

CONTRASTS IN NEWS COVERAGE:

A qualitative framing analysis of “a” list bloggers and newspaper articles reporting on the jena 6



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Most Americans had never heard of Jena, a small town of about 3500 residents in central Louisiana. For some the story begins on August 31, 2006 when a black student jokingly asked for permission to sit under the “white only” tree in the high school yard. After being assured by a school administrator that the “white only” meaning was a myth, the student and friends sat under the tree. Two nooses were found hanging from the tree the next day. Different interpretations for the nooses existed, including a prank aimed at white rodeo team members, but some later considered it be a racist message to black students. Regardless, the white students were punished, and the incident passed without much notice until several months later. For others, the story begins on December 4, 2006, when white student Justin Barker was hit from behind, knocked unconscious, and then beaten by six black students; Barker was taken to the local hospital and released later that evening. Within 48 hours, Robert Bailey, Jr., along with five other black students—soon christened the “Jena Six”—were arrested and charged with aggravated second-degree battery;



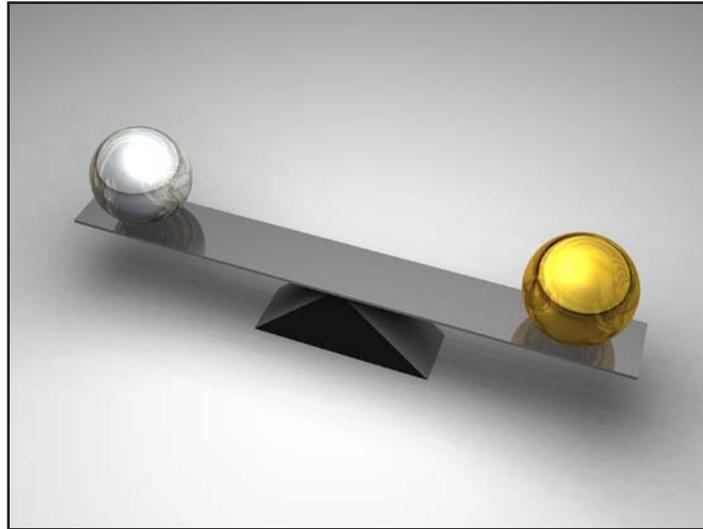
the charges were later amended to attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy to commit second-degree murder. One of the students, Mychal Bell, was believed to have initiated the attack; he had a prior criminal record that included another battery charge, and was kept in jail for several months.¹ This situation gained national attention, including comments from Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. By the time of the trial, the charges were reduced from attempted murder to aggravated second-degree battery and conspiracy to commit aggravated second-degree battery.² In the months that followed, people across the world formed groups, held rallies, and posted on blogs expressing their opinions about the event and the students involved in the attack.

Of note is that the events of Jena did not actually hit mainstream news until August 2007. Craig Franklin, a journalist for *The Jena Times* argued that the mainstream news media engaged in “lazy” reporting on the Jena 6, and that the majority of reports on Jena 6 are one sided, based on mis-information found in blogs: “The media got most of the basics wrong. I have never before witnessed such a disgrace in professional journalism. Myths replaced facts, and journalists abdicated their solemn duty to investigate every claim because they were seduced by a powerfully appealing but false narrative of racial injustice.”³ Franklin’s arguments seem supported by a 2005 study suggesting that 51 percent of American journalists use blogs to obtain information on a regular basis, with 28 percent “relying on the information in blogs for day-to-day reporting.”⁴



A blog is a single website, focused on self-publishing documents written by one individual or perhaps a small group; it is shorthand for a “web based daily log book,” or “weblog.” Bloggers are those who write and publish these blogs. Franklin credits the news media’s inaccurate reporting styles, reliance on blogs, and one-sided reporting for making the Jena 6 incident into a large, controversial issue.⁵ Blogs are increasingly playing a larger role in transmitting information to journalists and to Internet news readers. For instance, David Perlmutter argues that bloggers help to compile information about political activity for the public; they also serve as correspondents who are able to access certain information and visit venues in a more feasible way than news journalist. He argues that bloggers help to find and organize information for the public that would otherwise remain unreported. Furthermore, these bloggers serve as critics of the mainstream news media, its information, and the way it is presented.⁶ Although online sources such as blogs serve several purposes and are slowly drawing additional audience share, 46% of

Americans of all ages still turn to a more traditional outlet of information such as newspaper articles or broadcast news for their information needs.⁷ With the growing use of blogs, scholars are beginning to explore the relationship between blogs and the mainstream news media. Recognizing the potential influence of blogs, Stephen D. Reese, Lou Rutigliano, Kideuk Hyun, and Jaekwan Jeong explored the mapping of the blogosphere in terms of its connection with the news media, its geographical boundaries, and its links to political affiliations. After conducting a content analysis of six highly rated blogs, they found that the blogs, although separate from the mainstream news media in terms of their status and rank, still relied on professional news stories for information. The blogs used facts from these stories, “accepting



them at face value and using them to form their own arguments, reinforce views, and challenge opponents.”⁸

Tanni Haas argues that, contrary to popular belief, news blogs and mainstream news media share more similarities than differences. Among the myths of the blogosphere’s alleged power is the “ability to steer mainstream news media coverage and force changes in the upper echelons of the world of politics and journalism.”⁹ In addition, many assume that blogging provides an alternate style of journalism by allowing ordinary consumers to become active members of the news reporting process, thus bypassing the news media and its gatekeeping process. This, in theory, allows news consumers to read multiple perspectives from a range of sources due to a blog’s “interactivity, linking to other sites, and juxtaposing news stories and commentaries.”¹⁰ This diversity allows consumers to define their own truth, rather than be subjected to one sided facts that may define truth for them.¹¹

