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What is This?

'Bullets as bacteria'

Television news magazines' use of the public
health model for reporting violence

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ABSTRACT

Surveys of mass media content related to social violence suggest that it generally
focuses on the individual, atomistic 'act' (e.g. the bang-bang car chase) rather than
issues of cause and prevention. Yet, increasingly – but with controversy – doctors,
health officials and activists have pushed for a 'public health' model of reporting news
about crime and violence that looks at interactions between the victim, the agent of
injury or death, and the environment in which the injury or death took place rather
than viewing it in strictly individual terms. In this study of television news-magazine
stories, we found a strong emphasis on episodic and personal stories, with minor
allusions to greater social issues. The emphasis on entertainment seemed to negate any
promised 'public health' angles. We conclude that the challenge for the public health
model is to find 'scripts' that journalists deem to be publicly consumable and ratings
friendly.

KEY WORDS ▪ crime ▪ journalism ▪ news ▪ public health ▪ television
▪ violence

It can be said there are four states of illness: those that occur in the body, those
the mind conceives, those the medical-industrial complex pronounces, and
those that the media frame for the public. Pathological physical processes may
have been occurring in someone for a long time but only at a certain point
does that person accept that she or he is 'sick', which may or may not coincide
with medical professionals declaring that the patient has something called
'cancer'. There is a physical reality of sickness but also psychologically,
socially, politically, and culturally imposed constructions of what an ailment
means. Such definitions and their policy-making consequences are debated or
fought out within interpersonal channels, institutions, and the media. It is of
interest to media researchers to understand how a new candidate for a 'disease'
or health issue enters the anti-pantheon of illnesses – literally how some actors

attempt to discursively redefine something into a public health issue from some other categorization (cf. Lupton and Lupton, 1996).

Here we explore one of the most politically-charged and prominent cases of this kind. In 1993 when David Satcher took over the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and introduced the concept that crime and violence should be treated like public health problems such as heart disease and cancer, he surprised those who thought crime and violence fell to the criminal justice system, not the public health arena. One newspaper called him the CDC chief who worried 'as much about bullets as about bacteria' (Applebome, 1993: E7). Satcher's experience with violence was not merely theoretical: an African-American, his first position as a physician was as medical director of a free clinic in Watts (Rovner, 1993: Z6), where he noted that 'the major cause of death today [is] not smallpox or polio or even infectious diseases . . . Violence is the leading cause of lost life in this country today. If it's not a public health problem, why are all those people dying from it?' (Applebome, 1993: E7). Satcher cited the rise in death rates for African-American males as explainable by gun homicides (*Jet*, 1994: 4). He saw three elements of the community as crucial in recognizing crime and violence as an epidemic that should be put in the same category as heart disease or AIDS. First, individuals needed to know the risks of violence much like people might be counseled to avoid smoking or eating unhealthy diets. Second, Satcher thought it essential to involve community churches. Last, although he never stated this outright, he implied that the mass media – or, more specifically, the news press – needed to accept this new conception of violence. Satcher made a pitch to the media to include crime and violence in the same category as other public health epidemics so that its risk factors could be defined and prevention strategies discovered (Case, 1994: 15). Despite the almost inevitable polarization of the political left and right, a growing number of public health officials are now pushing for a change in how Americans and the media think about crime and violence toward the 'public health' model (Wallack et al., 1993; Stevens, 1997).

The public-health-reporting model is defined as reporting that includes risk factors, causes, and prevention strategies in stories about injury and death, regardless of whether the cause is disease or social problems such as violence (Stevens, 1997). This type of reporting identifies patterns of crime and violence and puts them into context. This model sees the causes of death and injury as preventable rather than inevitable and looks at interactions between the victim, agent of injury, or death and the environment rather than viewing them in strictly individual terms. Public health reporting advances the idea that crime and violence is predictable and preventable rather than random and inevitable. It provides information about how typical the type of violence is, what causes it, what defuses it, and how to intervene (Dorfman et al., 1997;

Stevens, 1997). It necessarily entails changing attitudes from attributing responsibility only to individuals to encompassing underlying societal factors.

