
GENDER BIAS & RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION: POSITIVE FRAMING OF NEWS REPORT COVERAGE ON MAUREE TURNER

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ABSTRACT

Mass media plays an important role in our lives and society to a greater degree. As a primary source of information that people tend to go for, the kind of information mass media provides matters. The problem is that every message we see in the media is constructed and that even texts like news reports are not entirely authentic. Previous studies have shown that news media do have their own tendency in writing their news reports, through which the minority communities are usually the ones to receive the short end of the stick. On that account, this study, through conducting critical discourse analysis, attempts to see the media framing in Mauree Turner's 2020 Oklahoma state legislative election news reports and find an underlying motive behind such framing. The finding shows that in general, the media framed Turner positively in their reports and that this positive frame implies an inherent gender bias and religious discrimination within American society.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis; gender bias; media framing; minority politician; news reports; religious discrimination*

Article information (Filled by Editorial Management)

Received: 25 May, 2022

Revised: 27 July, 2022

Accepted: 03 August, 2022

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v9i2.74879>

Available at <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/rubikon/article/view/74879>

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INTRODUCTION

The ability of mass media to deliver information across a wide-scale audience in a short period of time has made mass media a significant part of our lives. Considering the stretch of its scale, one can even say that mass media plays an essential role in society. People rely on mass media not only for

information but also for both education and entertainment. Accordingly, the information people receive from mass media contributes to developing their perception of the world and the other things in life. One problem is that not every message provided by these media is objective and impartial. First of all, as Paxson (2010) argued, messages

distributed by the media are all constructed in one way or another. The argument is that so many considerations were made along with its production. Questions regarding for what purpose the message was produced and for whom the message was intended or targeted were kept in the mind of the producer so that each message could be delivered as effectively as possible. Needless to say, the process of constructing a message includes major and minor adjustments, such as choosing a perspective or using a particular choice of word. As in the case of news reports, the same process happens. Despite the claim of being objective and impartial, news reports or news ‘stories’—as Bell (1991) pointed out—are still stories after all. Hence, events are not merely recounted or retold but rather written in a certain structure or composition from a particular angle or point of view, similar to how stories typically are.

On top of that, being part of an industry where profit is an undeniably important aspect, there is this urgency for news report channels to attract as many readers as possible to generate more profit. The logic behind this lies in how important readers are to a news channel or outlet’s survival. Generally speaking, this applies to any other media content providers (Napoli, 2003). Specifically, in terms of news media, Picard (2004) noted that “the mission of newspaper enterprises includes both commercial and social facets.” Not only do they act as a facilitator of commerce but also as a facilitator of both social and political expressions of the people. Accordingly, their financial model was based heavily on both buyers (readers/subscribers) and advertisers, through which subscription and advertisement systems were applied. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that in either

case, the readers are the one who pays the bill. The readers paid for subscriptions and used by the news outlet as a ‘product’ for advertisement. With this kind of financial model, garnering more audience would also mean earning more income.

In their attempts to cater to the comfort of the audience, news report channel or mass media, in general, tends to reinforce “common assumptions of the social and economic order of the world” (Paxson, 2010, p. 27). However, an external force like the audience is not the only issue because, as van Dijk (1991) noted after his study involving white mass media and how they cover ethnic and racial-related events, white journalists or news producers themselves were inclined to be subjective due to their white-lens perspective. On that premise, it is safe to assume that news reports are not entirely authentic, contrary to popular belief. The producers made various intentional decisions in tailoring their message to fit the targeted audience. Ultimately, news media contributes to maintaining the existing status quo through biased reports, which puts people from minority communities in an unfavorable position. With this in mind, it is encouraged to be critical of mass media. Instead of taking the information provided by the media as it is, one should also examine how said information was delivered to uncover any underlying messages. On that account, this study attempted to further explore the relationship between mass media and the minority by analyzing how American news sites reported the victory of a minority politician Mauree Turner and investigating how the reports are justified within American society.