Despite these popular assumptions and expectations for blogs, Haas argues that multiple research studies prove differently. Rather than impacting the topics discussed in mainstream news and introducing new information to the public, many blogs feature the same topics and information as the news media. When a story covered by bloggers was eventually picked up by the news media, it is questionable if this was due to the blog coverage or other circumstances. Haas finds it common for bloggers, even those who claim to recognize the news media’s biases, to support and reinforce mainstream news coverage by linking to its information rather than alternative sources.¹²

Our knowledge of the Jena 6 is intimately linked with reportorial practices of both mainstream news and blogs. Certainly the way the public receives information affects its opinions and beliefs; thus, reporting about the case of the Jena 6, because of its racially controversial nature, could possibly increase or decrease racial tensions. To explore this issue, and to discover differences between traditional print news and blog reporting, we conducted a qualitatively-based, comparative framing analysis of newspapers and A-list bloggers covering the Jena 6. A closer look at these blogs and newspaper articles provides insight into how the Jena 6 were thematically structured and framed as the story was reported to the world.

Framing

Framing “is the process whereby communicators act—consciously or not—to construct a particular point of

view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more or less noticeable. . . . They are located in the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture at large.”¹³ Frames

are “central organizing ideas within a narrative account of an issue or event; they provide the interpretive cues for otherwise neutral facts.”¹⁴ When the news media uses framing in their relaying of information, they construct the story in a way that encourages readers or viewers to draw the same, or very similar, conclusions.¹⁵ Furthermore, frames serve to “introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way.”¹⁶ Although we do not suggest that all framing is intentional in its design, ultimately it is the news media’s decision *how* to frame a story. Should they frame the story to advance their perspective, that of the target audience, or the views of the people involved in the event or issue?¹⁷



The functions of a frame include “defining a problem, diagnosing a cause, making a moral judgment, and suggesting remedies.”¹⁸ They are embedded within news stories so that they are not easily identifiable by the untrained eye. However, when doing an analysis there are techniques that assist in identifying the use of frames. According to Robert Entman, “text contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments.”¹⁹ William Gamson identified several framing devices—metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images—that are also used to communicate frames.²⁰ During a framing analysis, these framing devices are identified and used to explain the underlying goals of the media when presenting the information to the public.

Framing Analysis

Numerous studies have examined the framing techniques used during the reporting of conflicts and controversy. For example, Shannon Bichard analyzed blogs found on presidential candidate websites, finding that framing devices were used by the candidates in order to advance their perspective to potential voters about issues and the other candidates.²¹ Carolyn Bronstein explored how the print media framed the new feminist movement, finding that they used the same negative frames to discuss feminism as they had in the past – demonization, victimization and agency, goals and rights, personalization, and trivialization. The only difference she found was that the frames were recycled to fit the new time period. The study demonstrated the staying power of established frames; moreover, Bronstein argued that these negative frames affect others’ perceptions and views towards feminism and its perceived purpose.²²

The studies highlighted above provide examples of how the structures of news reports from similar mediums are analyzed in order to identify frames. A comparative framing analysis, on the other hand, compares the framing techniques used by two different mediums or sources. The goal of such a study is to identify, compare, and contrast the framing devices used by both. For example, Jim A. Kuypers conducted a framing analysis of President Bush’s speech to the United Nations in the months following the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the press response to this address, noting that the press critiqued Bush’s use of frames while also advancing its own, press-constructed frames. For example, one theme that was discussed by both Bush and the press was the ‘nature of the enemy.’ Bush framed that theme, the ‘nature of the enemy’ as “evil, implacable, murderers.”²³ The press, on the other hand, minimally discussed Bush’s framing of this theme, but reframed the theme to include the Bush Administration as another enemy. Kuypers found that many of the themes used by Bush were not mentioned or were reframed. As a comparative



analysis, the study demonstrates how different sources of information may highlight different themes and frame information about the same issue in different ways.

Following the ideas of the studies above, we conducted a qualitatively-based, comparative framing analysis on both traditional news sources and an emerging source, blogs. Specifically, we explored the framing techniques used by “A” list blogs and traditional newspaper articles that discuss the events centered on the Jena 6. We analyzed 23 newspaper articles and 28 blog posts.²⁴ An “A” list blog²⁵ is a high readership blog featured on the top 100 popular blogs list published by Technorati.com.²⁶ Although our event occurred in December 2006, national discussion did not begin to appear until June 2007 which is why we analyze articles and blog posts published between June 29, 2007 and October 26, 2007, the time period seeing the most reportorial activity. We examined three of the five most circulated newspapers: *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*.²⁷ Eligible newspaper articles for this analysis had to discuss the Jena 6 in great detail in the majority of the article’s content. It also had to be authored by a member of the newspaper staff and could not be labeled or resemble an opinion piece. The themes and framing devices used by

each paper were examined and compared to those used by four “A” list blogs. This is a close-textual analysis, not a content analysis; thus, we did not begin with pre-established themes and frames. Instead we looked for these in each individual article, and then determined which themes were conveyed throughout the time period we covered. By *themes* we mean “the subject of discussion, or that which is the subject of the thought expressed.”²⁸ They are the broad ideas or areas of focus conveyed within news accounts. We next determined how each theme was framed across time. Specifically, we



looked for those “key words, metaphors, concepts, symbols . . . and [also] names given to persons, ideas, and actions” that shaped understanding of the meaning of the themes.²⁹

“A” list blogs were chosen because of their high likelihood of reaching a larger audience. Blogs considered were not open posts (that is, not anyone in the public could post an entry). Four of the top 100 blogs featured actual detailed information about the Jena 6. Two of the blogs self-identified as liberal and two of the blogs self-identified as conservative.³⁰ The two liberal blogs are *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars*. The two conservative blogs are *Michelle Malkin* and *Newsbusters*. Our search yielded 28 blog posts for analysis. The following sections discuss the framing devices used by each source of information as well as the differences and similarities identified between the two.