One first step in changing perceptions of responsibility for a problem is to change the way the media report on the issue to include more information on social responsibility. This suggestion is in line with a long tradition of research in news production that asserts that task-specific changes in the *way* news-workers handle topics are possible and practical (Epstein, 1973). Here we ask, how successfully is this model infiltrating discourse about violence in mass media? Our research includes television 'news-magazine' programs which allow journalists to explore in greater depth particular topics, events, or issues. The purpose of this study is to analyze whether such programs have begun to follow the public health model when reporting on crime and violence.

Literature review

The public health model has roots in the concept of framing. Framing essentially involves selection and salience. The frames that the media use in stories help define problems and call attention to some things while obscuring others. At the most general level, framing refers to subtle alterations in statement or presentation. According to Entman (1993), frames have at least four functions: to define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. This is essentially what the public health model is suggesting – that media stories on crime and violence be reframed to call attention to context, risk factors, and solutions, just as the public journalism approach has called for reframing of stories to include more context, solutions, and citizens' concerns.

At the most general level, the concept of framing refers to subtle alterations in statement or presentation. The theory says that while our expectations are based on our past experiences, we still have the flexibility to create and use new or different expectations and that we are always monitoring the environment for social cues that signal when we should make such changes (Baran and Davis, 1995: 298). The implication is that cues learned from the media are also used to create frames. Using framing theory, we can assess how the media can reinforce a dominant ideology or alter an existing one.

Attribution theory suggests that people typically exaggerate the role of individuals' motives and intentions while discounting social factors. This tendency to blame individuals has been dubbed the fundamental attribution error by psychologists (Jones, 1979: 107–17). Attribution is an important concept in framing theory because certain kinds of news frames tend to encourage attribution of responsibility to individuals, while other kinds of

news frames influence people to hold society responsible. The 'individual saga' is a basic unit of storytelling, found in everything from folktales to evening news reports (Propp, 1984). Another way of thinking about telling stories is that television conventions give stories either episodic or thematic frames (Iyengar, 1991: 5). Episodic news frames focus on specific events or particular cases while thematic frames place issues in a general context. Episodic framing leads to individual attributions of responsibility, whereas thematic framing is more likely to result in societal attributions.

The media's focus on episodic framing reinforces the dominant ideology of individual responsibility for crime and violence. Making the dominant ideology seem like 'common sense' is critical to the concept of hegemony. Through the frames they use and the discourse they contain, media reports can either reinforce or challenge the dominant ideology. Often, journalists may not be aware of their role in reinforcing the status quo. By giving only episodic information about crime and violence, the media give cues that there is nothing citizens can do, thus ignoring research to the contrary, increasing the public's fear, and reinforcing the dominant ideology of blaming the individual with only vague references to greater social causes.

It is unsurprising that, as the dominant form of mass communication, television is heavily criticized for its framing of violence and its effects on society (Paik and Comstock, 1994; Grabe et al., 2000). For example, it has been shown repeatedly that the media's emphasis on crime and violence causes people to be more fearful (Morgan and Shanahan, 1997; Gerbner, 1998; Potter and Smith, 2000). Over time, messages that highlight certain features of crime and violence create a framework for thinking about solutions that favor certain kinds of social change – longer prison sentences as opposed to rehabilitation or prevention, for example (van Dijk, 1993; Hill and Zillmann, 1999). If media reporting on crime and violence carries systematic biases, then these biases may misdirect people's responses to crime and violence, resulting in less effective policies for prevention and control. Research on the content and style of mass media suggest an overall bias toward individual or atomistic coverage: the focus is on the car crash or the body under the tarpaulin rather than greater contexts or social policy debates.

The idea that the media have a responsibility to report information in a context that gives it meaning is nothing new: it has been tacitly accepted since the Hutchins Commission first outlined the press' responsibilities in 1947 (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). By providing information in context, the media give citizens information they can use to alter the basic conditions that give rise to and sustain crime and violence. By reporting on underlying causes and social factors, the media facilitate the discussion regarding violence and its solutions and encourage views currently outside the

dominant ideology that sees the causes of crime as individually located and the solutions in terms of punishment instead of prevention.

This study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how television reports on crime and violence by using textual analysis to describe and analyze two television news-magazine episodes. The goal of this analysis is to provide a first step toward recognition of the media's role in perpetuating existing public policies regarding crime and violence with a goal toward cultivating an awareness of the social effects of the way the media cover crime and violence.

