“A Praying Woman”: The Press Framing of Telephone Supervisor Lisa Jefferson and Her Conversation with United 93 Passenger Todd Beamer

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On September 11, 2001, a GTE Airfone supervisor took a call from United Flight 93 passenger Todd Beamer, who said the airplane had been highjacked. Supervisor Lisa Jefferson, a Black woman, stayed on the line with Beamer for thirteen minutes, until just before Beamer and his fellow passengers staged an attempted revolt and the plane crashed in a field just outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The goal of this essay is to identify how the press framed Jefferson and her phone call with Beamer on September 11, 2001. After a newspaper database search, the analysis includes the following publications: the (Chicago) Daily Herald, the Chicago Tribune, and the (Tinley Park, Illinois) Sunday Star (as Jefferson was a Chicago native); the Somerset Daily American (serving Shanksville); the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (seventy-five miles from Shanksville); the (New Brunswick) Central New Jersey Home News (serving Beamer’s home); the Washington Post (which provided extensive coverage of 9/11); and the (Fort Lauderdale) South Florida Sun-Sentinel (which carried articles from a correspondent covering 9/11).

The examination involves articles, headlines, and photos published in September 2001 through the end of the year and those published on the one-year and every five-year anniversary through 2016. This analysis uses framing theory to reveal one significant news frame: the “praying woman,” a Black woman of quiet strength whose religious faith helps her endure in a time of crisis. This frame is noteworthy, as it draws on and adds to the research that has recorded the use of news frames to depict Black women in stereotypical ways.

Literature Review

Framing is useful in explaining the role that texts play in shaping perception through the process of “priming,” the ability of news frames to draw one’s attention to information that...
they might find salient. If an individual finds the information salient, the priming process activates cognitive schemas that help categorize thoughts, piece information together, and make moral judgments about the information. How the information is reported, not just what is reported, is significant to the degree to which one’s perceptions are formed, including perceptions of both gender and race.

With some exceptions, the literature regarding the news coverage of Black women has revealed both implicit and explicit framing biases. For example, Black women campaigning for political office have been associated with the “angry black woman” stereotype, as indicated by such implicit and explicit news descriptions of Black women as “outspoken” and “belligerent.” The positive stereotypes usually associated with White women political candidates (e.g., “compassion”) are notably absent in descriptions of Black women. Research into the framing of emotions in news photographs also has revealed that Black women (and men) are more likely than White subjects to be portrayed with emotions that may not accurately capture their realities. With this information in mind, we ask the following question: How did the press portray Lisa Jefferson, and what are the implications of these frames in relation to how the press typically portrays Black women?

Analysis

The first mention of Jefferson and her conversation with Beamer came on September 16, 2001. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and the Central New Jersey Home News referred to Jefferson by a professional title, “GTE telephone operator,” with no other descriptions. Articles published from other newspapers that month and later that year also used variations of that title. The use of such titles are gender neutral, as there is no mention of Jefferson’s personal traits, such as her appearance or personality, commonly used to describe women. In two separate articles from September 2001, however, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette described Jefferson using stereotypical gender frames. The first is an article that suggested that Jefferson was a calming influence to Beamer in his final moments, and the second, a headline, used a nurturing, almost spiritual reference: “GTE Operator Connects with, Uplifts Widow of Hero in Hijacking.”

In its coverage of the one-year anniversary of United 93, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette defined Jefferson as “a praying woman.” A photo in the story shows Jefferson looking slightly upward, with her hands together in a praying position. An article from the South Florida Sun Sentinel makes similar reference by describing Jefferson as “a shy Baptist daughter of Chicago city-bus driver . . . ” in one paragraph and “a Baptist and regular churchgoer” in another. The story also mentions that Jefferson credits “her religious faith” as helping prepare her for the conversation with Beamer. In total, the coverage makes an implicit connection between Jefferson’s race and gender and the historical ties of Black women to the Baptist faith. The result is one that frames Jefferson in a stereotypical, but positive way—that of a strong, peaceful servant of God just trying to do His work, a direct antithesis to the “angry Black woman.”

