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Missing the (Turning) point: The erosion of democracy at an American university

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Abstract

On August 25, 2017, student members of Turning Point USA (TPUSA), a right-wing conservative organization who advocates for smaller government and free market enterprise, recruited on the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) campus. Members of the UNL community protested nearby. Part of the protest was recorded on video and released to social media leading to harsh public criticism that accused the university of restricting free speech and being an unsafe environment for conservative students. Drawing on cognitive linguistics (e.g. metonymy, framing) and multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA), this paper explores how the TPUSA incident at UNL was recontextualized in local and national media discourse, the ways in which the social actors and events were framed, and its consequences. The authors show how these representations reinforce dominant neoliberal discourses (which correlate with right-wing discourses) that negatively impact public education, providing a necessary counter to a populist political climate in which anti-intellectualism reigns.

Keywords: free speech, Turning Point USA, anti-intellectualism, multimodal critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

On August 25, 2017, a University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) student, Kaitlyn Mullen, set up a booth outside of the student union to recruit for Turning Point USA (TPUSA), a right-wing conservative organization. Members of the UNL community, including a graduate student, Courtney Lawton, and a faculty member in the English Department, Amanda Gailey, protested nearby. Part of the protest was recorded on video and released to social media. The video depicted Lawton holding a sign saying, “Just say no to neo-fascism”, using obscene gestures, chanting phrases such as “fight white nationalism”, and referring to Mullen as “Becky, the neo-fascist”. Gailey is only shown briefly holding a sign that asks for her name to be added to TPUSA’s Professor Watchlist. Another video shows a UNL staff member attempting to get Mullen to move her table to a different location due to the fact that her current location was a space reserved for registered student organizations which TPUSA was not. While not shown on video, the event concludes with Mullen getting upset and being escorted away by campus police.¹

As the videos and Mullen’s account of the incident spread from social media and conservative websites to local and even some national news outlets, public criticism of the protest, and Lawton’s actions in particular, grew. Widespread coverage of this event¹ then led to harsh public criticism (eventually including that of conservative state senators) accusing the university of restricting free speech and discriminating against conservative students. Lawton was temporarily (and later permanently) removed from her teaching assignment as a result.

This paper explores the way in which student/faculty activism during the TPUSA incident at UNL was framed in media discourse and the way in which different modes of communication worked together to accomplish this framing. With the help of multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) (Ledin and Machin 2018; Machin and Mayr 2012; van Leeuwen 2008; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999), we examine fifteen articles (including images, videos, and tweets) in local and national news sources that report the events related to TPUSA’s recruiting on UNL’s campus. In our analysis, we aim to understand how the events are recontextualized in media discourse, how the social actors and events are framed in the process, and what the consequences of this representation are. It is hoped that by using MCDA, we can show not only how (biased) media representations contribute to the way people make sense of events, but also how this bias is accomplished often more subtly through the combination of image and text.

1. For a more detailed description of the events of this day, see <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/state-of-conflict> or listen to NPR’s offshoot of this article at <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/state-of-conflict>.

2. Getting to the (turning) point and other necessary context

This section explores the relationship between TPUSA and public universities. In many ways, TPUSA is no friend to public institutions, especially universities. TPUSA was founded in 2012 on the idea that higher education is hostile to conservatives. Their website describes the organization as a “student movement for free markets and limited government”. One of the group’s main goals is to “commandeer” student governments and yank the wheel to the right by bankrolling conservative candidates who will push to defund progressive student organizations and promote policies that would prevent left-wing activists from stifling right-wing speakers (Kolowich 2018). The ideology advanced by TPUSA can be described as “neoliberal”, meaning that they advocate broadly for privatization and deregulation of government (Harvey 2007). In the context of higher education, neoliberal policies seek to reduce funding to public universities, forcing them to behave like private companies and “limiting their ability to realize their critical and emancipatory potential” (Saunders 2010, 66).

TPUSA is perhaps best known for their Professor Watchlist. The watchlist is referred to as a “project” of TPUSA whose aim is “to expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.” (<https://www.professor-watchlist.org/about-us/>). However, as Tiede (2017) notes, there is a discrepancy between the stated purpose to list professors because of their classroom conduct and the actual practices of Professor Watchlist website. Barely more than half of the professors listed on the site are there because of incidents involving behavior that occurred in the classroom; instead, many on the list are there because of their political engagement as private citizens. Some have reported racist, misogynist, and threatening emails as a result of their inclusion on the Professor Watchlist. The fact that TPUSA runs a website that explicitly targets university professors provides context as to why the UNL protest occurred.

While no research was found on TPUSA specifically, the political right’s antagonism of higher education is well documented. Furthermore, the anti-intellectualism discourses such as those of TPUSA have been found to correlate closely with those of right-wing populists (Wodak 2015, 22). Messer-Davidow (1993, 43) documents what he refers to as a “manufactured attack on liberalized higher education by means of a right-wing apparatus dedicated to making radical cultural change” that began in the 1980’s. The strategies that conservative groups used then seem to mirror those employed by TPUSA, and those of right-populist governments on the rise today (Wodak 2015). First, conservatives create narratives in which they are the victim. They hope these stories will gain media traction and eventually turn into legal battles that have the potential to guide policy (Messer-Davidow 1993).