Public health as social issue

Applying the public health approach to social issues dates to the 1940s when public health experts began suggesting that social policies could help prevent hunger. The public health approach was also applied to smoking and lung cancer and, then, to injuries and deaths from automobile crashes (Roshier, 1973). All three problems were first treated as though individuals alone were responsible – drivers were blamed for car crashes, for example, with no mention of how road conditions or the lack of safety features in cars contributed to the problem. More progress was made toward slowing the rate of deaths and injuries from smoking and automobile accidents when those seeking solutions began to also look at what society could do, rather than focusing only on what individuals could do. When the government began requiring safety features in automobile designs, deaths from car crashes dropped; after public health campaigns were enacted and warning labels put on cigarettes, deaths from lung cancer decreased.

But history shows that the media are traditionally slow to change. Despite articles in medical journals as early as the 1930s on links between vehicle design and collisions, it wasn't until 1961 when Ralph Nader's book *Unsafe at Any Speed* was published that the press began to follow the public health model in reporting traffic accidents (Roshier, 1973). Until then, stories on traffic deaths and injuries typically blamed the driver. Prevention reporting consisted of telling people to drive more cautiously. After Nader's book, journalists began to report differently on auto injuries and fatalities by including information from research that identified the risk factors contributing to car crashes. Stories began including information on the type of cars involved, road conditions, whether occupants were wearing seatbelts, and if drivers were under the influence of alcohol. Instead of just reporting on the individual and her or his actions, journalists now reported on the vehicle and the environment as well (Stevens, 1997).

The ways stories are structured by the media have earned conventional acceptance from journalists and audiences (Graber, 1984). But such conventions tend to focus on narratives of 'named' actors and actions: 'Social control agents typically recommend individualistic strategies for prevention, leaving the ideological, institutional, and structural determinants unexamined by the press' (Grabe, 1996: 927). Iyengar (1991: 137) notes that journalistic conventions favor the 'hegemonic model of public communication' where existing power structures are maintained, thus insulating public officials and political elites from being held responsible for problems such as crime. Indeed, traditionally, journalists have reported on crime and violence only as issues of law enforcement and the courts. Violence-prevention proponents say that changing reporting conventions on violence today is no different than changing reporting on automobile deaths and injuries in the 1960s and smoking in the 1950s.

The media, especially television, have long been accused of contributing to social problems. For example, crime coverage has consistently been positively correlated with the public's fear of victimization (Heath, 1984; Williams and Dickinson, 1993). Work in cultivation analysis has underscored the cumulative pattern communicated by television over long exposure and its ability to heighten fear of crime and leave viewers with a distorted view of reality (Morgan and Shanahan, 1997; Gerbner, 1998; Diefenbach and West, 2001). It has been shown that public perceptions of crime are formed partly by information presented in the media (Stroman and Seltzer, 1985: 340–5). Numerous content analyses also consistently show that crime is over reported in proportion to its occurrence (Artwick and Gordon, 1998; Diefenbach and West, 2001). At the same time, crime (and crime fighting) is probably the single most common activity portrayed in both dramatic television and news (Perlmutter, 2000). Some content analyses have been done specifically on risk factor and prevention information in crime and violence stories. For example, few stories on youth violence included precursors or prevention (Stevens, 1997). Dorfman and colleagues (1997: 1311–16) analyzed whether violence stories included a public health perspective and found that episodic coverage of violence was more than five times more frequent than thematic coverage with its links to broader social factors. Even when prevention strategies were included, it was in the form of actions people could take for self-protection rather than underlying risk factors or precursors. Dorfman concluded: 'Local television news provides extremely limited coverage of contributing etiological factors in stories on violence . . . Isolated from their social context, the chance for widespread support for public health solutions to violence will be diminished' (Dorfman et al., 1997: 1311–16). These stories

that rarely include precursors and prevention strategies come despite news industry calls for more of just such reporting (Kirkhorn, 1996; Stepp, 1998).[1]

With such a broad social and industrial context in mind, we can now approach some emblematic media texts asking the question of what model they follow for approaching crime and violence.