Mauree Nivek Rajah Salima Turner is an African American Muslim politician who got elected as a member of the Oklahoma House back in 2020 after winning the state legislative election. Not only that Turner comes from two intersecting minority backgrounds as a Black person and a Muslim, but Turner is also someone who identifies as a non-binary. While it is not uncommon to find minority politicians taking seats within the government these days, Mauree Turner's case is different due to the very fact that their three different identities intersect with one another. Indeed, as a non-binary, Black and Muslim lawmaker, Turner's win in the election had made it into the headlines of some popular news sites in America. Reports regarding Turner's win are interesting not only because of their circumstances but also because of the argument that messages in news media are constructed.

Following the main concern of this study, this study is conducted under the post-nationalist American Studies paradigm. Throughout the decades, American Studies have progressed past focusing on the notion of American identity, which heavily revolved around the Western or Eurocentric point of view (Rowe, 2000). Today, rather than debating the definitions of who are Americans and what is America, scholars are encouraged to widen the scope of their studies—and that is by shifting and putting their attention more on the experience of those coming from minority communities. Since the focus of this study revolved around a minority politician—specifically how the media framed the news reports regarding their win in a state legislative election—the post-nationalist approach is deemed more appropriate than the other approaches.

Furthermore, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is used to conduct this study. Briefly, as many scholars have noted, discourse can be referred to as either *the language* that is 'above the sentence'; *the language* that is 'in use'; or *the language* that is seen as a form of social practice. However, according to Cameron and Panović (2014), the first definition is rather limited to linguistics; hence, many social science scholars define discourse using the second and third definitions. Discourse as *the language* in use means that language is the source of information concerning a person or/and a group of people's beliefs and overall attitudes. On that note, a discourse analysis would not only revolve around the texts by themselves but also the way or the manner in which said texts were linguistically formulated. With this in mind, social theorists argued that "social reality is not a set of fixed truths which we will discover if we ask the right questions, but is rather a discursive construct" (Cameron & Panović, 2014, p. 8). This argument is also related to the third definition of discourse which regards language as a form of social practice. Through this particular perspective, Wodak (2014) asserted that various elements in society shape discursive events and that, in return, these elements are also shaped by discursive events. In other words:

...discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned; it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of/and relationships between people and groups of people. (Wodak, 2014, p. 303)

This relationship between discourse and society has pushed for a discussion concerning power—which, according to Wodak, is likely to be reproduced and maintained through discourse. It is because discursive practices, as implied earlier, have

ideological effects that contribute to constituting various elements of society. In support of Wodak's argument, van Dijk, while discussing discourse, stated that:

Discourse is thus defined as a form of social interaction in society and at the same time as the expression and reproduction of social cognition. Local and global social structures condition discourse, but they do so through the cognitive mediation of the socially shared knowledge, ideologies and personal mental models of social members as they subjectively define communicative events as context models (van Dijk, 2014, p. 12).

Referring to van Dijk's statement above, the ideological effects that Wodak mentioned earlier happened through cognitive mediation. That being the case, the cognitive process, thus, is an essential aspect of van Dijk's theoretical framework. His approach particularly focuses on the trio discourse-cognition-society, which made it necessary for researchers to pay attention to the discourse structure, social cognition, and the relationship between discourse and society in conducting a critical discourse analysis.

Other than that, the concept of discursive strategy is important to this study. This one concept is related to the focus of this study which mainly concerns news media and framing. As Carvalho (2008) noted, it is rare for journalists to witness events without a third-person mediation. This mediation is what causes the journalists' (and subsequently the media's) depictions of what is happening in society to be dependent not only on the preferences of the media itself but also on the perspective of the third party that serves as their source of news—someone who witnessed the events firsthand. Therefore, in conducting CDA, one should

also account for any kind of discursive strategy that happened within the process of delivering information. Explaining further about discursive strategy, Carvalho (2008) elaborated that there are four different discursive strategies, and one of them, which becomes the specific focus of this study, is framing. Important within CDA is that one should think of "framing as an action or operation, rather than in terms of frames as (fixed) independent entities" (Carvalho, 2008, p. 169).