The TPUSA incident on UNL's campus serves as an example of such a victim story, otherwise referred to as victim-victimizer reversal (Wodak 2015).

Crucial to the construction of this narrative is the use of dichotomous, "us" versus "them", thinking that is prevalent in both contemporary right-wing populist and neoliberal ideologies (Ötsch and Pühringer 2017), but also in other types of populism (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017). Organizations like TPUSA activate "us" versus "them" discourses by reducing trust in as well as creating resentment toward 'elites', a category consisting of intellectuals, scholars, teachers, and journalists (as opposed to the wealthy or politically powerful) (Wodak 2017). This distrust in and resentment for intellectual life (anti-intellectualism), and higher education by association, is only advanced by media representations that fail to devote attention to its core functions (such as teaching, researching, learning, etc.) and instead focus on unique or extreme cases (Claussen 2011). In the case of the UNL protest, this is done by concentrating on yet another dichotomy: profession versus unprofessional. The narrowing of social actors to their professional roles frames the protest as the inappropriate behavior of an employee thus opening the door for attacks against the university. As a result, UNL is left more vulnerable to neoliberal policies that seek to reduce government funding of education.

3. Freedom of speech

Attention to freedom of speech is important to this project for two reasons. First, TPUSA and conservative critics accused Lawton and Gailey (as well as the university as a whole) of discriminating against Mullen by restricting her freedom of speech. Second, lots of negative press was directed toward Lawton for the way in which she protested (using obscene language and gestures). "Freedom of speech", which is guaranteed in the First Amendment (U.S. Const, amend. I) refers to one's Constitutional right to articulate and express ideas without censorship or restraint. A recent analysis found that the Supreme Court (under Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr.) has been more likely to embrace free-speech arguments concerning speech by conservative groups as opposed to progressive ones, which is a sharp contrast to earlier eras (Liptak 2018). The narrative that universities restrict conservative students' freedom of speech reflects the way in which the Right has begun to weaponize the First Amendment "borrowing and building on arguments developed by liberals" to "justify unlimited campaign spending, discrimination against gay couples, and attacks on the regulation of tobacco, pharmaceuticals and guns" (Liptak 2018, 4th paragraph).

While the question of whether or not Mullen's free speech was violated permeated the media coverage of the protest, the same was not true of

Lawton's actions, despite the fact that she was also a student at the university. Lawton was removed from teaching after the incident and her behaviors during the protest were condemned by both the media and university officials. The issue of HOW one chooses to express one's freedom of speech (especially in the form of protest) has been a topic of conversation across the United States in recent years. Just a few weeks before the TPUSA protest at UNL, violence had broken out in Charlottesville, Virginia between white supremacist rally-goers and counter-protestors culminating in a man connected to the white supremacists group ramming his car into a crowd of counter-protestors, killing one and injuring several (McCausland and Saliba 2017). While, this action was condemned by most politicians on all sides of the political spectrum, President Trump, in his initial statement, cited blame on both sides because counter-protestors also engaged in violent, although certainly not deadly, behavior during the rally. Style of protest has also been a hot topic of debate relating to NFL players, and other athletes, kneeling during the playing of the national anthem to protest racial inequity and police violence in the U.S. Some have criticized kneeling as disrespectful to the country and inappropriate (Mindock 2018). These examples demonstrate how protests had been represented and discussed in media discourse at the time of the August 25th events, and thus indicate that the issue of free speech was on the public's mind at the time when Lawton protested TPUSA. Hence, because of the recent attention to free speech and protesting, the manner in which Lawton protested allowed conservative organizations to turn the conversation toward free speech (and away from TPUSA's role on college campuses).

4. Theoretical framework

This study draws on the overlapping and complementary theoretical frameworks of cognitive linguistics (e.g., framing and metonymy) and multimodal critical discourse studies (e.g., recontextualization, analysis of images). Cognitive linguistics focuses on language as an instrument for organizing, processing and conveying information (Geeraerts and Cuyckens 2007). Framing analysis, first introduced by Goffman (1974), provides a useful conceptual perspective for this study because it acknowledges that the way information is presented, in this case via the news media, influences how the audience processes it. Iyengar (1994) makes clear the political implications of media framing on how people view issues, such as racial and class inequity. He found that political issues in the media adopted either a thematic or an episodic frame. Thematic frames present issues in terms of their broader context, while episodic frames emphasize the specifics of an individual case. How the media chooses to portray an issue is thus very important to the

way in which the public thinks about it. For example, Iyengar (1994) showed how news media's episodic framing of poverty featuring Black, adult single mothers led viewers to connect being poor with individual characteristics rather than inequity in society.