Print News Reporting

We discovered three common themes pertaining to the Jena 6—the punishment for the black students, the identity of the alleged attackers, and a description of the event as a whole. The first theme, punishment of the black students, refers to description of the charges pressed after the attack occurred. The identity of the attackers, the second theme, concerned items such as discussion of the age, personalities, race, and school involvement of the students. The third theme, description of the event as a whole, concerned attempts to label, characterize, and define the attack and the events leading up to it. After discovering the recurring themes, we then looked for how those themes were framed in the articles during the coverage period.

The Punishment for the Black Students

All three of the newspapers featured articles that discussed the initial and current charges against the black students. The heaviest focus was on Bell, who was the first to be tried, and who spent the longest time in jail. Bell was initially charged with attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy to commit second-degree murder. Each of the newspapers explained how this charge was reduced to aggravated second-degree battery, of which Bell was

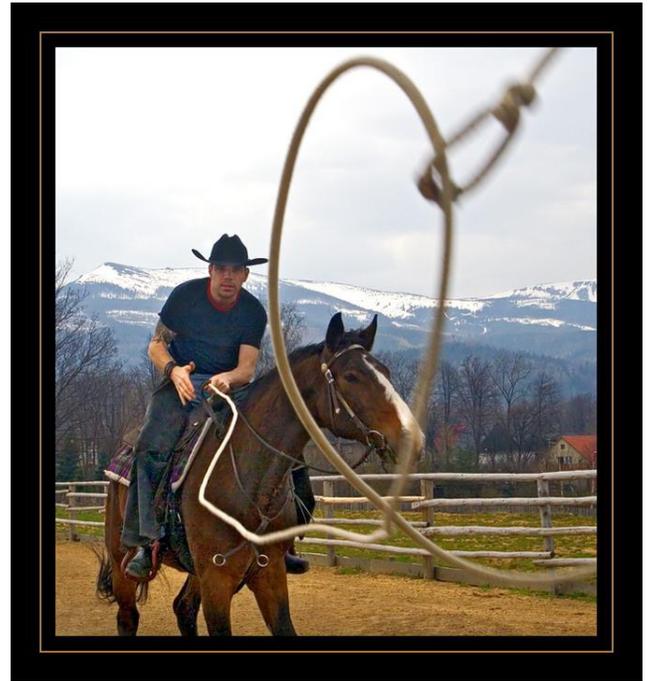
later convicted. However, the newspapers framed this punishment as a *problem* because it was too strict for what the reporters classified as being a simple “schoolyard fight,”³¹ “an altercation,”³² or “a brawl . . . sparked by racial taunts.”³³ Each newspaper framed this theme by explaining the legal charges in comparison to the injuries sustained by the white student, Justin Barker. By doing so, the articles used actual injuries sustained to judge the charges instead of considering the intent of the attackers. Several of the articles explained how Barker was released from the hospital on the same day and attended a school function that evening. *The Washington Post*, for instance, wrote, “the victim. . . was treated at a hospital and released after two hours. He attended a class-ring ceremony later that night.”³⁴ In some articles, this information was placed right before the explanation of the criminal charges pressed against the black students. This produced a coverage suggesting that the attack was a schoolyard fight and not attempted murder.



In numerous articles the charges were mentioned in sentences with descriptive words for the attack. An overt example of this framing technique was “a white student had been *beaten* by six black *school mates*. The white student was treated at a local hospital and released; the black students were charged, *not with assault*, but with attempted murder.”³⁵ Readers see that the black students were accused of trying to murder the other student, but they then read that what they really did was “beat,” or assault, the student. This downplaying of the attack by framing the punishment as being too harsh was continued throughout the coverage. For example, *USA Today* wrote, “the district attorney filed inappropriately severe charges against the black teens.”³⁶ *The Washington Post* referred to the punishment as “the overzealous prosecution of six black high school students charged with beating a white schoolmate.”³⁷

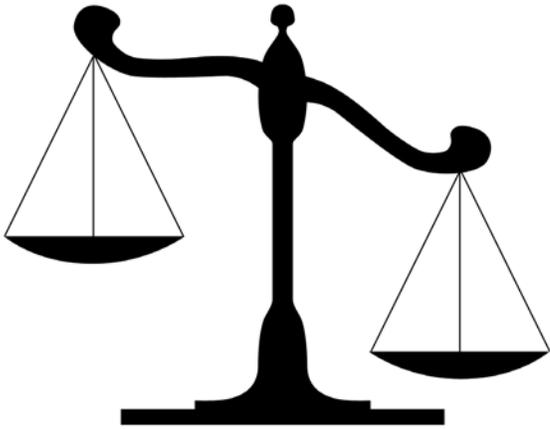
Introducing an element that both Jena High students and school administrators denied, the newspapers also framed the black students’ punishment as being unfair by comparing it to the punishment of the three white students who hung the nooses on the tree in the schoolyard of the school. All the newspapers featured articles that mentioned the punishment of the white students being reduced by the superintendent from expulsion to suspension.³⁸ The punishment for the white students was often mentioned directly before or after the punishment for the black students. By doing this, readers were given a comparison of both punishments, thereby showing how one was stricter than the other, even though the two incidents were unrelated prior to the newspapers intentionally connecting them.