Method

Two texts were analyzed: one is an episode of *48 Hours* (CBS), which devoted its complete hour to the topic of road rage; the other text is an episode of *Prime Time Live* (ABC), which featured a story about a researcher who discovered three elements common to nearly all the violent criminals she has studied in 20 years. This story was one of four stories on the show that night. Others have examined local television news broadcasts (Dorfman et al., 1997) but no one has yet studied the more lengthy and in-depth network news magazines. This is a notable gap because news magazines are prominent on the network prime-time schedule. Mainstream television news magazines were chosen because they offer the most opportunity for broadcast journalism to present stories of crime and violence in a thematic frame with contextual public-health information. News magazines are virtually free of the time and length constraints of network news. Most news-magazine formats are an hour long, contain between three and five individual stories per show (Grabe, 1996), and air anywhere from one to four times per week. News magazines' production schedules are longer and they have a larger news staff than local TV news stations (Grabe et al., 2001). News-magazine programs are more likely to include thematic presentation and contextualization of crime and violence than the short and fragmented stories of television news.

The two programs were chosen for many reasons which contribute to them being representative of the genre. Both have been on television continuously since 1989 and have won numerous awards. *48 Hours* delves into a single subject, examining it from multiple angles with saturation coverage. Grabe (1996) categorized television news magazines as either 'tabloid' – sensational – or 'traditional' – respectable news. A study of the form and content of these shows places *48 Hours* and *Prime Time Live* in the 'traditional' category along with *60 Minutes*, *Dateline*, *20/20*, *Turning Point*, *Eye to Eye with Connie Chung*, and *Day One*. The last four shows are no longer on the air; *60 Minutes* was not used because it is considered the 'extreme' end of the traditional television news-magazine style (Grabe et al., 2001). Also, a content analysis of *60 Minutes* shows it features very few stories on crime: only 4 percent. More than half of its viewers are over 55, making the audience

skewed (Grabe et al., 2001). No studies could be found that showed significant differences among *Dateline*, *20/20*, *48 Hours*, and *Prime Time Live*; however, there is no reason to think they are vastly different – Grabe (1996: 31) says 'the format of the shows are similar'.

In order to represent at least two of the three major networks, and after eliminating *60 Minutes* as being a thematic outlier, we taped the remaining four news magazines (*Prime Time Live*, *48 hours*, *20/20*, and *Dateline*) for a three-week period, then examined the shows for the presence of stories on crime and violence. *Prime Time Live* and *48 Hours* were the only two shows during that three-week period to feature segments on crime and violence using Dorfman's definition of having

> portrayed, described, or involved any deliberate act of physical force or use of a weapon in an attempt to achieve a goal, further a cause, stop the action of another, act out an angry impulse, defend oneself from attack, secure some material gain, or intimidate others; any deliberate use of the threat of such physical force; any armed crime, regardless of whether injury resulted; or any individual, community, or organizational response to such crimes. (Dorfman et al., 1997: 1312)

These are the two used in this analysis.

While it is impossible for any individual television program to be representative of all texts in the genre, it seems likely that the episodes chosen are reflective of news magazines in general. The study of news magazine's discourse about crime and violence is likely to offer insights into the ideologies that prevail within this genre.

Textual analysis

This analysis follows the methods of Hall (1975), van Dijk (1985), and Fiske (1994) called textual or discourse analysis in which one subject is selected and analyzed in a close reading of the text. This method is used to disclose potential underlying meanings of polysemic texts and uncover the latent meanings that shaped the manifest content. This analysis looks at three patterns in the ways that television narratives are told; television news magazines tend

- to frame issues episodically rather than thematically;
- to rely on conventional reporting methods (even when discussing public health concerns) rather than the public health model; and
- to stress individual responsibility for violence rather than social causes.

The Berkeley Media Studies Group has devised a list of basic questions that should be covered when reporting public health information on crime and violence (Stevens, 1997). They include contextual information such as how

often this type of incident happens in the community and whether incidents such as this are increasing or decreasing; the type of weapon used and how often such weapons are used in this type of incident; whether alcohol or drugs were involved and how often they figure into this type of incident; and, if alcohol was involved, how many liquor outlets exist in the neighborhood where the crime occurred. These and other questions are based on public health research that identifies precursors to certain violence and specific weapons associated with certain crimes. By reporting this and other specific kinds of information, the media give people the information they need to make decisions regarding public policies to fight crime and violence; this information can also reduce fearfulness by identifying who is at risk and who is not. The current style of reporting causes everyone to be more fearful than necessary, public health proponents say.