Metonymy also played an important role in the representation of the events of August 25th, and the shaping of public opinion on them. Metonymy is a figure of language and thought in which one entity stands for another it is associated with or related to in some way (Catalano 2016). Metonymy serves multiple communicative functions such as textual cohesion, humor, irony, euphemism, and hyperbole. It operates not just in language, but in gesture, sign language, art, music, film, photographs, and advertising (Littlemore 2015). One example could be when we call wealthy people "job creators". In this context, the process of metonymy forefronts one aspect of having money (the fact that this money could be used to create jobs). At the same time, it downplays or hides the fact that the person has lots of money, which would be useful if the person wants to justify lowering taxes for wealthy people. Metonymy plays a key role in "helping us make sense of the world," and it "shapes the way we think and the way we influence the thoughts of others" (Littlemore 2015, 191). Hence, we incorporate not only metonymy analysis but critical metonymy analysis, which involves analyzing metonymies and then working out exactly what they bring to our attention and what they obscure (Charteris-Black 2014, 203).

Finally, multimodal critical discourse studies (MCDS) provides a useful lens with which to analyze the way the TPUSA protest was framed.² Drawing upon social semiotics, MCDS views language, as well as images, sounds, gestures, etc. as a set of resources with meaning potential that can be used to accomplish the goal of a communicator (Machin and Mayr 2012). This scholarly perspective pays close attention to the linguistic and non-linguistic representational choices that were made, what alternative choices were available, and their implications. Such analyses are important because language (and other forms of communication) not only shape and maintain the values within a society, but also serve "to create, maintain and legitimize certain kinds of social practices" (Machin and Mayr 2012, 19). It should be noted that critical approaches such as MCDS demonstrate the ways in which communication is involved in advancing dominant ideologies and work to address social wrongs in hopes to bring about social change (Waugh, Catalano, Al Masaed, Hong Do, and Renigar 2016). As shown by van Dijk (1995, 22), "the mainstream news media are inherently part of a power structure

2. Note that in alignment with Catalano and Waugh (Forthcoming), we use MCDS to denote the field as a whole but employ the term MCDA - multimodal critical discourse analysis when focusing on the analysis in particular.

of elite groups and institutions” that reinforce social inequity. Therefore, a way in which an event is covered by news outlets is an ideal subject of analysis for MCDA.

Given this project’s focus on media framing, we found especially useful the concept of recontextualization, which attends to the way in which stories/ events (e.g., social practices) are represented (Bernstein 2003; van Leeuwen 2008). Recontextualization occurs when language is used to transform events and practices through changing, replacing/rearranging, adding, removing (e.g., deleting), substituting, repeating or simplifying elements (Machin and Mayr 2012; van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). According to van Leeuwen (2008, 6), it is important to stress the difference between social practices (e.g., doing things) and representations of these practices (e.g., talking about it). This is important because representations of social practices “not only represent what is going on, they also evaluate it, ascribe purposes to it, justify it, and so on, and in many contexts, these aspects of representation become far more important than the representation of the social practice itself” (van Leeuwen 2008, 6). However, this seemingly simple distinction is often glossed over and lost on readers/viewers.

5. Method

We analyzed the textual and photographic contents of articles published in local and national online news outlets between August 25th and November 17th, 2017 regarding TPUSA’s recruitment on UNL’s campus. Using a www.google.com search for “Turning Point USA and UNL”, 15 articles were found that fit the following criteria:

1. Must be about the TPUSA events of August 25th on UNL’s campus.
2. Must include multimodal data such as images or video.
3. Must be at least 250 words.
4. Must be published between August 25th and November 17th (the time analysis began).

News sources spanned the political spectrum allowing us to compare coverage across diverse political ideologies and perspectives. Five of the 15 articles found were published by the *Lincoln Journal Star*, seven by the *Omaha World Herald*, one by the *Daily Nebraskan* (a UNL student-run newspaper) one by *U.S. News and World Report*, and one by *Breitbart*. Table 1 identifies political tendencies of the news sources found (which helps identify bias in local and national coverage), as well as numbers of articles found from each news source.

Table 1. Number of articles and political tendency of data sources

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| News source, number of articles | <i>Omaha World Herald</i> (7) | <i>Lincoln Journal Star</i> (5) | <i>Daily Nebraskan</i> (1) | <i>U.S. News and World Report</i> (1) | <i>Breitbart</i> (1) |
| Political tendency ³ | Right-center | Neutral ⁴ | No information | Left-center | Alt-right ⁵ |

The text of each article was turned into a .txt file and uploaded to MAXQDA,⁶ which was used to run word frequency lists and code for metonymy and instances of transformation. Examples of addition, deletion, and substitution were found and coded. After coding, the authors met to discuss discrepancies between coding as well as patterns in the data, and metonymy. Important metonymies were coded and categorized and are discussed in the Findings section. In addition, the photographs accompanying each article were saved in a separate document and analyzed individually, but with close attention to the context of the original article in which they appeared. Only photographs relating to the TPUSA protest were analyzed. Photographs that were connected to advertisements or that were used alongside links to other stories were not included in this analysis. In addition, while we recognize that reader responses to these articles (in the form of online comments) also contain valuable information about the ideologies and how they are received by readers, we will not deal with them in this article due to the scope of the paper.