The papers labeled the hanging of the nooses as a hate crime that sparked the entire issue with the Jena 6. District Attorney J. Reed Walters was quoted in one article as saying, “I cannot overemphasize what a villainous act that was. The people that did it should be ashamed of what they unleashed on this town.”³⁹ *USA Today* wrote, “Hanging nooses is not a crime under Louisiana law, but, in a state where 335 blacks were lynched from 1882 to 1968 it is a repugnant, overtly racist act.”⁴⁰ By referring to the hanging of the nooses as a hate crime that led to the attack, the white students’ action became more severe and could be blamed for the incidents that followed, and also used as justification for the attack on Barker. The way each newspaper clustered the information together about both punishments invited readers to make comparisons and to view the punishment of the black students as being unfair.



Identity of the Alleged Attackers

All three newspapers framed the black students as *victims*. Only one article, featured in *USA Today*, discussed Bell's criminal record prior to the attack.⁴¹ The rest of the articles, including those featured in *USA Today*, portrayed the students as *children victimized* by the judicial system. Comparatively little was mentioned about Barker as the



victim. The Jena 6, framed as victims, were used by the press as a synecdoche for the justice system's treatment of black Americans. In one instance, the victimization of the alleged attackers was supported by comparing this recent event with other instances where black Americans were wrongfully convicted of crimes. For example, *The Washington Post* wrote that civil rights advocates have argued that "zealous prosecutions of black youngsters are multiplying across the nation."⁴² The newspaper also credited advocates for pointing out three cases of injustice to black Americans by the judicial system: 17-year-old Genarlow Wilson, convicted of molestation for having consensual sex with a 15-year-old black girl (released after two years); 19-year-old Marcus Dixon, convicted for having sex with an underage white girl (the conviction was thrown out by the U.S. Supreme Court); and 16-year-old Shaquanda Cotton, who served one year of a seven year sentence for assaulting a white teacher's aid.⁴³

The last case is particularly interesting in that the legal description of the attack was assault (a body slam of the aid to the floor) but the press reported it as a "shove." By emphasizing the race of both the girls and the judge, the attackers are framed as victims in a racially biased court system.

The idea of the unfair justice system was mentioned numerous times throughout the coverage of the Jena 6. For example, *USA Today* referred to the Jena 6 as "a symbol for African Americans who say the justice system treats blacks more harshly than whites"⁴⁴ and quoted a black supporter as saying that Jena 6 is "another case of young black men railroaded unjustly."⁴⁵ In one of its articles, *The New York Times* identified the Jena 6 as "a flashpoint for accusations of racial bias in the state's judicial system."⁴⁶ *The Washington Post* discussed how supporters marched and rallied because they wanted to shine light on the "unequal treatment black people receive from the criminal justice system everywhere."⁴⁷ All of these statements continuously framed the black attackers as victims of racial injustice.

Keywords are often used to frame a situation, and we found prominent examples of this in the coverage of the Jena 6, especially during descriptions of the trial. *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* featured articles that stressed the fact that the jury was *all white* without explaining why this was so.⁴⁸ Only one article, of all examined, explained that no black citizens summoned for jury duty answered that call.⁴⁹ *The Washington Post* used race as a keyword again when discussing the prosecutor involved in the criminal cases against the attackers. After explaining Barker's injuries, the article continued, "his attackers were charged by prosecutor Reed Walters, who is white. . . ."⁵⁰ By emphasizing the race of the jurors and prosecutor, the newspaper articles continued to frame the Jena 6 as a case where the black students were victimized by a predominately white judicial system because of their race.

The idea of the unfair justice system was clustered with the image of the alleged attackers as innocent children. *The Washington Post*, for example, referred to the alleged attackers as "youngsters."⁵¹ Despite Bell's public criminal record that was discussed in only one *USA Today* article, an article in *The Washington Post* quoted an anonymous source as saying, "this is not a group of kids with a history of trouble."⁵² The reporter later asserted that "Bell had no prior criminal record."⁵³ Positive attributes were stressed about the other alleged attackers as well. For example, articles added that they were "star players on Jena's champion football team."⁵⁴ By illustrating the alleged attackers as innocent children, and then discussing the racial bias in the justice system, the attackers were framed as assiduous students victimized because of their race.

Descriptions of the Event

The event as a whole was framed by the papers as a black vs. white issue reminiscent of society prior to the civil rights era. Several metaphors were used in order to help readers view the Jena 6 in this way. For example, *The*



New York Times referred to the incident as “a throwback to Deep South injustice.”⁵⁵ Some of the headlines made overt comparisons to the past, such as an article titled “Protest in Louisiana Case Echoes the Civil Rights Era.”⁵⁶ *USA Today* also compared Jena 6 to “the Deep South’s Jim Crow Era.”⁵⁷ The lead in an article from *The Washington Post* read, “fifty years ago today, nine African American teenagers in Little Rock were escorted into Central High School by National Guardsmen while an angry white mob hurled racial epithets.”⁵⁸ This, clustered with the title of the particular article “It’s the Same Old Story in Jena Today,”⁵⁹ makes a comparison between the Jena 6 and the incident in Little Rock. These comparisons to past and extremely tense racial events framed the Jena 6 as a racial incident that is just as serious and severe as those of the past.

