CATCHING FIRE IN THE NEWS
(BOYDSTUN, LAUFER, CARD, & SMITH 2026)

CODING PROTOCOLS FOR HEAT, FUEL, AND OXYGEN

UPDATED JUNE 2025

For each storm and non-storm event, we rated the event according to each element (heat, fuel, and oxygen) on a six-item scale from Low to Very High (Low, Medium Low, Medium, Medium High, High, and Very High) based on comprehensive research, including reading news articles, social media posts, and Google Trends data, where applicable.

- **Heat:** The newsworthiness of the event, including factors like dramatic impact and shock value, as well as photo/video evidence
- **Fuel:** The historical and current political, cultural, and economic context that amplifies the event's relevance, whether within or outside the relevant issue areas
- **Oxygen:** The media agenda capacity to begin with, as well as attention and amplification from beyond traditional news sources, such as social media, politicians, and activist groups

HEAT

A news story has **low newsworthiness if:**

- It concerns a subject with low societal status or impacts a small population
    - Examples: countries with low perceived importance to the Western world, communities of color, people without celebrity status
- Has little to no shock value
    - Not prompted by a "focusing event" i.e. it is likely not sudden, but rather continuous, regularly occurring, or hard to measure (example: car crashes affecting children)
    - The event has relatively low harm or potential for future harm (example: events with few/no casualties)
    - An event that doesn't possess an element of intrigue or scandal, or is inherently dry and uninteresting

A news story has **medium newsworthiness:**

- If it concerns a subject/population with importance, but has low/moderate shock value and impact OR
- Has shock value/impact/intrigue, but concerns a population/subject that is not highly covered or perceived as important

A news story has **high newsworthiness**:

- Is perceived to be very important
    - Directly concerns powerful individuals, institutions, household names, or people with high perceived importance who the media is more likely to pay attention to
- Has a high shock value
    - Has a focusing event that "breaks" the story and grabs audience attention
    - Entails direct harms or impacts that cannot be discounted (casualties, graphic harms, definitely changes those impacted, concerns an issue that causes harm)
    - Has elements of scandal and shock, or is inherently sensational

	Absence of compelling photo/video evidence	**Compelling photo/video/audio evidence**
Low newsworthiness	Very low	Low
Medium newsworthiness	Medium	Medium-High
High newsworthiness	High	Very High

FUEL

Two elements:

- **History of similar media coverage**
    - No history: no media storms around issue in recent history, does not occupy a continuous place in media agenda or public policy concerns
    - Some history: There is general societal awareness leftover from prior media coverage and precedent, but it has been mitigated by time, is not as relevant, or does not have widespread salience
    - Strong history: maintains a continuous throughline and importance in media (examples: immigration is particularly salient for Western populations, certain scandals can benefit from a history of media coverage of similar scandals)
- **Current economic, social political conditions provide ways to hook into and amplify the event's relevance**
    - No current conditions/backdrop: no real concurrent events or conditions that can be used as a hook or frame to amplify the importance of the news item
    - Some current conditions/backdrop: there is a concurrent event that amplifies the issues importance, but it is only relevant to select populations, isn't widely publicized, or acts as a weak amplifier
    - Strong current conditions/backdrop: there is at least one highly publicized concurrent event that amplifies the issues' importance on the national or international stage (example: 2024 election provided salience hook for Israel-Hamas war, same with 1972 election and Thomas Eagleton)

	No history	**Some**	**Strong history**
No current backdrop/ conditions to amplify relevance	Very low	Low	Medium
Some backdrop	Low	Medium-High	High
Strong backdrop	Medium	High	Very high

OXYGEN

Examples of amplification sources:

- Celebrity tweets, speeches, endorsements, donations
- Cross-sectional philanthropy efforts
- International government action (investigations, testimony, hearings)
- Protests
- Advocacy groups
- Social media activism (hashtag, online boycott)
- Corporations
- Politicians
- "Soft news" like Saturday Night Live or talk-show hosts (Jimmy Kimmel, John Oliver)

Impacted media agenda:

- A media storm is impacted when there is a concurrent media storm that meets the following criteria: has at least 2,000 articles that month, is within the first three months of its life, and the amount of monthly coverage is at least ⅔ the amount of coverage the month of peak coverage.

- Media storms that fit these criteria:
    - October 2019 - January 2020: Trump impeachment (Australian wildfires)
    - October 2014: Ebola (Amanda Bynes)
    - June 2016: Brexit referendum (Brock Turner)
    - Russo Ukraine war ONLY in March 2022 (coverage declined by over 40% in next month)
    - March-May 2020 - COVID-19

	Impacted media agenda	**Available media agenda**
No significant amplification	Very low	Low
Amplification by one type of non-news source (e.g., two celebrities count as one type)	Low	Low-Medium
Amplification by two or more types of non-news sources	Medium	Medium-High
Amplification by three types of non-news sources	High	Very high