Results and discussion

Structure of the texts

The two television texts analyzed differed greatly in the amount of time each devoted to its stories: *48 Hours* typically reports on only one topic during its hour-long episode, while *Prime Time Live* features multiple, unrelated stories. In this episode of *Prime Time Live*, there were four stories and 'Recipe for a Killer' was allotted seven minutes. In contrast, *48 Hours*' 'Road Rage' consumed an hour. Beyond story length, the shows' structures were similar, employing the usual visual conventions of television to create dramatic, compelling, and visually rich texts that are as entertaining, if not more so, as they are informative. The main points in the stories were communicated visually as well as verbally. Both shows made liberal use of contrast, suspense, empathy, and seamlessness to appeal to viewers' emotions.

   48 Hours employed fast-paced clips of traffic – horns blaring, lights flashing and blurring as they speed by – and then contrasted that with slow-motion footage of the people affected by a road-rage accident or an aggressive driver being arrested. Scenes of loud, fast-moving traffic were contrasted with quiet, contemplative shots of the face of the motorist who murdered another man. The dark-and-stormy-night setting of one incident was recreated in stark contrast to the bright daylight scenes of the aftermath – the twisted wreck of one car and outdoor interviews with the victims' relatives.

   The *Prime Time Live* story 'Recipe for a Killer' used still shots of infamous killers like Ted Bundy and overlaid them with visuals of jail cell bars moving

across the fixed images. The bars were tinted an angry reddish-orange in contrast to the dispassionate black-and-whites of the killers' faces.

Unusual camera angles were employed for visual effects that also communicated meaning. In 'Road Rage', the camera showed the police officer from underneath his motorcycle, the faces of drivers in their own car mirrors, or the speeding, honking rush-hour traffic as it whizzed by on tilted horizons. All this appeared designed to convey the dominance of the officer, a reflection of ourselves as the aggressive driver, an upside-down, out-of-control situation, perhaps. Whether this is the meaning intended by the journalists, this indeed may be the reading interpreted by the viewer.

Entertainment-inducing suspense was employed that might have fit the script of any 'fictional' crime thriller: the man getting out of bed, dressing, brushing his teeth, and going to work turns out to be a motorcycle police officer. The father of the teenage driver was revealed to be a traffic court judge. The outcome of the lead story was deferred as other vignettes were shown.

Viewers were especially encouraged to feel empathy. Dan Rather addressed viewers as if he were talking to them one-on-one. Audiences see the narrow misses and rush-hour traffic as if they were in the driver's seat. In both cases, stories were not just told but virtually recreated with step-by-step re-enactments of rain-slick streets and highway signs overhead, thumping sounds of car doors closing and trunks opening, scenes of a crossbow being loaded, cocked, then fired. Viewers hear the swish of the arrow and the sound as it pierces a plastic jug of water. The mind makes the connection between plastic and flesh, water and blood. Some of the same techniques that served to create empathy were also used to demonize – extreme close-ups, for example. In *Prime Time Live*'s 'Recipe for a Killer', a repeated device was a still shot of a killer's face, his chin and forehead cropped to focus on the eyes. As the researcher talked, the camera zoomed in so her face was similarly cropped. This technique was used profusely when Rather on *48 Hours* interviewed the crossbow killer.

What this structure demonstrates is the merging of news and entertainment. No longer do talking heads read dispassionately about exciting or tragic events. Forgotten is the notion of objectivity or the idea that the camera never lies. Gone is the disclaimer that this footage represents a re-enactment rather than the actual event. Connected to our study is the observation that, for the creators of the documentary, these aspects, which were obviously designed to be entertaining, were the most unfitting to a public health model of reporting. This raises the question, elaborated on later, of whether the public health 'script' can find acceptance by journalists and other professionals who don't see how to make it fit into their preconceptions of how to 'infotain' an audience.

Thematic versus episodic framing

Television magazine shows may have blurred the distinction between news and entertainment but Iyengar (1991) found that, while it was rare for television texts to be exclusively one or the other, it was fairly clear which was predominant. Such was the case with these two news magazines. While there were elements of both episodic and thematic coverage in the two, it was clear that episodic frames were dominant. However, the shows advertised themselves as the *opposite* of what they turned out to be. In the teasers and introductions, both hosts emphasized the thematic approach. The title of the *48 Hours* episode, 'Road Rage', implied a general approach to a large issue. Dan Rather's introduction also intimated an overarching treatment of the topic:

> It's being called the drunk driving of the 90s. Aggressive driving. A problem so severe the federal government is now expanding a crackdown on red light runners into some 200 cities... On these monitors they see the results of aggressive driving every day. Accidents that don't have to happen. They can do much more than tie up traffic. They can ruin lives. In the last six years nationwide, nearly 13,000 were injured or killed by aggressive drivers. It's gotten so bad there's even a name for it – road rage.