Although the Jena 6 literally represents the six black students being charged for attacking the white student, the newspaper articles framed it as being an example of the subtle racism that has always existed in America. One citizen of Jena was quoted as saying, “it’s always been a racist town. It’s just never been this blatant before.”⁶⁰ A writer for *USA Today* noted that “racial injustice persists, still corrosive but less overt.”⁶¹ *The Washington Post* mentioned a school board member who “said white people in the town are no longer racist, but he acknowledged that black people were mistreated.”⁶² Although the citizen was arguing that times have changed, the use of this information still frames the Jena 6 as an issue of racial inequality.

The divide between blacks and whites in Jena was also stressed by using a person’s race as a keyword. Most articles mentioned when a citizen was white or black. Based on their comments, and when considering their race, the divide is made more obvious using this method of description. For example, *The New York Times* discussed citizens of Jena and their opinions about the racial tension in their hometown. The citizen who recognized the racial problems had “black” in front of her name, while the citizen who did not believe

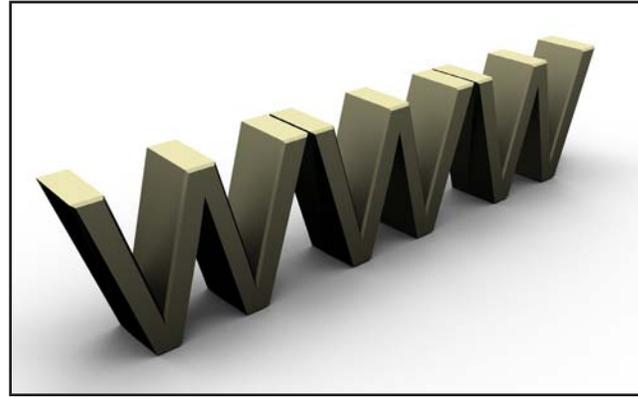


the problems existed had “white” in front of her name.⁶³ This further framed the situation as being black versus white, with black citizens recognizing the problem while white citizens did not.

The public attention given to Jena 6 was said to be similar to “the Freedom Rides of the 1960s”⁶⁴ and “the huge civil rights marches of a generation ago.”⁶⁵ The rallies, petitioning, and online attention were also referred to as

“a new civil rights movement.”⁶⁶ These are just a few examples of phrases used to compare the Jena 6 to the civil rights era. This was the journalists’ overt way of framing Jena 6 as a racial issue similar to those of the 1960s; implied was that the resulting action by civil rights activists brought about the reduction in charges.

“A” List Blogs Reporting



As with the newspapers, we began by identifying recurring themes from each blog posting. We discovered that the blogs featured themes similar to those used by the papers about the Jena 6. The four general themes identified were: the punishment of the black students, the identity of the students involved, a description of the event as a whole, and the media’s role in the Jena 6. The fourth theme, only included in the blogs, was the news media role in the Jena 6. After discovering the reoccurring themes, we then looked for how those themes were framed in the articles during the coverage period.

The Punishment for the Black Students

The Huffington Post framed the punishment of the black students as unfair and unfitting for the crime. By referring to the incident as a schoolyard attack, the charges against the alleged attackers are framed as being unjust. For example, one entry read “that the students were charged for what amounts to a schoolyard fight is news in itself, but what is more troubling is that the District Attorney, Reed Walters, chose to charge the students as adults.”⁶⁷ Another entry in *The Huffington Post* used sarcasm to point out the unfair punishment. After questioning Barker’s injuries by discussing his early release and attendance at an after school function, the blog read, “Mychal Bell was charged with aggravated second-degree battery, which requires the use of a deadly weapon, that weapon, of course, being his sneaker. I’ve lived in New York for seven years, and I’ve smelled some pretty nasty foot funk in that time, but I’ve never, ever been held up by a Nike.”⁶⁸

The *Huffington Post* continued this frame by writing that, “the black high school teens [are] being railroaded through the Louisiana criminal justice system,”⁶⁹ thus emphasizing the indictments as unfair. Emotion evoking words were used several times to reinforce the frame.

When discussing the court systems, the blog referred to “the sledgehammer treatment of black teens in juvenile court.”⁷⁰ Classifying the attack as “a schoolyard fight”⁷¹ and using descriptive language to discuss the “harsh” punishments given by a racially bias court system creates the image of the black students’ punishment as being unfair.

Newsbusters framed the punishment of the alleged attackers as being appropriate: “the white student, Justin Barker, was jumped by six black students [at] school where he was hit in the back or head and rendered unconscious before the gang of black teens proceeded to kick [him] in the stomach, back, and face. So when you see reports that vent



outrage that someone could be originally charged for attempted murder using ‘shoes’ as a weapon (imagine that, shoes) keep in mind what they were doing with those shoes.”⁷² The blog framed the punishment as being fair by emphasizing the severity of the attack and injuries.

Newsbusters and *Michelle Malkin* also discussed Bell’s criminal record in relation to the attack and his charges. An entry in *Newsbusters* read, “he has a prior criminal record that some reports characterized as violent. Thus his bail was high because of past arrests.”⁷³ An entry in *Michelle Malkin* addressed concerns that the punishment of the alleged attackers was unfair because of Bell’s public defender and jury. The entry read, “much has been written about Bell’s trial, the six-person all-white jury that convicted him of aggravated battery and conspiracy to commit aggravate battery and the clueless public defender who called no witnesses and offered no defense. It is rarely mentioned that no black people responded to the jury summonses and that Bell’s public defender was black.”⁷⁴ By ruling out the idea of a biased jury or uninformed, racist public defender, the punishment for the alleged attackers was framed as appropriate and fair.

