Referee Report on "Officer-involved : The Media Language of Police Killings"

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Summary

This paper by J. Moreno-Medina, A. Ouss, P. Bayer, and B. A. Ba examines semantic structures in news reporting on police killings in the United States. Using NLP and other computational linguistics tools, it investigates the magnitude, nature, and consequences of obfuscatory language in this context. Leveraging regression estimates from publicly available data, the authors find greater use of obfuscation in reports on police shootings compared to reports on civilian shootings. They then estimate a second regression on cross-sectional data from the Cooperative Election Study to show that a 10 percentage point increase in media obfuscation is associated with increased support for funding the police. They supplement these findings with a lab experiment that exposes subjects to retellings of the same shooting story with varying levels of obfuscation. They also document that case circumstances, notably whether the victim was armed, affect both the effectiveness of obfuscation and its use by the media. Lastly, using a theoretical model, they show that typical demand and supply-side factors, such as media ownership and readership composition, are only weakly associated with the use of obfuscatory language, in contrast to the substantial role played by the reuse of police reports across media platforms.

Its first major contribution is methodological: the authors develop an approach to identify grammatical and syntactic structures, such as nominalization and the passive voice, that may be construed as obfuscatory. This adds to a rich literature in computational linguistics on the semantic analysis of text data, especially work that combines machine learning tools with linguistic theory in NLP (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2004; Engle et al. 2020; Giglio, Kelly, and Stroebel 2021). In addition, it advances research on how linguistic framing influences perceptions and policy preferences (Chen 2013; Bursztyn et al. 2022) by providing evidence that these structures shift support for policing in the aftermath of a police shooting. This is also relevant for cognitive science, as it corroborates existing evidence on how semantics shape accountability judgments (Northcutt Bohmert, Allison, and Ducate 2019) and clarifies their relevance for public support for police accountability. Empirically, the paper contributes to the literature on crime coverage in the media (Gilliam et al. 1996; Grunwald, Nyarko, and Rappaport 2022) by providing an in-depth analysis of semantic structures present in police department reports and their echo in news articles. It builds on earlier work (Yasmin 2021) documenting disparities in media coverage by victims' ethnic or socioeconomic characteristics and extends it by focusing on agency suppression and responsibility encoding. To move beyond description, the paper offers theoretical foundations to identify drivers of obfuscation in news reporting by considering both demand and supply channels, with an emphasis on institutional text reuse. This approach may be repurposed to study the drivers behind other recurring patterns in police and media reporting. In this report, I critically review these contributions and offer suggestions to strengthen them.

Main Remarks and Suggestions

In the last section of the paper, the authors reflect on the potential origin of obfuscation in the news media. They estimate regressions to assess whether obfuscation in police reports correlates with obfuscation in media reports linked to police killings. To strengthen their findings, they look at interaction effects between police obfuscation and whether the police department in question shares the same media market as the outlet reporting on the killing. While this approach efficiently identifies correlation between po- lice and media language, it falls short of establishing police reports as the driver of obfuscation. Indeed, obfuscation by the police may itself reflect local preferences for transparency or for police accountability. It may be that because the general public in a given area tends to be less critical of the police, both the police and news reports do not feel the need to resort to obfuscatory structures without any one source influencing the other. To more clearly ascertain whether news outlets tend to parrot police reports verbatim, an additional semantic analysis focusing on evidentials could be conducted. In the linguistic literature, *evidentiality* refers to the "grammatical marking of information source" (Aikhenvald 2007) and concerns how speakers indicate the source of the information they convey. For instance, the same information can be framed as hearsay ("I heard that . . . ") or as common sense using adverbs such as "obviously".Thus, investigating the occurrence of sentences such as "police say" or "police claim" may serve as further evidence that police reports shape media discourse on such event. More generally, euphemistical structures related to computational linguistics in identifying biased text, such as hedge words like "possibly" or "maybe" (Recasens, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, and Jurafsky 2013) could give more clues as to whether the obfuscatory structures used by police are reused without critical distance in news reports.