Additionally, Carvalho also believes that framing is not optional and is, instead, a necessary process when talking about reality. On that note, the question that researchers proposed in analyzing framing is *how* instead of *whether an actor enacted the act of framing or not*. Referring to Entman (1993), there are two main actions involved in the act of framing; those are selection and composition. The former is about what elements are being included and what are being excluded, whereas the latter is about the arrangement of said elements in question.

Using the qualitative method, this study was conducted to seek an interpretation of the media frame and an explanation of its reasoning. The data were collected from six news articles published by CNN, USA Today, The Guardian, The Washington Post, and NBC News following the win of Mauree Turner as an Oklahoma legislator in 2020. It is to be noted that these news sites were chosen with two specific considerations. First, excluding news aggregators, those five news sites are some of the most popular American news sites (Pavlovskaya, 2021). Second, out of the news sites included in the list, those five news sites are the only ones that write about Turner's win in the 2020 state

legislative election. Furthermore, rather than random articles, only specific articles that focus heavily on Mauree Turner and their win were collected. Given the points above, this study focuses on identifying how the media frame electoral news for the winning minority politician Mauree Turner and finding an explanation of the framing within the context of American society.

DISCUSSION

A close reading of these news articles reveals that these journalists perform the act of framing through two main actions that are selection and composition. Also, through the CDA approach, the way in which these news sites and journalists frame Mauree Turner's win in the election implies an underlying issue within American society. In the discussion, respecting Turner's identity, only the pronoun they/them is used for the sake of consistency and to avoid any confusion.

Media Framing of Mauree Turner

The researcher noted three major tropes of action the media took in their framing of Mauree Turner. The first one is, emphasizing an aspect of Turner—their identity. This finding aligns with previous studies where scholars found that the news media had this tendency to associate minority politicians with one or two specific attributes. Decades ago, the news coverage of minority politicians was not only scarce but also heavily racialized (Chaudhary, 1980; Zilber and Niven, 2000; McIlwain, 2011). In elections where they are up against white politicians, news media are inclined to pay attention more to the racial identity of minority candidates, and such racial references are only less prevalent if there are

no white candidates for the minority candidates to compete against in the election.

Similarly, in studies involving female politician candidates, these politicians also received news coverage limited to their attributes as women (Banwart *et al.*, 2003; Kelly, 2009). As seen in Turner's case, this tendency of narrow-focused coverage persists throughout the years, even until today. What sets these studies apart from the current study is what kind of identity the media focused on, which in the case of Turner, it happens to be their gender and religious identity. In five different news articles from CNN, NBC News, USA Today, and The Washington Post, the headlines were all found to be along the lines that Turner is a nonbinary and a Muslim.

Additionally, following the rule of foregrounding that these news sites have set up in the headlines, the bodies of the articles (or the texts within) were written in accordance with the kind of information that is being emphasized. Take, for example, the opening paragraphs of CNN and The Washington Post's articles where it is reaffirmed that Turner is winning in the state legislative election and becoming the first legislature member who is a nonbinary and a Muslim. Further, the emphasis on Turner's gender identity continues with a brief explanation regarding the term nonbinary in general and what being a nonbinary means for Turner.

Besides the explicit and repetitive direct mentions of said particular information like what the rest of the media had done, The Guardian emphasized Turner's gender identity by comparing them and their political opponent, Jason Dunnington. In the comparison, The Guardian described Turner

in such detailed sentences while only using one phrase *the man* for Dunnington. The phrase in itself would mean nothing if it were not for the efforts The Guardian put in describing Turner. The excerpt below is taken from the article:

When 27-year-old Mauree Turner sat down at Holly Rollers, the queer-owned vegan Donut Shop in Oklahoma City, in July 2020, it was under strange circumstances. First, Turner, who uses non-binary pronouns, had just won Oklahoma's 88th district by a mere 228 votes. Second, sitting opposite was the man they had just beaten. (The Guardian, 2020).

As seen above, The Guardian only put a short phrase of *the man* after a long and detailed description about Turner. The decision of The Guardian to refer to Dunnington through his gender identity subsequently puts Turner's identity, which is mentioned right in the previous sentence and in the same paragraph in highlight. Aside from the emphasis on Turner's gender identity, this particular composition and the strategy that The Guardian had taken to include several different kinds of information regarding Turner compared to Dunnington illustrate a strong in-group representation (through Turner) and out-group representation (through Dunnington). These representations are related to the positive framing of Turner that The Guardian is trying to infer in the next few paragraphs.