Identity of the Alleged Attackers

The Huffington Post and *Crooks and Liars* framed the black students as the *victims* in the events occurring in Jena. The alleged attackers were framed as such by the discussion of the racial biases embedded within the legal systems and the small town. *The Huffington Post* emphasized race as a keyword when discussing the court proceedings for Bell. One entry reads, “they were tried as adults and one was charged with attempted murder and convicted—by an all white jury.”⁷⁵ Not only does this stress the fact that a white jury convicted Bell, it separates this fact from the rest of the sentence, allowing the readers to focus on that specific keyword—*white*. *Crooks and Liars* stressed the youthfulness of the alleged attackers, thereby further framing them as victims. One entry read, “the D.A. pushed for maximum charges which carry sentences of eighty years. Four of the six are being tried as adults (ages 17 & 18) two are juveniles. . . .”⁷⁶ By discussing age along with descriptive language of the D.A.’s intentions, the alleged attackers are framed as children (or juveniles) instead of adults or attackers. *The Huffington Post* also used a strategic clustering of information in order to stress particular points to the readers. One entry explained how the attackers were *provoked*: “White student taunts black student about his beating with racial epithets. Black students beat him and he suffers bruising and concussion. Black students are charged as adults for attempted second-degree murder.”⁷⁷ Before discussing the attack, the blog mentioned how the black students were teased and possibly provoked. The harm done to the white student is labeled as minor right before revealing the second-degree murder charge. The way in which the sentence was structured framed the black students as victims who were responding to verbal abuse.



the victim of actual physical abuse. These blogs stressed the severity of the attack, which the media had downplayed, thereby taking the attention away from the real victim.

Newsbusters and *Michelle Malkin* identified the *victim* of Jena as being Justin Barker, and downplayed the concept of the attackers as heroes or victims. *Newsbusters*, for example, featured a post that discussed how the world was focusing on “the so-called Jena 6 while at the same time, either burying mention of the teenager who was beaten by six high school students, or not mentioning him at all.”⁷⁸ This framed Barker not only as a victim of the attack, but now as a victim of neglect from the news media. A different entry framed Barker as being the ignored victim: “Why not call it the ‘Jena 7’ or the even ‘Jena 1’ in an effort to remember the one person that was violently assaulted in this case?”⁷⁹ The blogs’ use of descriptive words framed the prosecution of the Jena 6 as not being serious or notable, while identifying Barker as being

Michelle Malkin and *Newsbusters* often featured phrases that attempted to take the spotlight off of the black students as victims. Bell's criminal record, for instance, was discussed in the same sentence as the \$14,000 in medical bills that Barker incurred from the attack.⁸⁰ This cluster of facts takes the attention off of Bell, who is described negatively, and puts it on Barker, who is described more sympathetically. This move from the black attackers as victims to Barker as victim is made even more apparent in an entry that quoted a Barker supporter as saying, "racism should, at all times, be condemned. However, the black students are (no longer) the victims in this case."⁸¹ Although not an original statement of the bloggers, the decision to use the quote exemplifies a framing device that identified Barker, not the Jena 6, as the victim.

Descriptions of Events

Two of the blogs made comparisons between the Jena 6 and past racial tensions. The other two blogs said that there was no comparison between the two. Once again, the similarities between blogs matched those that shared the same political leaning. *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars* framed the Jena 6 and the rallies/movements resulting from the indictments as new versions of the civil rights era. *Michelle Malkin* and *Newsbusters* argued that the racial tensions prevalent in the past do not exist today, and the talk of such racial injustice is only a result of mendacious activists who are using the Jena 6 as an excuse to further their own causes.

For example, *Crooks and Liars* attributed this quote to an anonymous person: "today the racial tensions, especially in the South, haven't improved as much as must of us would like to believe."⁸² In the same entry the blog asserted that the Jena 6 controversy is unbelievable to so many because "people across the country look at the systemic and ugly bigotry, and wonder how these conditions can still exist in the 21st century."⁸³ These sentences frame the events circling around the Jena 6 as being reminiscent of pre-civil rights racial tensions. *The Huffington Post* makes the comparison to the past more overt by comparing the Jena 6 controversy to "the Jim Crow era."⁸⁴ When comparing the Jena 6 directly to a specific era or movement that is well known, this makes the frame even stronger because the reader has an easier time viewing the issue in the way the author intended.

As with *Michelle Malkin*, *Newsbusters* framed the Jena 6 as being dissimilar to the civil rights era; instead, comparisons to the past were depicted as absurd. The Mayor of Jena was quoted in an entry as saying, "to put the incident in Jena in the same league as those who were murdered in the 1960s cheapens the sacrifice and insults their memory."⁸⁵ *Newsbusters* also referred to racial activist groups who argued that the Jena 6 was about the subtle racism recycled from the past as presenting "a load of crap."⁸⁶ The comparisons between the Jena 6 and the civil rights era were labeled as being false, insulting, and meaningless. Their use of descriptive words and catchphrases, such as "load of crap" helps to frame the Jena 6 as being nothing like the racial tensions of the past.