3. Political tendencies were determined using Media Bias/Fact Check <https://mediabiasfact-check.com/>. “No information” means that this news source was not listed on the Media Bias/Fact Check site. Biases are determined by tabulation of use of wording that attempts to influence an audience by using appeal to emotion or stereotypes (e.g., loaded words) and bias of sources used.

4. Noted on Media Bias/Fact Check as “least biased”.

5. Noted on Media Bias/Fact Check as “questionable” based on exhibiting extreme bias, overt propaganda, poor or no sourcing to credible information and/or is fake. We chose to keep this source despite its “questionable” rating due to the fact that its readership includes the current U.S. president who has often cited information from this source to back up his own statements.

6. MAXQDA (<http://www.maxqda.com>) is a software program that facilitates qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods analysis.

6. Findings

In our analysis, we found numerous examples of how the events of TPUSA on UNL's campus were recontextualized through transformations such as additions, deletions, and substitutions. Hence, we will divide our findings into these three categories, at the same time taking care to uncover the role of metonymy in each.

6.1 Additions

When events are recontextualized, they are not simply re-told as they happened. In the description, reactions to the events, purposes (depending on the perspective of the person quoted), and legitimations (justification of actions) are often added (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 98). While various additions were found throughout the data, due to the scope of this paper, we focused our analysis of additions on reported speech. Bias in coverage often resides in these additions because of who has access to the media in order to have their voices heard, and the ways in which they are presented as speakers in relation to the news event. Questions we must ask when looking at additions to news events include: "Who is speaking, how often and how prominently, and about what are quoted news actors allowed to give their opinions?" (van Dijk 1991, 151).

We found (not surprisingly) that different kinds of additions were made, depending on the news source. For example, in the coverage from Breitbart News, a news, opinion, and commentary website aligned with the alt-right, tweets by Charlie Kirk added evaluations of the event that negatively framed the university, but also deleted other aspects (more on this later). In contrast, the *Daily Nebraskan*, a student-run newspaper, was one of the only news sources to feature direct quotes from Amanda Gailey, who at first, was the main target of conservative news sources until Courtney Lawton's actions proved to be an easier target. Table 2 indicates the number of direct/indirect quotations of each social actor found per news source.

Table 2 reveals that of the social actors involved in the events of TPUSA's recruitment on UNL's campus, Kaitlyn Mullen's voice was overwhelmingly heard the most, with 39 quotes or images across all news sources, regardless of political tendency. This was almost double the combined total for both Courtney Lawton and Amanda Gailey (22). The majority of the media coverage of the events contained additions like the following, in which TPUSA staff were given direct quotes which framed the event in their favor:

Table 2. Direct/indirect quotations per news source

| Person quoted/ number of quotes | <i>Omaha World Herald</i> | <i>Lincoln Journal Star</i> | <i>Daily Nebraskan</i> | <i>U.S. News and World Report</i> | <i>Breitbart</i> | Total across news sources |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Kaitlyn Mullen | 19 | 14 | | 4 | 2 | 39 |
| Amanda Gailey | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | | 7 |
| Courtney Lawton | 8 | 4 | | | 3 (2 are videos) | 15 |
| Nebraska lawmakers | 11 | 27 (not including entire Op Ed from senators) | | | | 38 |
| UNL administrators/ communications/ regent director/ spokesperson | 15 | 31 | 2 | 2 | | 50 |
| UNL students and/or faculty | 16 | 20 | 1 | 1 | | 38 |
| Turning Point USA | 3 | 1 | 4 | | 5 | 13 |
| Nebraska citizens (via emails to UNL administrators) | 3 | 4 | | | | 7 |
| Conservative organizations (other than TPUSA) | | 1 | | | | 1 |
| Critics of Turning Point | 2 | | | | | 2 |

(1) “As professors, it’s wrong to come out and **discriminate against a student** because they have a different viewpoint,” Prax said. “Turning Point’s fear is that this may **violate student freedom in the classroom.**”⁷

(said by Timon Prax, Midwest regional manager of TPUSA)
(*Daily Nebraskan* http://www.dailynebraskan.com/news/unl-english-professor-protests-radical-agendas-students-asked-to-leave/article_3d479dco-8d2e-11e7-87d5-b31d43c55d28.html)

As found in Tiede’s (2017) analysis of the Professor Watchlist, this quote by Prax also subtly inserts the issue of student freedom in the classroom, despite the fact that the events took place in a public plaza, outside of class time, and with no student/professor relationship (e.g., neither Amanda Gailey nor Courtney Lawton had any relationship with Mullen). Furthermore,

7. **Bolded** words are added in order to highlight points of focus within the examples.

the addition of “discriminate against a student” is also untruthful since Mullen was a student of neither Lawton nor Gailey, and they were protesting the institution of TPUSA, not the student herself. Framing the protest in terms of a UNL representative mistreating a student is consistent with the goals of anti-intellectualism discourses that seek to foster public distrust in the university as a whole. In Example (2), the *Daily Nebraskan* also featured additions in the form of evaluations by UNL students that signed up to be in TPUSA:

- (2) “It really sucks that they were treated like, so like, badly, harshly, openly because of what they believe in.”