The statistic about the number of people affected by the problem also hinted that more contextual information would come: it did not. Within an hour, it would seem that *48 Hours* could indeed have given it an in-depth, thematic treatment. However, the hour was devoted primarily to images of accidents and the reactions of the victims, an almost entirely episodic approach. In *Prime Time Live*, the title, 'Recipe for a Killer', was more ambiguous than the 'Road Rage' title. It could be read to imply a thematic frame or it could be seen as episodic, meaning a recipe for one specific killer. Teasers for the *Prime Time Live* piece were less thematic than *48 Hours*, although the message was mixed. In the *Prime Time Live* promo, Diane Sawyer said: 'Is it possible what she learned from these convicted killers could unlock the mysteries of murder?' The plural 'killers' and 'mysteries' and the use of 'murder' without an article implied that more than one crime and more than one cause would be considered. In the introduction, Sawyer said: 'It's a disturbing question. One we ponder over and over again. Why do some people kill?' Sawyer's generic question implied a broad look inherent in thematic framing. This impression was tempered by the contiguous mention of one individual researcher and her specific discoveries – the technique that defines episodic framing.

The titles, teasers, and introductions to both news magazines were primarily thematic. But what followed in the body of the stories was decidedly episodic. Instead of the broad brush strokes that *48 Hours* proposed to use to paint a picture of road rage, what it delivered were four, separate detailed vignettes of separate stories with road rage as the common element and one

'bright' at the end that was almost so flippant as to negate the subject's seriousness. Even if these four stories were considered as a whole, they would not offer a representative picture of the problem. They were not chosen because they were a microcosm of a bigger and more complex issue. Instead, each story was more a bizarre aberration than the norm. The first example of road rage took place on 'a bucolic stretch of road in upstate New York', not the big city freeways where most road rage incidents occur. Another vignette featured one motorist shooting another with a crossbow. It seems reasonable to assume that a crossbow shooting is fairly rare. Instead of being somewhat representative of the problem of road rage, these stories seem to have been selected because they were so unusual.

The three other vignettes featured a traffic officer who was part of the crackdown on aggressive driving; a therapist who diagnosed road rage on a radio talk show; and a teenager learning to drive whose father is a traffic court judge who dealt with road rage. All three segments were episodic, dealing with one particular person or case. Except for the fact that the federal government is cracking down on red-light runners in 200 cities, no information is given regarding how common it is for police departments to target road rage, for traffic court judges to attempt to deter aggressive driving with jail sentences, or for therapists to counsel enraged drivers over the radio.

The other text was just as thematically lacking. *Prime Time Live's* 'Recipe for a Killer' also made no attempt to appear as anything but episodic framing. It was reported in the standard, journalistic convention of conflict – one expert's opinion and a rebuttal by another. No attempt was made to include the works of other researchers in order to give a broader understanding. It simply presented one researcher's findings and offered the disclaimer that not everyone agreed. The reasons behind an episodic approach became clear when the story revealed that the researcher had just published a book written for a popular audience rather than scientists. Another news value, immediacy, was fulfilled – the recent publication of a book.

Public health model versus conventional model

While *Prime Time Live's* 'Recipe for a Killer' didn't deliver the thematic coverage its teasers and introduction promised, it did come up with more public health information – precursors and risk factors, if not prevention strategies – in its seven minutes than *48 Hours* did in an hour on 'Road Rage'. It outlined three precursors to a specific kind of crime and violence, in this case, murder, that psychiatrist Dorothy Lewis discovered in her research: abuse suffered in childhood, neurological impairment, and psychiatric disorder.

None of these factors alone is as powerful as the interaction, she explained: 'Most brain-damaged people are not violent. Most psychotic people are not violent, and probably most abused people are not violent.' Lewis explicitly pointed out the public health approach at the end of the segment when she said the goal of her work was '[S]imply to learn what are the causes of violence and what are the implications for prevention'.