Right after the introductory paragraph, The Guardian continues the comparison by bringing up the professional records or on-field experiences of both Turner and Dunnington. Similar to how the description in the opening part of the article, The Guardian, for the second time, put a different effort and strategy into describing the two

politician's works. For Turner, The Guardian lists the works that Turner had previously done before getting elected to the office. The list includes Turner's job description as a regional field director with the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union). On the other hand, in describing Jason Dunnington, The Guardian decided to focus more on the fact that before this election, Dunnington was a three-term incumbent who, for so long, had been facing difficulties in moving forward with his progressive policy proposal in Republican-led Oklahoma House. The composition insinuates this idea of just how unproductive Dunnington is compared to Turner, who has been working on various things.

On top of that, the particular use of the word *struggled* as an adjective to describe Dunnington's difficulties, together with the detail on who dominates the legislature, puts Dunnington in a negative light. As a politician who fights for the well-being of their citizens and the betterment of society in general. And considering that he is a Democrat, the description of his helplessness against the majority of Republicans in the Oklahoma House does not sound reassuring to the people he represented. On the other side, the long list of works that Turner had done during their time before the election insinuates just how productive and passionate they are with their job. The stark contrast between the two politicians conveniently underlines Turner's identity further both as a member of the queer community and as a politician who cares for the well-being of their people in need. The difference between the two continues to be asserted through a comparison of Turner and Dunnington's political spectrum. This time, The Guardian described Turner as a left-leaning Democrat

while describing Dunnington as a moderate incumbent even though both hailed from the same party, that is, Democrats. In this comparison, The Guardian's apparent intention to differentiate the two politicians is illustrated. The readers are expected to be able to distinguish between a left-leaning politician and a moderate politician. Considering that people read certain news sites that fit their political spectrum, this particular detail correspondingly frames Turner positively and, to some degree, better than their predecessor—Dunnington.

Another case of polarization was seen in NBC News article. However, instead of pitting Turner against another individual, NBC News set them against a group of people represented through Oklahoma House. In narrating Turner and their experiences during their time as a new member of the house, NBC News (2020) wrote:

Despite the challenges they've faced in the Republican-led state House, Turner has not been deterred from pushing a legislative agenda born of their own lived experiences.

In the above sentence, NBC News chose to use the word *challenges* to describe Turner's experience. Although the word *challenge* can be understood as neutral with no particular association with negative or positive meanings, the phrase that followed the word in this particular composition makes it different. Following the word *challenges* is the phrase *they've faced*. With *they* as Turner's pronouns, *face* serves as a verb, referring to the very action that Turner did. Citing the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), the word *challenge* is commonly collocating with the word *face*. In contexts where this specific collocation happens, the meaning of the word

challenge usually takes on a rather negative one as it refers to something unpleasant. Therefore, in this case, for NBC News to use this word suggests the idea that Turner and Oklahoma House are at opposing ends. Because if both have the same goals and ideas, then Turner should not have difficulties in Oklahoma House. Similar to the previous one, this polarization accentuates Turner's identity as a minority politician and a Democrat against the Republican-led Oklahoma House.

In addition to these, some of these media also heavily personalize their whole coverage by adding the narrative of Turner's personal experiences and struggles. Things like how Turner grew up, what kind of environment they lived in, what kind of struggles Turner and their family had to go through, and how such struggles made Turner into the person they are today were narrated in the reports. Ultimately, this kind of coverage made Turner appears to be more 'humanly' and relatable, in a sense, for the people they represented. Through this personalized coverage, Turner's intersecting identity was emphasized more than the other parts of the reports since every identity of Turner—Black, nonbinary, and Muslim—is as equally as significant to them.

