

Making a Murderer: How Media Influences the Legitimacy of the Legal System

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Introduction

If media influences perceived legitimacy of the legal system, then it is important to further research how this can be used to enact change or stop corruption.

Hypothesis: Commonly used organization and language used by media to represent legal cases alters how people view the legal system and most often lead to a negative perception.

Legitimacy of the law

when there are two forms of power conflicting in a situation the legitimacy of one being doubted begins to limit the authority that this power has in the situation. (Weber, 1978).

Literature Review

The construction of media

Media have to rush to release a story after the crime has happened and only have a small amount of space or time to discuss it in. This means they must pick and choose what they view as the most important facts of the case. (Sacco, 1995).

Media and framing

When it comes to the legal system, most of the public are not informed through direct legal sources and get their information from the media (Roberts, 1992).

How media influences the public's perceptions

Public perception coding	Percentage of analyzed perceptions (n = 197)
Generalized about the legal system	31.4% (n = 62)
Generalized about the media	20.3% (n = 40)
Avery innocent	17.76% (n = 35)
Avery guilty	14.2% (n = 28)
Dassey innocent	10.15% (n = 20)
Discussed other theories	6.1% (n = 12)

Breakdown of categories found in tweets and blog postings

Theory

Framing Theory

frames organize how information is presented to create meaning. Framing theory argues that the manner in which an event is presented to a group or individual influences their perception of it. (Goffman, 1974) (Entman, 1993). frames are presented to assist the reader in understanding a meaning in a certain setting. (Bateson, 1972).

Media Frames

Through these frames, online news media have the power to control the direction of the reaction. This power stems from mass media defining what is newsworthy, because they make this decision they become one of the main interpreters of events. (Semmel, 1983). Structures of expectation (Tannen, 1993)

Influence on the Public

the lack of knowledge about political issues leads framing to be even more influential on public perception because individuals are less likely to have previous background, experience, or knowledge on the issue (Iyengar, 1991).

Methods

Content analysis of Making a Murderer, 30 online news articles, and 197 reactions to the case.

I coded for language (positive, negative, and neutral), evidence cited, and who was interviewed or quoted, and the overall implied verdict (guilty, innocent, or neither).

	Older articles (Dec. 2015-Mar 2016) n = 15	Newer Articles (Apr. 2016-Feb. 2017) n = 15
Guilty	13.33% (n = 2)	20.00% (n = 3)
Innocent	53.33% (n = 8)	46.67% (n = 7)
Neither	33.33% (n = 5)	33.33% (n = 5)

Implied verdict in both categories of online news articles

Results/Discussion

Making a Murderer

mostly negative language, directly interviewed only defense and overall implied Avery was innocent.

Online news articles

the framing of an article implied its perceived verdict of the case, discussed as a form of entertainment, and the older categories of articles differed that the newer category in presentation of theories and language.

Public perceptions

generalized about the legal system, generalized about media, claimed Avery was guilty or innocent, claimed Dassey was innocent, and theorized about other suspects.

Overall

The public applied their opinion of this case to the wider legal system. Patterns of opinion in the way media framed the case were also seen in public discussion.

Limitations

Sense of identity online may have impacted how people presented their opinions through twitter.

media bias in online news articles may have been present because they were all after the release of the documentary.

Selected References

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