(*Daily Nebraskan*, http://www.dailynebraskan.com/news/unl-english-professor-protests-radical-agendas-students-asked-to-leave/article_3d479dco-8d2e-11e7-87d5-b31d43c55d28.html)

This comment subtly erases the actions of TPUSA related to the Professor Watchlist, which has real and negative consequences for professors put on the list, by turning the conversation toward the “beliefs” of Mullen instead of the real reason for the protests, which were related to harmful actions of the organization.

Another important area where additions were made is in the university’s attempt at damage control, through the ever-present voice (49 tokens and 1 image) of administrators defending the university, but condemning Courtney Lawton’s actions, as shown in the following examples:

- (3) Bounds [UNL president] on Monday said faculty at the university who protested Turning Point USA’s presence on campus missed a “teachable moment,” calling the gesture **unprofessional** “and not in keeping with the **standards of conduct** I expect from **members of the University of Nebraska community**.”

(*Lincoln Journal Star*, http://journalstar.com/news/local/education/unl-again-finds-itself-in-midst-of-free-speech-debate/article_a9a3b96d-46f1-5009-8ebe-b6fbb56711a5.html)

- (4) Bounds has said the behavior was unprofessional. “I’m deeply troubled that a student **has been treated** this way,” he said in a written statement. “I will continue to **support free speech**, but we must allow for the healthy exchange of ideas without **personal attacks, especially against young people** who are our future.”

(*Omaha.com* https://www.omaha.com/news/education/amid-free-speech-firestorm-nu-grapples-with-keeping-debate-robust/article_110ce94b-5a20-55bf-b017-072c78728881.html)

The above statements show how in an effort to defend the university, administrators focused on condemning the professionalism of Courtney Lawton, while choosing to largely ignore the reason faculty protested in the first place. In addition, Bound's use of **personal attacks, especially against young people** only refers to Courtney Lawton's actions, while ignoring Turning Point's actions associated with the Watchlist, and reaffirms that these actions were taken against a student (rather than TPUSA or their representatives). Bound's use of passive voice (e.g., **has been treated**) removed the actor who missed the opportunity he spoke of and who treated a student this way. By creating ambiguity between the actions of the protestors and those of the university as a whole, he created a tighter association between the two; one that conservatives were already attempting to establish. This episodic approach to their responses resulted in turning the incident into an issue of free speech (on behalf of Mullen, not in the case of Lawton) and professionalism through their moral evaluation of Lawton's behavior.

6.2 Deletion

In the re-telling of events, it is impossible for news sources to capture every element, every comment, and all-important context (van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999). Therefore, decisions must be made about what should be included, and what must be deleted. Our analysis found that deletion was a powerful device in the framing of the August 25th events, particularly in the way that the social actors were represented metonymically both in image and text. As shown in Table 3, of the three main social actors in the August 25th events, Kaitlyn Mullen received the most direct and indirect quotes and had the most presence in the discourse through images. However, as Table 4 demonstrates, only 3% of nominations of Mullen included reference to her role as a student activist for TPUSA.⁸

Table 3. Nominations

| <i>Social actor</i> | <i>Total tokens</i> | <i>Tokens of direct/indirect quotes</i> |
|---------------------|---------------------|---|
| Kaitlyn Mullen | 78 | 8 |
| Courtney Lawton | 30 | 2 |
| Amanda Gailey | 33 | 3 |

Instead, functionalization occurred through the use of words such as “sophomore” and “second year UNL student” which framed Mullen as a UNL student,

8. “Nominations” are when a social actor is referred to by name, which serves to personalize them to the audience (Machin and Mayr 2012).

keeping the focus on a university frame. The frequent use of Mullen’s name (and even honorifics such as “Ms. Mullen”, and nicknames such as “Katie”, which connote intimacy) reminds readers that she is a real person, complete with feelings, opinions, and rights. In contrast, Lawton and Gailey were much less frequently named (30 and 33 tokens as opposed to Mullen’s 78). Examples (3) and (4) from Hank Bounds (in the Additions section) demonstrate this point by omitting the names and referring to them as “members of the University of Nebraska community”. By deleting the humanity of Lawton and Gailey through metonymy, media accounts lead audiences to identify with Mullen. Furthermore, the emphasis on Mullen as a student and Lawton and Gailey as university employees deletes other aspects of their identity.

