked suspicious. Zimmerman was not arrested until April 2012, and his trial for second-degree murder did not begin until June

2013. The case sparked global outrage and extensive media coverage. In July 2013, Zimmerman was found not guilty by a jury.

“Politics Nation” by Rev. Al Sharpton

“Politics Nation” is a political talk show hosted by Reverend Al Sharpton on MSNBC News. The show has been running since 2011. Al Sharpton is a minister, civil rights activist, and belongs to the Democratic party. On “Politics Nation,” he consistently talked about and presented important information about the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. He also frequently brought the Martin family, as well as their family attorney, onto the show. Furthermore, he frequently brought on former prosecutors, legal analysts and other reporters to get their insight and expertise on the Martin and Zimmerman case.

The New York Times Coverage

Various reporters from The New York Times consistently and accurately reported on the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case when the shooting first occurred and throughout the duration of the trial. The New York Times provided objective information about the shooting, and in my opinion spent equal time reporting on both Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. Through my research of twelve New York Times articles, I found that the reporters consistently upheld all nine of the principles of journalism, and remained a reliable news source throughout the duration of the case in comparison to “Politics Nation” by Al Sharpton.

2. PRINCIPLES OF JOURNALISM

Principle #3: Verification

The first principle that I examined for this case study is the third principle of journalism, which states that “its essence is a discipline of verification.” Essentially, journalists need to maintain a consistent method for verifying information and sources in the news stories that they write. This method consists of being transparent and honest about where sources and information are coming from in a news story, seeking out multiple witnesses and various sides to a story, and overall just disclosing as much information as possible within a story.

Throughout the twelve transcripts of “Politics Nation” that I researched, I found various examples that show that Sharpton did not uphold this verification principle of journalism. First, during Sharpton’s March 21, 2012 show, he was interviewing Trayvon Martin’s father, when he said “and then, I understand, they drug tested him and not Zimmerman?” when talking about Trayvon Martin. Sharpton randomly revealed that the police drug tested Martin but not Zimmerman, and does not explain how he got this information or where he verified it. I was very confused when he randomly revealed this information. The next example is from Sharpton’s March 28, 2012 show, when he was interviewing a reporter that broke a story about how the former Sanford police chief, the police investigation supervisor, and the Florida state attorney allegedly all met up together just hours after Martin was shot and killed. The reporter said, “I think what’s important about this is that if what this source told me today is true, then we’re seeing a much greater level of personal involvement by the former state attorney in charge of this case.” This shows that this reporter broke the story even though she didn’t confirm or verify the information given by the source. In response, Sharpton said, “This could be a huge development

if the source is correct,” which further proves that Sharpton included unconfirmed information on his show. This goes against the third principle of journalism, which is verification.

On the other hand, the New York Times coverage did a good job of upholding the verification principle of journalism. The New York Times reporters consistently verified their information and sources, as well as reached out to multiple different sources for comments. For example, New York Times reporters Dan Berry, Serge F. Kovalski, Campbell Robertson, and Lizette Alvarez, in their April 1, 2012 news story headlined “Race, Tragedy and Outrage Collide After a Shot in Florida,” reported about the backstory of what was happening in Trayvon Martin’s neighborhood prior to the shooting. They reported that there were seven burglaries that occurred in the neighborhood, which is why Zimmerman was a neighborhood-watch volunteer. The story included a quote from a resident of the neighborhood, in which he stated that “there were Trayvon-like dudes with their pants down.” The New York Times reporter followed the verification principle by reaching out to all sides of the situation and getting comments from multiple different people. Another example is from a May 16, 2012 news story headlined “Trayvon Martin Case Shadowed by Series of Missteps” by Serge F. Kovalski, which proved that the New York Times consistently verified information about how the Sanford Police Department handled the case poorly. Kovalski wrote that “In interviews over several weeks, law enforcement authorities, witnesses and local elected officials identified problems with the initial investigation.” The reporter disclosed where and how they were able to verify this information.