Lewis is one of the epidemiologists using a public health approach to study crime and violence. While *Prime Time Live* helped her bring her message to the audience, the news magazine's journalists did not use the public health model in their reporting: it was Lewis who was responsible for the public health approach. Public health information was simply contained within a conventional news story with a conflict frame. All the media did was interview two people: Lewis and the director of the National Institute of Mental Health who speaks in opposition to her. By focusing on two opposing sides, this story employed the conventional conflict frame, not a public health frame.

What this story communicated in the way of public health information was far greater than what *48 Hours* served up. Among the precursors and risk factors for road rage offered in that story were, as reporter Susan Spencer narrated: 'The speeders. The no-signal lane changers. The headlight flashers. The get-right-on-your-bumper tailgaters.' All attributed responsibility to individuals. At one point, the reporter said there is one 'simple reason' for road rage, and then an expert was shown saying there had been a 35 percent increase in traffic over the last 10 years. Rarely is a complex problem due to one 'simple' cause. No information was given on how many new roads were built in the same 10 years, which would help put the statistic in context. Note also that the phrase 'simple reason' was the reporter's, not the expert's: he may not agree that this 'simple reason' is the cause of road rage. In these television texts, the other part of the public health equation – prevention strategies – was non-existent, impractical, or offered so simplistically as to amount to little more than common sense. For instance, Dan Rather summed up these prevention strategies:

> In this age of road rage, safety experts say you've simply got to keep your cool. Whether on the super highway or in the mall parking lot, don't respond to a challenge from an aggressive driver. Just let them pass.

Prevention strategies of more substance were in the segments with the motorcycle officer, the traffic court judge, and the talk-show therapist. The first two illustrated society taking responsibility for the problem rather than placing blame with individuals. But communities employing these strategies are apparently rare: although no facts were given on how many radio stations

have on-air counselors for road rage, the implication to viewers is that these strategies are newsworthy precisely because they are new, i.e. not yet commonplace. Rather than being of immediate benefit, the coverage of these preventative methods served the purpose of showing viewers how some cities were dealing with the problem so they may encourage adoption of such strategies.

Attribution of responsibility: society versus individual

These two texts were similar in structure, framing, and their model of reporting. Where they differ markedly is in their attribution of responsibility. The *48 Hours* road-rage story tended to reinforce the dominant ideology by attributing responsibility to individuals: *Prime Time Live's* serial killer piece carried an implied societal focus. Taking a cue from the psychiatrist being interviewed, the show suggested that others and even society as a whole may bear partial responsibility by not providing the help such people need. It addressed the dominant view of individual attribution of responsibility at the end when the director of the National Institute of Mental Health stated: 'The idea that some people who were violent criminals were brain damaged or abused doesn't necessarily get people off the hook in terms of responsibility.' The psychiatrist, Dr Lewis, quickly agreed: 'We're not saying they should be let out of prison because many are very, very dangerous to society.' Thus, she (and the show) avoided being labeled radical by viewers, most of whom probably read the text in the manner preferred by the dominant ideology – that responsibility resides with the individual.

48 Hours conveyed a clear message of individual responsibility. One segment of the show was determinedly focused on laying blame with an individual. In the first road-rage vignette, the reporter repeatedly asked: 'Who was at fault?' The widows of the two accident victims were asked. The third driver involved in the same accident was asked. The district attorney was asked. All named a specific individual or individuals. In fact, there was even a component of revenge. The grown son of one victim spoke of making the 'guilty' driver 'pay'. 'I can't wait to see him hauled away in cuffs', he said. The widow of the other victim named the surviving driver as more responsible than the one who died, saying '[T]hey both were irresponsible. But (the survivor) is alive. I saw him strap on his seat belt and drive away from the court proceedings.' The impression all these people gave is that because one man lived and was able to be tried in court, he was somehow more culpable. In the end, the grand jury refused to indict the surviving driver.

Conclusions

Both shows we analyzed were heavily episodic, even though they billed themselves as thematically framed. Episodic framing generally reinforces the dominant ideology of individual attribution of responsibility (Iyengar, 1991) and these shows were no exception. Little information regarding precursors, risk factors, or prevention strategies was found in these reports. The one exception was *Prime Time Live'*s story on one researcher's findings on the causes of violent murder. That story contained substantial information on causes; however, it was not due to the journalists' reframing the story with a public health perspective but because the subject of the story – the dramaturgical protagonist – used a public health approach. While this story included public health information, it did not use the public health model and, thus, left out many other possible precursors of violence, such as drugs, alcohol, and guns.