Table 4. Types/number of different nominations

| <i>Kaitlyn Mullen</i> | | <i>Courtney Lawton</i> | | <i>Amanda Gailey</i> | |
|--|-----------------|--|-----------------|---|-----------------|
| <i>Type</i> | <i>no./pct.</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>no./pct.</i> | <i>Type</i> | <i>no./pct.</i> |
| Mullen | 45 = 58% | Lawton | 23 = 77% | Gailey | 13 = 39% |
| Ms. Mullen | 12 = 15% | Courtney Lawton, a graduate teaching assistant | 2 = 7% | Professor/Prof. Amanda Gailey | 8 = 24% |
| Kaitlyn Mullen | 9 = 12% | English lecturer and PhD student Courtney Lawton | 1 = 3% | Amanda Gailey | 3 = 9% |
| Sophomore Kaitlyn Mullen/ Kaitlyn Mullen, a sophomore | 5 = 6% | The lecturer, Courtney Lawton | 1 = 3% | Amanda Gailey, an associate professor in the English department/ an associate professor of English | 3 = 9% |
| Turning Point USA chapter President | 2 = 3% | English Department Graduate Assistant Courtney Lawton | 1 = 3% | a woman claiming to be Associate Professor Amanda Gailey | 1 = 3% |
| Katie Mullen | 2 = 3% | UNL graduate student Courtney Lawton | 1 = 3% | English faculty member, Amanda Gailey | 1 = 3% |
| Kaitlyn Mullen of Colorado | 1 = 1% | Lawton, an English department lecturer | 1 = 3% | Faculty member Amanda Gailey | 1 = 3% |
| UNL sophomore Kaitlyn Mullen | 1 = 1% | - | - | English professor Amanda Gailey | 1 = .3% |
| Kaitlyn Mullen, a second-year UNL student from Highlands Ranch, Colorado | 1 = 1% | - | - | Associate Professor Amanda Gailey | 1 = 3% |
| TOTAL | 78 | | 30 | | 33 |

Nomination or functionalization not only highlight certain aspects of a social actor's identity but also take the place of other potential categories which are thus removed from consideration. Take for instance, some of the alternative ways in which Lawton and Gailey could have been represented: concerned citizens, activists, protestors, etc. They also could have been labeled based upon where they grew up, their gender, religious affiliation, race, sexual orientation, etc. The point is that there are numerous aspects of their identity that are not included. These deletions could be because the author doesn't have the information, has decided it is not relevant to the story, or because it contradicts or complicates the story in a way that makes its inclusion undesirable.

While Mullen's role with TPUSA was largely erased from the recontextualization of the events (with the exception of *Breitbart*, which highlighted it), Lawton and Gailey's roles as concerned citizens and activists outside of their job were also ignored through nominations of the two (seen in Table 4) which largely focused on their role as "professor" or "lecturer". Lawton's role as a lecturer/teacher was highlighted (in order to connect her behavior to her teaching, even though she was not teaching at the time of the protest). Furthermore, Lawton's role as a graduate student was only mentioned in 6% of nominations. Besides her underrecognized role as a UNL student herself, Courtney's role as an active community member that has spoken up on behalf of immigrant students and gun control was never mentioned. Hence, one wonders if she had she been framed as a concerned community member, would her actions have been viewed differently and would audiences have been allowed to wonder: why was she concerned?

We also found that images featured in the articles reinforced the framing of Mullen as a student and downplayed the broader political context of the protest. Viewers may notice that Mullen, who is identified through captions and text, is shown in numerous photos. However, Gailey, Lawton, and other protestors are largely absent, seen only once each, in both cases with their signs, which are iconic for their role as protestors. Below are the two most common images of Mullen found in the data.

According to Barthes (1977), photographs denote things, but they also connote things such as the "ideas, values and wider discourse communicated" and they represent people in ways that categorize them (Ledin and Machin 2018, 48). In Example (5), viewers will notice that one of the people depicted is wearing a backpack which carries the connotation that he is a student. In addition, Kaitlyn Mullen is talking and gesturing downward as if explaining an idea. She is also squinting her eyes, which connotes questioning or an effort to understand the person with whom she is talking (who is with his back to the camera, but whose backpacks connotes he is a student). In (6), she is standing in a position of power (with hands firmly

(5)⁹

Sophomore Kaitlyn Mullen engages fellow students outside the Nebraska Union last August, sharing the message of Turning Point USA, a conservative nonprofit organization that advocates for fiscal responsibility, free markets and limited government.

(6)¹⁰

Kaitlyn Mullen, alongside Andrew Klingemann, talks with Hallie Lewin about Turning Point USA outside the Nebraska Union at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on Tuesday, Aug. 29. Mullen, a sophomore, said she was berated and intimidated by people on campus Friday, Aug. 25, because she was trying to recruit students for the conservative group. E

ADAM WARNER/THE WORLD-HERALD

9. Copyright *Lincoln Journal Star*. View the original photograph at: http://journalstar.com/news/local/education/unl-again-finds-itself-in-midst-of-free-speech-debate/article_a9a3b96d-46f1-5009-8ebe-b6fbb56711a5.html

10. Copyright *Lincoln Journal Star*. View the original photograph at: http://journalstar.com/news/local/education/unl-again-finds-itself-in-midst-of-free-speech-debate/article_a9a3b96d-46f1-5009-8ebe-b6fbb56711a5.html

placed on each hip) and laughing while another student is handling some of the free items on her booth. The photo also features a red sign with white letters spelling “GO” in the background that is part of a Go Big Red banner shown hanging outside the student union at UNL. The backpacks and sign are indexical (Chandler 2007) of a college campus. Both photos show Mullen close-up, further humanizing her to viewers. Only the “Big Government Sucks” t-shirt hints slightly as to the real reason she is there. Alternatively, the photographs could have shown her filming Courtney Lawton while she protested, or crying, or calling Turning Point to discuss strategy. All of these things occurred, but instead, the clothing, setting, and objects featured in the photos paint a picture of a normal campus scene, all of which set up a particular angle that is favorable to Kaitlyn Mullen and Turning Point.