Another strategy used in framing Turner is the act of reproducing or echoing the narrative of a history maker. Along with explicitly mentioning Turner's gender and religious identity, some media also used the phrase *the first* in the headlines. The phrase presupposes that no nonbinary person who is a Muslim, aside from Turner, ever got elected and took such an important position in the government. Additionally, some of these media also explicitly claimed that Turner

made history or will make history by winning the 2020 state legislative election. Bearing in mind just how impactful an event should be to be considered as making history, Turner's win is portrayed as something revolutionary and inspiring. The media further illustrated this idea through the quotes they intentionally included in the reports, where an important figure of an LGBTQ organization called Turner's achievement a *milestone political moment*, and Turner themselves a *trailblazer*. On top of that, another individual from the same organization also referred to Turner's win as *breaking the rainbow ceiling*. In either of these contexts, Turner's gender identity and their background as a member of the LGBTQ community are underlined. In the same sense, when the media briefly mentioned a past event that includes Oklahoma discriminating against an imam in 2019, Turner's religious identity is the one that is being emphasized.

Alongside these two strategies, these media also craftily write their sentences in a particular composition where Turner is closely associated with agency and power. It is illustrated through the constant use of active sentences where Turner is the one initiating actions. In a sense, the media emphasize Turner instead of the action. Accordingly, this particular sentence structure frames Turner rather positively than how it frames the other parties. It is because where other parties are written using the same sentence structure—one that focuses on the *doer* or *agent*—they were often written under an unfavorable impression.

The Underlying Motive of the Framing

The way the media framed Mauree Turner presupposes that the most prominent

issue surrounding their victory in the election about Turner's identity. While there is nothing wrong with celebration, this presupposition implies something that is much more unpleasant than what is seen. First, one should question *why*. Why did Turner's identity matter in this election? Why did the media consider Turner's identity—both gender and religious identity—to be the highlight the newsreaders should be focusing on? Through the way the press writes these news reports, readers learn that Turner is the first nonbinary and Muslim to be elected to Oklahoma Legislature, which leads to a question: *Why* is Turner the first to be a nonbinary and Muslim legislative member? *Why* the lack of representation from minority communities? Considering what has been discussed about the media framing in Turner's coverage and where these media put themselves or with whom they side in the reports, there are two implications of the society behind such a positive framing.

The first one is gender bias. Gender, in general, has been the root of many issues in society. As one of the products of social construction, the concept of gender restricts ideas that are not acceptable to fit into the existing social norms or standards. This particular way of view eventually developed gender bias, through which society is inclined to associate particular attributes only to a specific gender and vice versa. For example, in the community where their culture believes in binary gender, gender is divided into masculine and feminine, with said forms based on one's biological characteristic—sex. Therefore, those born as males are naturally assumed as men whose appearance and behavior are then expected to be masculine, following the standard set by their society.

Similarly, this also applies to those who are born females. Along with this grouping are gender roles. It is due to this assumption that different genders should have different attributes that society deems people should have different roles to fit their gender. This abstract concept makes people believe that only men should work outside, attending to public matters, while women are expected to stay home and work on more domestic matters. The same view of gender roles also applied to America for the longest time, where women were not even included in voting because of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868).

Looking back at how the media framed Turner, it seems that the same view still exists in today's America. If Turner was a man, would there even be so much emphasis on his gender identity? The answer would be no because there has never been so much fuss about men actively participating in politics for as long as history has recorded. Following the prevalent gender bias, society deems it natural for men to be involved in public matters; and as such, male politicians who identify themselves as men have never been asked to justify their gender identity. On the contrary, Turner, who identifies themselves as nonbinary, had to face relentless questions about what being a nonbinary means, as if society is trying to place them in the gender binary box. From the repetitive mentions of their gender identity to getting compared to their political opponents while their gender identity is being emphasized, the way the media frame Turner speaks volumes about how much gender matters in society and how persistent gender bias is. And through the positive framing, an attempt was made by these media to resist such inherent gender bias.