Although public health reporting requires more time to include such information, a complete reframing of the story is not always necessary. Researchers at the Berkeley Media Studies Group have devised ways for print media to include such information without devoting much more space (Stevens, 1997; Stevens and Dorfman, 2001); and similar guidelines could be developed for broadcast journalists.

Regardless of whether journalists changed the way they report, the fact that public health information was conveyed at *all* is still important. The media are playing a part in making people aware of the causes of crime and violence so they can begin to consider different strategies for prevention. Certainly, television is often criticized for blurring the lines between entertainment and news but such criticism is a two-edged sword. We have noted that almost every aspect of the shows analyzed was designed to be 'infotaining'. By making crime and violence stories engaging, television attracts a wider audience. There is merit in simply exposing more people to a problem. News magazines such as *Prime Time Live* and *48 Hours* have their own mission, which is not the same as that of news shows such as *Nightline*. Airing in prime time makes these shows more susceptible to ratings and advertiser pressures but it also makes them more available to a wider range of viewers. It is always a good idea, however, for journalists to ask themselves how they might make their stories more informative to their audience. If incorporating the public health approach to reporting on crime and violence is one way to improve upon their service to the public, then it bears consideration.

This is not to imply that the public health model of reporting is without fault. While it has some laudable goals, it also has some drawbacks. Journalists should not embrace the public health model, or anything else, without

question. First, the public health approach needs not to be perceived as discounting individual responsibility altogether: considering *both* societal and individual responsibility and their interactions can enrich the discussion and range of options for solutions. We want to make it clear that we, and proponents of the public health model, thematic framing, and civic journalism, do not advocate abandoning altogether portraying individuals as having responsibility for their own criminal and violent behavior, only that the way it is currently framed, as *only* an individual responsibility, is not entirely accurate or helpful for solving the problem. Rather, we suggest that the scales are tipped too far in one direction and advocate a more balanced approach – including societal responsibility *as well as* individual responsibility in news stories. This should result in a more accurate portrayal of problems and better solutions that take a wide range of factors into account. We feel that such calls are in line with a quasi-form of more scientifically minded, if not a scientifically driven, 'precision journalism' (Meyer, 1973).

Such an alteration should not be traumatic to news professionals who are used to 'code-switching' style to fit different assignments. It is a matter of narrative transformation. For example, writing about the craft of historiography, Hayden White (1978: 62) established that historians have found it necessary to choose between fundamental 'pre-generic plot structures' so that they can 'transform a chronicle of events into a "history" comprehended by its readers'. In effect, they choose a genre of telling and then tell it through the script of that genre. But audience expectations and standards of what is the correct genre for all events are, by nature, hidebound and formulaic. Most news-workers and the public accept crime and violence as told through news as a story of individual sin. Creating a new genre of 'public health' is, in essence, a paradigm change for all involved, from creators to receivers. Such changes require time and experimentation to find new formulas that 'work', i.e. impart understanding to an audience without alienating or boring them.

The extreme challenge is posed by research on the narratives of journalism that almost always finds that it focuses on surface rather than context, heroic and villainous individuals rather than broader social questions, and excludes or marginalizes certain players (e.g. Robins, 2003). Is any new genre of 'bullets as bacteria' public health violence stories doomed to devolve into tales of valiant cops and doctors versus evil gun pushers? This kind of a mythos has not notably contributed to solving America's drug problem. The 'problem' and 'solution' narratives in reporting public affairs news may in themselves undermine debate by the public on those issues (cf. Woodstock, 2002). Such folktale narratives, while emotionally satisfying, rarely lead to public policy debates that ask tough questions about how society creates and allows to prosper such high levels of violence. We need new kinds of scripts for reporting violence

that are acceptable to practitioners and audiences, not just physicians, policy-makers, and communications researchers.

Note

1   While not confining itself to coverage of crime or public health issues, the controversial public journalism movement, also called civic journalism, has also encouraged media reports to include context that would help citizens understand issues (Merritt, 1995).

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