The images featured in the articles work in conjunction with the text to construct an episodic frame (Iyengar 1994) that leads the audience to think about the TPUSA protest as an isolated event devoid of its broader societal context. By depicting a specific person, (Mullen) in a specific role (student), and in a particular space (college campus), the photographs found in the news articles covering the TPUSA protest advance a narrow view of events that fit neatly within critiques against higher education rooted in anti-intellectualism. The audience is led to think about what happened between a student, Kaitlyn Mullen, and university employees on August 25th, 2017; not what TPUSA was doing on UNL’s campus or why some members of the UNL community protested their presence.

6.3 Substitution

Social media has been shown to be a powerful tool in advancing political agendas, particularly for grassroots organizations such as TPUSA (Krzyżanowski and Tucker 2018). Below, Example (7), in a tweet that was shared in one of the texts that was part of our data set, Charlie Kirk, leader of TPUSA, substitutes the Nebraska personnel who asked Mullen to move her booth to a different area for the entire University of Nebraska.

In this metonymy, INSTITUTION FOR PERSONS, CATEGORY FOR MEMBER OF CATEGORY, “U of Nebraska” stands for the select staff member who asked Mullen to move. Moreover, “U of Nebraska” stands for the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, which is where the event took place, and does not include the other institutions that are part of the University of Nebraska system a.k.a. University of Nebraska at Omaha, and University of Nebraska Kearney. The deletion of “Lincoln” from the nomination and substitution of “U of Nebraska” is significant because it allows the incident that took place at UNL to be generalized to ALL Nebraska public universities. Once this mental switch is made, it allows for the actions of those who protested TPUSA to be prescribed to the entire university system, and to all public institutions

(7)¹¹

of higher education in the state, as well as academics in general, helping to spur an us versus them dichotomy in which readers are positioned against university ‘elites’.

In response to tweets by TPUSA and the news coverage that followed, three Nebraska state senators published an Op-ed accusing UNL of being hostile toward conservative students. The title of their piece was, “Local View: UNL’s treatment of conservatives is troubling” (bolded by the authors). In the headline, we see the metonymy INSTITUTION FOR PERSONS in which the entire institution (this time only including the University of Nebraska–Lincoln as opposed to the whole university system which TPUSA used) stands for a small select group of individuals associated with the August 25th events. According to van Dijk, headlines deserve special attention because of the important textual and cognitive functions they serve (1991, 50). This particular headline, because it is an Op-ed, expresses what is important to the authors and what they want readers to remember. Both the use of “UNL” (i.e., INSTITUTION FOR PERSONS) and “conservatives” in the heading are significant. Note that the headline says that “UNL’s treatment of **conservatives** is troubling,” not the treatment of conservative students. Hence, the metonymy entire category for member of category subtly makes the jump from accusations about how the university treats *students* to how the university treats *conservatives* (a.k.a. Republicans) in general. Later in the body of the Op-ed, the three state senators narrow this concern to only talking about students, but because of the power of headlines to influence thought, the damage is already done.

11. View the original tweet at: <https://www.breitbart.com/tech/2017/08/28/watch-university-of-Nebraska-Lincoln-employees-harass-call-cops-on-conservative-student-activists/>

The conservative senators' portrayal of the protest is advanced and legitimized by the photographs appearing alongside the article, and shown below:



State Sen. Tom Brewer of Gordon
Courtesy photo

(8)¹²



State Sen. Steve Erdman of Bayard
Courtesy photo

(9)



Halloran
Courtesy photo

(10)

The photographs above denote the three Nebraska senators who authored the Op-ed. Here the dress of the senators has meaning potential. Suits and ties are iconic of politicians, businessmen, and people with power and the money to buy the suits, which are not cheap. In addition, Senator Tom Brewer wears a purple heart pin on his lapel, which is metonymic for heroic military action. Besides the dress of the senators (CLOTHES/PIN FOR STATUS), their facial expressions index emotional states of friendliness (e.g., smiles). Finally, all three photos of the senators are close-ups (which convey intimacy), with horizontal angles which invite the viewer to “take this person’s perspective” and engage more with the subject (Ledin and Machin 2018, 60). Furthermore, the photos are “demand” images, in which they look directly at the viewer as if to ask a response from them (Ledin and Machin 2018, 60). All of these elements add up to a very positive visual representation.