The Sunday Star offered a similar profile on the five-year anniversary. The article does not make any religious references, but relies on gendered personality traits to describe Jefferson as having “a kind demeanor” and being a “private, reserved person.” The article
also notes the “inner strength” that guides her: “Behind her warm brown eyes lurks a bit of steel.” The implication is that Jefferson is in control of her emotions, an important distinction given the news frames of Black women as “belligerent.”

Conclusion

A majority of the articles pulled for this analysis came from September 2001 and later that year. However, the most interesting findings came from articles published on or near the one-year and five-year anniversaries of the United 93 hijacking. The “praying woman” frame stands out in these pieces, as it includes both explicit references to Black women’s religious devotion and implicit ones that denote their moral strength and courage.

This frame is a stereotype, to be sure, for it draws upon broad, historical connections between Black women’s religious convictions and their active participation in the Baptist church. But it also has positive connotations. It stands in contrast to news frames that have highlighted Black women’s perceived lack of emotional control, thus implying that they are dangerous and cannot be trusted. Such frames, by extension, deny the history and depth of Black women’s public participation—the fact that religion and faith have long been the tools by which many Black women have survived and battled injustice—by suggesting that they are a burden with little to offer. The “praying woman” frame should be noted, then, for its value in showing Black women as cultural heroes and role models in times of national crisis.

Notes

1. Jim McKinnon, “13-Minute Call Connected Her with a Hero,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 22, 2001.
2. Robert M. Entman, “Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power,” Journal of Communication 57, no. 1 (2007): 164; see also Karrin Vasby Anderson, “Rhymes with Blunt: Pornification and U.S. Political Culture,” Rhetoric & Public Affairs 14, no. 2 (2011): 329–30, for more information on priming.
3. Robert M. Entman, “How the Media Affect What People Think: An Information Processing Approach,” Journal of Politics 51, no. 2 (1989): 350.
4. Orlanda Ward, “Media Framing of Black Women’s Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives,” in Distinct Identities: Minority Women in U.S. Politics, ed. Nadia E. Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 162.
5. Ward, “Media Framing of Black Women’s Campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives,” 163.
6. Shelly Rodgers, Linda Jean Kenix, and Esther Thorson, “Stereotypical Portrayals of Emotionality in News Photos,” Mass Communication & Society 10, no. 1 (2007): 132.
7. See, for example, Jim McKinnon, “‘Are You Guys Ready? Let’s Roll,’” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 16, 2001; Rick Malwitz, “Cranbury Man Believed to Have Led In-Flight Attempt to Thwart Hijackers,” (New Brunswick) Central New Jersey Home News, September 16, 2001.
8. Some variations of the titles include “GTE supervisor” and “GTE Airfone operator.” See Karen Breslau, Eleanor Clift, and Evan Thomas, “The Full Story of United 93,” (Chicago) Daily Herald, November 30, 2001; Charles Lane, Don Phillips, and David Snyder, “A Sky Filled with Chaos, Uncertainty and True Heroism,” Washington Post, September 11, 2001.
9. See Yasmine Dabbous and Amy Ladley, “A Spine of Steel and a Heart of Gold: Newspaper Coverage of the First Female Speaker of the House,” Journal of Gender Studies 19, no. 2 (2010).
10. See McKinnon, “13-Minute Call Connected Her with a Hero”; McKinnon, “GTE Operator Connects with, Uplifts Widow of Hero in Hijacking,” Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, September 19, 2001, respectively.
11. McKinnon, “Lisa Jefferson: Verizon Operator Who Talked to Todd Beamer,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 11, 2002.
12. McKinnon, “Lisa Jefferson: Verizon Operator Who Talked to Todd Beamer.”
13. See, for example, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
14. Wes Smith, “The Haunting Cries from United 93,” (Fort Lauderdale) *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, September 11, 2002.
15. Rosalind Cummings-Yeates, “The Phone Call That Changed Lisa Jefferson’s Life,” (Tinley Park, Illinois) *Sunday Star*, September 6, 2006.
16. A search of articles covering the ten-year and fifteen-year anniversaries of the United 93 hijacking produced little, if any, mention of Jefferson. Those mentions were limited to a variation of the professional titles previously described.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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