My second critique concerns the experimental strategy described in section five. Four outcomes are measured at the end of the experiment: belief in the officer's responsibility, support for departmental or legal penalties, and support for police reform. I question the identification strategy for the latter, which relies on a donation choice pitting support for officer mental health against increased police reforms. These options are not clearly mutually exclusive, which weakens inference from donations to the second option as a clean measure of reform support. For instance, a respondent favoring reform could simultaneously endorse genuine legal reforms, such as stricter background checks, while also believing that mental health among police officers is a real issue and thus choose to donate to option 1. The literature on mental health care use documents the prevalence of such issues among police officers (Jetelina et al. 2020), which makes it reasonable that respondents might prioritize this concern without rejecting reform. To reduce this ambiguity, I recommend adding a direct attitudinal item on legal reforms that is compatible with demands for better police mental health (for example, "Should police mental-health-related background checks be strengthened?") and interacting it with the donation outcome variable as an additional robustness check.

Minor Comments

In their analysis of the Cooperative Election Study (CES), the authors carefully specify that little can be known about the media habits of respondents. This is problematic for disentangling the effect of obfuscation on support for the police from other unobserved factors. I believe that a way to make this analysis more robust could involve using the available data from the CES panel for 2010–2014(Schaffner and Ansolabehere 2015). Indeed, this other version of the survey asks essentially the same question and includes questions on media use the day prior to the survey. Although the latter also exists in the cross-sectional studies used by the authors, the possibility to measure this at multiple points in time for a given respondent may provide additional insights on their media exposure and help construct a control for media type consumed and preferences for local versus national news on political or societal topics. This may help to supplement the placebo test provided by the authors and provide additional credence to their claim. More generally, and assuming such a source exists, panel data with a greater focus on the frequency of media use broken down by source could help substantiate the existence of a causal link between obfuscation in news reports and support for a given policy. Weighting the importance of a media channel by its degree

of representation in the corpus built by the authors could also help ensure that people exposed to media outlets presenting a higher degree of obfuscation are given more importance.

Going back to the section on supply and demand, I believe that the authors do a laudable job of controlling for several potential drivers of obfuscation. They particularly examine whether the influence of media ownership is consistent with recent advances in the scientific literature on the subject (Cagé 2020) and convincingly assess that ownership by a major conservative broadcasting group such as Sinclair has little influence on observed levels of obfuscation. However, as the American media environment is fairly rich and diverse, I believe other potential vectors of heterogeneity in obfuscation practices might be worth considering. For example, differences in media bias and reporting tone between cable and broadcast news network have been documented in the scientific literature(Hosseinmardi et al. 2025). Thus, it may be that these exhibit different preferences for obfuscation on police violence or social issues in general which could be of interest. To a lesser extent, ownership by a commercial mass media group (e.g., Comcast, Fox, or Paramount) as opposed to a public network (e.g., PBS, a cooperative public television network) may also add depth to conclusions drawn from the Sinclair example. To conclude my critique on this section of the paper, I find the argument for no differences across national TV stations illustrated in Figure C.6 less convincing. Indeed, with the exception of OANN, there does appear to be a pattern whereby channels less identified with either party (i.e., more balanced republican and democrat viewer shares) such as NBC or CBS exhibit a noticeably lower use of obfuscation. Although this figure alone is, of course, cannot establish the point, an additional analysis would be welcome.

My last suggestion has to do with the differential obfuscation documented in this study. In line with much of the related scientific literature, the paper finds higher obfuscation for white and female victims as compared to victims belonging to an ethnic minority and to males (regardless of ethnic background). Although these patterns overlap with known ethnic disparities in the United States, victims' socio-economic conditions could also be relevant. Studies, indeed, document higher levels of police violence against lower-income individuals (Motley and Joe 2018), and investigating whether obfuscation differs by socio-economic context would add another useful dimension to this paper's findings.

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