Principle #4: Independence

The second principle that I examined for this case study is the fourth principle of journalism, which states that “its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover.” When journalists are completely independent and do not have a vested interest in the news story that they are reporting, they gain credibility and reliability. Journalists need to focus on informing the public in an objective way, and should try not to be personally affected by the news story in any way. I believe that during the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, the New York Times reporters did a really good job at remaining independent and impartial. The reporters never included any hint of opinion or bias in their coverage; they simply reported the facts and the information that the public needed to know in order to make informed decisions about the situation for themselves.

Through my research and analysis of “Politics Nation” transcripts, I found that Al Sharpton did not maintain an independence from the news stories he was covering, specifically with the Trayvon Martin case. It was very evident that Sharpton was personally invested in and affected by the shooting, as were most people in the United States. However, it’s extremely important for journalists to take a step back and present the facts in an objective way, and it was clear that Sharpton struggled to do so. In almost every transcript that I analyzed, I found that Sharpton clearly shared his opinion about the situation. For example, during his March 12, 2012 show, he said, “I mean, there’s clearly a case here that there is no doubt the young man was killed. There is no doubt by Zimmerman’s admission that he did it, and there is no doubt that he was not under life extenuating circumstances unless iced tea and skittles are considered a threat.” He is not just presenting facts and information in this quote; you can tell that he is sharing his opinion. Another example occurred during his March 20, 2012 show, when he said, “Trayvon

was never pursuing him [Zimmerman]. Therefore could never have been a threat for him. And therefore, you can't use self-defense against something you were trying to chase down. He should be arrested." Throughout his coverage of the case, Sharpton made it very clear that he wanted to see Zimmerman get arrested and charged for murder. Although a lot of the country was in agreement with Sharpton, as a journalist, he had the responsibility of remaining independent and not having a vested interest in the story.

Principle #5: Forum for Public Criticism

The next principle that I examined for this case study is the fifth principle of journalism, which is a "forum for public criticism." News outlets and media facilitate a means of public discussion about critical issues and debates circulating around nationally and globally. The best and most effective public discussion occurs when the public receives verified information and facts from reporters in order to make informed decisions as news consumers, and not biased information. Also, reporters should cover all sides of a debate, not just the most popular side of a debate. The New York Times consistently facilitated an effective means of public discussion and criticism through its coverage of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case throughout 2012 and 2013. The New York Times reporters highlighted all sides of the debate and situation, not just the most popular one at the time. They reported on equal information about Martin and Zimmerman, both the good and the bad. The New York Times also informed the public with facts instead of opinions, which Al Sharpton failed to do so.

On the other hand, Al Sharpton struggled to facilitate an effective forum for public discussion and criticism in "Politics Nation." There are various examples that prove that

Sharpton was only interested in highlighting one viewpoint or side to the debate. He consistently spoke to Trayvon Martin's family to get more information about who Trayvon really was and to show his support for them, but never reached out to George Zimmerman's friends or family for comments. For example, during his March 12, 2012 show, while interviewing the Martin family, he asked them, "What kind of young man was Trayvon? What type of person was your son?" Furthermore, during his March 19, 2012 show, when talking about the Martin family, he said "They deserve this nation's support, and we're coming to give it to him." Although the Martin family wholeheartedly deserved all the respect and media attention they were getting from Sharpton, it was evident that Sharpton was only highlighting one viewpoint of a situation, which goes against his responsibility as a journalist.

Principle #6: Comprehensive & Proportional

The last principle that I examined is the sixth principle of journalism, which states that "it must keep the news comprehensive and proportional." It's extremely important for journalists to include all important information that news consumers need to be informed about in a news story. Journalists need to include all information that can affect the outcome of the situation. Sharpton did not do well at upholding this principle of journalism. He frequently left out important information about the case throughout his coverage. For example, when reporting on the 911 audio call that revealed a man screaming in the background, Sharpton left out critical information and details. He did not mention how Trayvon Martin's father initially told police that it was not his son screaming in the background of the audio recording, which the New York Times reported. Sharpton neglected to include crucial and important details about the case.