The second implication is related to the heavy emphasis on Turner's religious identity. To begin the discussion, mentions of religion or religious topics are not uncommon to find in media due to the role of media in society. Among various information topics that the media provides for people, religion is one of them. As a means of communication, specifically, media at one point serves as a medium for religious communities to preach their spiritual teachings to an even broader and massive amount of audience. In America itself, there was even a time when religion had taken over the media (Stout and Buddenbaum, 2003). Still, the demand for the separation of church from state has been increasing over decades, which slowly decreases the heavy presence of religion in the media. In today's age, where religion no longer dominates the media to the point that it has its own space as before, the perception people developed over religion depends significantly on the kind of contexts under which religion is brought back into public discussion. For example, in situations where some religious individuals are heavily involved, the way people perceive the related religion would be likely in accordance with what said individuals did; it does not even matter if what they do is not relevant to their religion. In this practice, while positive events would favor the image of the religion, negative events would most likely perpetuate harmful stereotypes for the religion and the people who practice related religions—as seen in the case of Islam and Muslims in American news media.

To begin with, as scholars have noted throughout decades, the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the American news media has never been positive. From depicting them solely through the Orientalist view—which is

all about belly dancers and desert savages—to focusing on a specific theme related to the crisis, terrorism, and violence (Adnan, 1989; Said, 1997; Sheikh *et al.*, 1996). These stereotypical portrayals are either inaccurate or exaggerated, leading people who consume such media information to develop misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. With Islam and Muslims framed negatively, a misconception that people develop fuels their negative emotions toward the religion and the people practicing it. Indeed, as demonstrated in the study by Saleem *et al.* (2016), people who rely on media for information about Muslims are likely to be associated with stereotypical beliefs about the religious community, negative emotions, and support for policies that are considered harmful to the community. The study illustrates just how impactful the media is for people to shape their attitudes toward a specific community based on the information they receive from the media. That being said, in discussing the significance of Turner's religious identity in the media's framing of Turner, one should consider how the lack of positive framing in American news has negatively affected the image of Islam and Muslims among the American public throughout decades. The emphasis on Turner's religious identity in these electoral news reports is not coincidental, on the contrary, it is intentional on the media's part.

However, before drawing on the conclusion for the implication behind the emphasis, another thing that should be considered while discussing the implication behind the emphasis on Turner's religious identity is the relationship between religion and American politics itself. As much as ones like to claim that Americans separate private matters like religion from public matters like

politics, the reality is that both things are so closely intertwined. Referring to history, the first president George Washington even believed in the idea that a good republic would depend on religion—because it is only within the concept of religion that one can define morality (Preston *et al.*, 2015). Following this argument was the role that religion partakes in advancing political movements. Patrick (2003) noted that religious belief had helped the advancement of the civil rights movement in a way as it was “led by ministers, fortified by the Scripture, exhorted in massive church meetings, and buoyed by gospel music” (p. 15). All in all, religion has always been closely related to politics in one or two ways. The same thing is illustrated through the tendency of specific religious communities to affiliate themselves with a particular political party. In a state like Oklahoma, which is dominated by Protestants who affiliate themselves with Republicans, the lack of representation from the surrounding Muslim community in its politics is expected. With these in mind, the emphasis on Turner's religion makes sense in that such positive framing was to counter the existing negative stereotype and prejudice against Muslim communities

CONCLUSION

These media—CNN, NBC, News, USA Today, The Guardian, and The Washington Post—framed Turner through both processes of selection and composition, which includes several different acts that can be categorized into three major tropes. These tropes include the emphasis on Turner's identity, the use and reproduction of the ‘making history’ narrative, and the consistent use of active sentences, putting Turner as the doer of

actions as the focus of the sentences, through which Turner is positively framed. Considering the stance taken by the media in writing Turner and the contexts under which Turner is being discussed in the news reports, a thorough critical discourse analysis reveals that these framings done by the media are justified through the implication of existing gender bias and religious discrimination against minority politicians in American society. This study showed that through the texts produced by these media, prejudice and discrimination toward minority people from the same community as Turner are both implied and resisted. By giving insights into the relationship between discourse and the society behind such discourse, this study helps readers to understand how society 'works'. For future researchers who are also interested in further discussing gender bias and religious discrimination in American society, this study gives additional insight in the sense that it should be taken into consideration that such issues can be observed not only through 'obvious' instances but also subtle instances like texts—or more specifically as in this study, discourse.

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