The UNL administrators’ response to the Op-ed features the headline “NU not ‘hostile’ to conservatives, university leaders say”. Despite using the word “not” to negate the frame, the same metonymy (NU as an institution standing for those who work there) is advanced. According to Lakoff (2004, 3), “when we negate a frame we invoke the frame”. Thus, the *Lincoln Journal Star*, by using the language of the senators in the headline, to describe the university, even to say it is not so, reinforces the senators’ frame. By phrasing the title as such, a type of ‘Don’t think of an elephant’ phenomenon occurs

12. View original photographs at https://journalstar.com/opinion/columnists/local-view-unl-treatment-of-conservatives-is-troubling/article_21071ebo-d140-53d8-98f8-odf19466c377.html

in which the words “NU” and “hostile” will be bound together in the minds of readers/viewers.

The photograph accompanying the university’s response (much smaller in size when compared to those of the senators), denotes UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green in an unflattering light and further promotes a perception of the university as defensive. The photo of Green is provided below in Example (11):

(11)¹³



Green is shown with a suit and tie (indexical of status) as well as an “N” pin representing the University of Nebraska and his personal connection to it. However, his posture mirrors the defensive headlines. In the photo, Green’s hands are spread out in a defensive position in front of his body, with fingers of his left hand outstretched. His left hand is stiff, with the thumb stretched out vertically. His facial expression is not a smile, but his lips are somewhat pursed as if asking a question and his eyebrows are somewhat raised. Taken together, the pose is iconic for someone defending his actions or positions, as if asking the audience to agree with his perspective.

Notice that Example (11) is neither a close-up nor a longshot, but it does not convey intimacy with the subject. While there is a horizontal and equal camera angle, Green’s gaze is an “offer image” (Ledin and Machin 2018, 61), in which no contact or demand is made on the viewer because he does not look directly at them but instead, is looking out into a presumed audience. Also significant is the large red “N” icon in the back of the photo, which reminds viewers that this person on the defensive is representing the university. It is clear that the *Lincoln Journal Star* chose this photograph because it communicated a message that aligned with the headlines of the article. This choice (e.g., substitution) positioned the university in a defensive stance, refuting the accusations while at the same time re-activating them in the minds of the viewers through the headlines and the pose of the photograph.

However, in a critical analysis such as ours, we must also ask what the alternative could have been. The photos included here are not simple additions. Rather, others could have chosen but were not. These substitutions

13. Copyright *Lincoln Journal Star*. View the original photograph at: http://journalstar.com/news/local/education/nu-not-hostile-to-conservatives-university-leaders-say/article_cc37def0-bef9-506d-ba05-6204a4d46e27.html

are important because, as we have shown above, the selected photos help to frame the events portrayed in the articles. For example, why did the *Lincoln Journal Star* not choose a photograph such as Example (12), which can be found on the UNL website?

(12)¹⁴



Example (12) is much more similar to the photos of the three senators (Examples (8)–(10)) and a more positive and generic representation. The differences between the photos highlight yet another example of how the media's coverage of events played into an already existing anti-intellectual frame in which the state senators, representatives of 'the people,' were standing up to 'the elites' who were abusing their power.

7. Conclusion

Our analysis found that numerous transformations were made in the recontextualization of the August 25th events. For example, additions were made which allowed others (e.g., Turning Point, UNL students, administrators, Nebraska senators) to comment and evaluate the events. We found that of the social actors involved in the events of August 25th, Kaitlyn Mullen had the most access to the media, and gained the support of influential senators. In contrast, UNL administrators also had easy access to the media, but rather than defending the actions of Courtney Lawton (or Amanda Gailey) in terms of their free speech, they chose to distance themselves from them, and negatively evaluate them in hopes to portray them as acts of a badly-behaved employee. Mullen was framed principally as a UNL student, rather than the Turning Point USA representative. The role of metonymy was particularly important in deleting the fact that Courtney Lawton was also a student, not

14. Photo available under CC BY-SA license. View the original photo at: <https://www.unl.edu/chancellor/bio>

in the classroom at the time of the protest, nor was she Mullen's teacher. Additionally, metonymy allowed for Lawton's actions, once recontextualized, to be applied to the entirety of UNL and public universities generally. Images were powerful communicators working together with the texts, communicating a university/student frame while avoiding a political one. Framing the protest as an incident between a student and university employees allowed powerful groups (such as TPUSA and conservative politicians) to make larger claims about the university as a whole, and for all parties to episodically frame the incident as a single matter of professionalism and free speech, rather than looking at the systemic way in which TPUSA is eroding democracy within American institutions.

In answer to our research questions regarding what the consequences of the framing are and who is behind it, it is clear that the events of August 25th were harnessed by Nebraska conservatives as a potent tool with which to diminish public trust in higher education and defend budget cuts to the university which might otherwise have been seen more negatively. Moreover, it opened up space for larger anti-intellectualism discourses (that go hand-in-hand with right-wing populism), and have weakened the university, leaving it more vulnerable to neoliberal policy changes (like those supported by organizations similar to TPUSA) that result in the privatization of education. Our paper is one small way in which we fight back against these political forces. Through our critical multimodal analysis, we have exposed how the prevailing forces behind media discourse manipulate public opinion and get away with framing the events in a way that advances right-wing agendas, which leave real and devastating consequences. Because of the current political climate, more than ever, we hope that others will heed the call to do the same.

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