Through my research, I found that the New York Times did a good job of providing important background information about both Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman in its coverage of the case, which Sharpton failed to do. Although most of the country was in agreement about their opinion on the shooting, Sharpton had a tendency to report positive information about Trayvon and negative information about Zimmerman. The New York Times reported both positive and negative information about both Trayvon and Zimmerman. For example, on April 1, 2012, in a news story headlined “Race, Tragedy and Outrage Collide After a Shot in Florida” reported by Dan Berry, Serge F. Kovalski, Campbell Robertson, and Lizette Alvarez, the reporters wrote, “But Trayvon was a teenager, not an angel. In his last year at his high school in north Miami-Dade County, he has received three suspensions – for tardiness, for graffiti and, most recently, for having a baggie with a trace of marijuana in his backpack.” The New York Times also reported on crucial information about the trial that Sharpton failed to do so in his coverage. For example, in the July 8, 2013 story headlined “Trayvon Martin’s Father Says Screams on 911 Call Were His Son’s” written by New York Times reporter Lizette Alvarez, discussed the 911 audio recording. Alvarez wrote that “Two days after the shooting, Mr. Martin went to the Sanford police for an update on the investigation. He listened to the 911 call, where cries for help could be heard in the background. Asked by an officer whether he heard his son’s voice, a distraught Mr. Martin responded, ‘No,’ officer Chris Serino, the investigator, told the jury. A second officer within earshot of Mr. Martin that day also testified that Mr. Martin responded ‘no’ to the question.” I was surprised to read this information after reading through the transcripts of “Politics Nation” because Al Sharpton did not mention this crucial piece of information anywhere in his coverage.

3. COMPARISON BETWEEN OUTLETS

Differences in Coverage

Overall, there is a significant difference in the coverage of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case reported by Al Sharpton in “Politics Nation” and in the coverage reported by the New York Times. The New York Times consistently upheld all of the principles of journalism in their coverage, while Al Sharpton failed to do so. Sharpton struggled to consistently verify his sources and information, as well as keep an independent stance from his news stories and include all the various viewpoints in his news stories. He frequently and unapologetically shared his opinion on the shooting and the trial. However, he still did a good job at frequently bringing in experts on the subjects he spoke about. He brought in experts like prosecutors, police officers, legal experts, other news reporters and more to get their insight on the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. In comparison, I found that the New York Times was an extremely credible and reliable source of news for this case, as it provided all of the facts without adding in any sort of bias or opinion. The reporters remained independent throughout the duration of this coverage, even though it is difficult to remain unbiased when discussing a topic like this. The New York Times provided reliable and accurate information so that news consumers could make informed decisions about the case, which is the main goal of journalism. Overall, I found that “Politics Nation” was mostly an unreliable source of information during this case, and that the New York Times was an extremely reliable source during this case.

Sharpton's Information Neighborhood

After analyzing twelve of Al Sharpton's transcripts of his show "Politics Nations" during the coverage of the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case, I believe that his show falls into the commentary information neighborhood. Although Al Sharpton did provide a lot of news on his show, he provided too much of his own opinion to make it independent. As he provided important news information to his viewers, he also added in his own comments and opinions. At times, it was difficult to tell whether or not he was providing information or simply just his own opinion. I think that "Politics Nation" is definitely an example of a commentary information neighborhood.

4. LESSONS THAT NEWS CONSUMERS SHOULD TAKE AWAY

Overall, the main lesson that savvy news consumers should take away from this case study is to be careful about where they are getting their news from. Although "Politics Nation" is a very well-respected news show on MSNBC, there is a lot of added opinion and commentary, which leads to bias. This bias affects the way that certain information is presented and interpreted, and affects news consumers and their ability to make informed decisions about the news that they are consuming. I think that news consumers need to be wary about where they are getting their information from, especially when it comes to highly-polarized and publicized situations and cases like the Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman case. News consumers should first look to reliable news outlets such as the New York Times to get the confirmed facts

and information about the situation, and then turn to news commentary such as “Politics Nation” later on once they get all of the correct facts and have made an informed decision based on objective news.

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