The Role of the News Media

All four blogs critiqued the news media for playing a negative or insufficient role in the Jena 6. However, the way the role was framed differed among blogs. Two of the blogs framed the media's role as being insufficient and identified the problem as the media's failure to provide enough coverage of the incident: *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars*. The other two blogs framed the role of the media as having a negative influence and identified the problem as the media's delivery of inaccurate information to the public: *Michelle Malkin* and *Newsbusters*.

Crooks and Liars, for example, accused the media of just "recently [noticing] a story that has been agitating many



black Americans for months now.”⁸⁷ Not only was the media’s failure to cover the event stressed, the Jena 6 was framed as an important issue that had already drawn public attention for several months. Moreover, the media only paid attention when “they were faced with a protest so big that they had to put it on the front page.”⁸⁸ Even after the media’s coverage of the story was acknowledged, the negative framing continued with accusations that it only covered the Jena 6 because the public forced it to do so. An entry in *The Huffington Post* negatively portrayed the media as disinterested, and attributed this to allegations that the black community was not their target audience.⁸⁹ In one sense, race was being used as a keyword to stress the media’s role in perpetuating lingering racial injustice. For instance, one entry read, “why is it that mainstream white media and white folks in general are so obsessed (once again) with OJ’s guilt but paying little or no attention to the innocence of the Jena Six?”⁹⁰ In this sentence, the role of the media in the Jena 6 was compared to its role in another popular case—implied as less serious. Additionally, the word “white” was used as a keyword to emphasize the racial tension enhanced through lack of media attention. Both tactics framed the media’s role in the Jena 6 as negative and superficial.

On the other hand, *Michelle Malkin* and *Newsbusters* also discussed the media’s negative/insufficient role, but framed it quite differently; it was due to their failure to deliver accurate information. *Michelle Malkin* featured information about the Jena 6 written by Jena resident and journalist, Craig Franklin.⁹¹ The inclusion of Franklin’s article helped to frame the media as a negative purveyor of information basing their stories on false information. *Newsbusters* quoted the Mayor of Jena discussing how the media had portrayed Jena in a negative and false light, thus ruining its reputation.⁹² In this sense, the media was framed as mean-spirited. *Newsbusters* also labeled the media as being responsible for intentionally stoking racial fires: “underlying virtually every article and news segment involving such delicate matters is a desire to inflame racial tensions in our society rather than assist in quelling them.”⁹³ Identifying this as one of the media’s goals framed the media as part of the problem rather than simple purveyors of information.

Four posts on *Newsbusters* discussed how Barker was left out of several reports on the Jena 6; such reportorial practices were described as lazy, biased, and unprofessional.⁹⁴ Unlike *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars*, who described the media as being *forced* to cover the Jena 6, *Michelle Malkin* and *Newsbusters* asserted that the mainstream media only *decided* to cover the Jena 6 when it became a “celebrity cause.”⁹⁵ *Newsbusters* explained how the media was biased in that “they have blatantly immersed themselves into one side of the case and thus made themselves part of the problem.”⁹⁶ Together, these blogs expressed their opinion that the news media would never admit or apologize for their lack of factual, reliable reporting.⁹⁷

Comparing Print and Blog Reports

There are several similarities as well as differences among the newspaper articles and the blogs analyzed in this study. The newspapers displayed consistent harmony in terms of the themes and frames used during the Jena controversy. However, the blogs showed similarities based on their political affiliations. Both the newspaper articles and the blogs featured most of the same themes: the punishment for the black students, the identity of the alleged attackers, descriptions of the event, the identity of the students involved. One additional theme, the media’s role in the Jena 6, was found only in the blogs.

The newspapers framed the punishment of the black students as unfair treatment for a minor fight; they framed the identity of the alleged attackers as innocent students who were victims of the justice system and of lingering racism; and they framed the controversy and the public attention resulting from it as being a re-creation of the civil rights era. The newspaper articles framed several of their themes similarly to that of the blogs. Although we have no proof that reporters based portions of their stories on the blog entries, we can suggest that all the articles and the *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars* blogs did highlight and ignore the same material. For example, the Jena 6 incident was framed as an issue where the black students were victimized. There was little mention of Barker, other than his minor injuries, swift release from the hospital, and attendance at a school function the evening of the attack. Another similarity between the news articles and *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars* was the framing of the controversy as a modern version of the civil rights era. The only substantial difference in themes/framing was that *The Huffington*

Post and *Crooks and Liars* framed the news media as being negative because it collectively failed to give the Jena 6, a racially fueled incident, the amount of coverage the blogs felt it deserved. The concept that the punishment for the black students was too harsh for the crime was also mentioned in both of these blogs. Like the majority of the newspaper articles, *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars* labeled the attack as a “schoolyard fight” that was indirectly caused by the hanging of the nooses.

Themes	Framing: News Articles	Framing: Huffington Post & Crook & Liars	Framing: Michelle Malkin & Newsbusters
Punishment of black students	Schoolyard fight, so too harsh; unjust. Compared to noose hanging students, so too harsh; unjust	Schoolyard fight, so too harsh; unjust. Compared to noose hanging students, so too harsh; unjust	Appropriate to crime
Identity of attackers	School kids; youngsters Victims of racism Victims of white legal system	School kids; youngsters Victims of racism Victims of white legal system	Aggressive; prior criminal records Barker the victim
Description of event	Black vs. white; civil rights era Example of lingering racism	Black vs. white; civil rights era Example of lingering racism	Excuse for activists to self-promote No similarities with civil rights era
Role of News Media		Not enough coverage Unconcerned with black America’s plight	Stoking racial tensions Intentionally inaccurate One-sided

Michelle Malkin and *Newsbusters* covered the same themes used by the news articles and other blogs, but did not frame the themes in the same manner. In terms of the identities of the students, these blogs framed Barker as the victim and the black students as the aggressive students, highlighting Bell’s criminal record. Moreover, the Jena 6 controversy was framed as having no real comparisons to any part of the civil rights movement; these blogs framed such comparisons as being illogical. Like the other blogs, however, the punishment of the alleged attackers was not a dominant theme, although several of the postings did argue that the nooses were not related to the attack and that the charges for the alleged attackers fit the crime. Of note is that both *Michelle Malkin* and *Newsbusters* portrayed the mainstream news media as being unfair and one sided.

Ultimately our findings demonstrate how a framing analysis can be used to discover how purveyors of information, both traditional and nontraditional, can shape the way readers think about an issue or event. Through this study we also illustrate the potential of a qualitative framing analysis as a research method in the study of media. Put in table format, the themes and framing of those themes are readily apparent:

One obvious finding is that there were similarities between the hard news articles and *The Huffington Post* and *Crooks and Liars*, self-identified as presenting a liberal point of view. The similarities between their posts and the hard news reports are troubling. The fact that the liberal blogs and hard news stories framed the same themes in the same manner bears further investigation. Although we are not claiming that all mainstream news carries a liberal political slant, after a review of our findings, we are troubled that a non-partisan press so neatly aligns with self-professed liberal advocacy positions while concomitantly being devoid of any association with the self-professed conservative political positions we covered. There is simply no overlap. Thus, through this comparative analysis of press and blogs, we were

from the bloggers' accounts. So, to some of the bloggers, the reliance of one medium on another for information was opposite of what Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, and Jeong suggested the case to be.

Additionally, the A-list blogs in our analysis did not serve as reinforcement for the mainstream news by quoting from or linking to mainstream stories. Those blogs that did include links directed their readers to either a similar story from another blogger or to a "recent/most popular" blog entry. At this point we speculate that because some of the blogs featured information that they argued was not covered by the mainstream media, the linking to similar stories had the potential to create a conversation that may otherwise have been prevented by the gatekeeping of professional journalism.

Some of our findings conflict with what Haas identified as the realities of the blogosphere. Certainly we found that the topics discussed in the A-list blogs and the newspaper articles were along the same lines; however, although Haas's research shows that the blogs *follow* the mainstream media's narrow range of topics, the blogging following the Jena 6 incident was actually credited by many bystanders for *attracting* the media's attention. This is also illustrated by the delayed mainstream media coverage of the incident as well as the bloggers argument that the media did not cover the incident enough. Additionally, even though the same topic was discussed, only the liberal blogs and the newspaper articles framed some parts of the issue in the same way. Furthermore, the blogs discussed a topic that the newspapers did not include – the news media's role in the Jena 6. In her research, Haas also found that even those bloggers that recognized media biases still helped to reinforce mainstream news dominance by relying on their facts and linking to their information. We found no evidence to support this claim. Although only the conservative blogs discussed news media bias, these blogs did not feature the same information as the newspaper articles and did not provide links to the mainstream news media. Only the information in the liberal blog was framed like the information in the newspapers, although they did not link directly to mainstream news stories. Yet, even in this case, we cannot see from our findings that the blogs were relying on the information from the news media for their own coverage.

(ENDNOTES)

- ¹ On 3 December 2007, Bell pleaded guilty to second degree battery and as part of the plea arrangement has agreed to testify against the other defendants should their case go to trial.
- ² Supporters of the Jena 6 contend the lesser charge was a result of the attention the public gave to this issue; prosecutors deny this, citing instead common prosecutorial practices.
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- ⁷ Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "Key News Audiences Now Blend Online and Traditional Sources," 17 August 2008, <http://people-press.org/report/444/news-media> (accessed 9 December 2008).
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- ⁹ Tanni Haas, "Research Note: From 'Public Journalism' to the 'Public's Journalism'? Rhetoric and Reality in the Discourse on Weblogs," *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 3 (2005): 388.
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- ¹³ Jim A. Kuypers, "Framing Analysis," *Rhetorical Criticism: Perspectives in Action*. Jim A. Kuypers, ed. (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2009) 182.
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- ²⁰ William A. Gamson, "News as Framing," *American Behavioral Scientist* 33, no. 2 (1989): 159.
- ²¹ Shannon L. Bichard, "Building Blogs: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis of the Distribution of Frames on the 2004 Presidential Candidate Websites," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 329-345.
- ²² Carolyn Bronstein, "Representing the Third Wave: Mainstream Print Media Framing of a New Feminist Movement," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (2005): 783-803.
- ²³ Kuypers, *Bush's War*, 35-50, 135-165.
- ²⁴ The potential circulation for these newspaper articles is over 4 million. Although difficult to determine the exposure of blog posts, one may determine "blog reactions" to the four blogs we examine in this study. Blog reactions are the number of other bloggers that link to a specific blog post and this number can be displayed on every blog post. According to Technorati.com, cumulatively the four blogs we examine have over 394,000 other blogs linking to them at any given time. This figure does not include the regular readership of the specific blogs we analyzed. Only one blog provided readership figures, and that in real time: 120,000 persons.
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- ³³ Richard G. Jones, "Conviction in Racially Tinged Louisiana Case is Overturned," *The New York Times*, September 14, 2007, under "Lexis Nexis," (accessed October 29, 2007).
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⁶⁰ Whoriskey, "Thousands Protest."

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