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A qualitative analysis of sensationalism in media

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A Qualitative Analysis of Sensationalism in Media

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Abstract

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Sensationalism is a much discussed and examined topic in journalism. This study examines many aspects of sensationalism from its variety of different definitions to its possible effects on the media audience. It briefly touches upon its history and how it has evolved as a concept in the media.

Sensationalism was examined and quantified through a research methodology that inspected three different media markets. This research is an attempt to explore new areas of sensationalism that will need to be studied. The study shows which markets have more sensational content than others; demonstrating the use of sensationalism among different newspapers with varying circulation numbers throughout the United States.

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Introduction

Sensationalism is a much-discussed and examined aspect of journalism. Attempts have been made to provide a definitive framework for identifying throughout countless research projects. The purpose of this paper is to look at the many different aspects of sensationalism in the media. This research sets out to find the contributing factors of sensationalism and attempts to solidify the definition.

This paper will look at the first researchers who tried to define sensationalism, and will explore the possibilities of how framing creates sensationalism and how sensationalism impact the audience. This research will lead to a better understanding of this media practice.

Sensationalism will also be examined and quantified through a research methodology that will inspect three different media markets. This research is an attempt to add to the knowledge base and explore new areas that will need to be studied. The research will show which markets have the most sensational content by evaluating key words and phrases that have been determined to be sensational in their effect.

Research Question

What is sensationalism? How is it used in the media and how does it affect the public thought process? Is sensationalism a trigger of public fear?

Literature Review

Defining Sensationalism

There are numerous definitions for sensationalism. Among these are: stretching the facts, gossip, or unusual stories being exploited in the everyday press, etc. Media sensationalism has been studied for at least a century. Today's journalism is littered with sensationalism. Truths are expanded to seem more exciting and dramatic. Stories are aimed to gain higher ratings and more money, in certain mediums. For example, in the article "Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America," the author Brigitte Nacos writes that the media has had an "insatiable appetite" for violence.[1] Nacos writes that all media will over-report the news to make sure they get plenty of "dramatic visuals."[2] Nacos article discusses several elements of sensationalism. Nacos writes when "competition among TV, radio, print organizations became fiercer, the media became more obsessed with exploiting violence-as-crime and violence-as-terrorism in search of higher ratings and circulation."[3]

One of the more prevalent definitions of sensationalism among historians is that it includes an appeal to the emotions such as excitement, shock, fear, and astonishment.[4] Newspapers can create those feelings in the way they frame their stories through layout,

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[1] Brigitte L. Nacos, "Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America," *Political Science Quarterly* 118 no. 1 (2003): 23-52

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] David Sloan and Lisa Mullikin Parcell, eds. *American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices*, (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2002) 267

illustrations, writing style, and even by picking and choosing the content that goes into the story.[5]

The book *American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices* discusses the evolution of the sensational culture in the media. Sensationalism has roots that began before the creation of the United States. The authors discuss that sensationalism started in the form of gossip, exaggerated oral histories told from person to person.[6]

With the advent of the printed press, papers such as *Publick Occurences* stretched stories out by adding exciting details gain people's interest. Sensationalism has been used throughout history to sell papers by creating stories that will get an audience's attention.[7] Sensationalism is used today to gain readership, ratings and to make money.

Uses of Sensationalism

Karen Slattery's look at sensationalism as a guide for moral reporting is an interesting twist on the use of sensationalism in the media. She writes about a community stricken by the murder of young child who was first kidnapped then molested and murdered. She continues to discuss the crime coverage during and after the event saying that the story "dominated the local television news."[8] Coverage of the crime included the community's reaction, stories on the events that may have led to the crime, and other

[5] Ibid., 267.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 268-269

[8] Karen L. Slattery, "Sensationalism Versus Moral Life: Making the Distinction," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1994): 5-15

stories dealing with the authorities not notifying the community that a prisoner was recently released from prison without rehabilitation.

Slattery argues there may be a moral dimension to sensationalism; which is the fact that constant news coverage of dramatized stories and exploiting the pain people were feeling may actually prove beneficial to the community.[9] Slattery says that news stories like these could alert residents that they should be more aware of who is living in their communities. Leading community members to lead safer lives and perhaps even purge the negative aspects of the neighborhood.

Through different definitions and theories, Slattery composes the argument that there may be more to sensationalism than negative news reporting. Her first objective is to look at a story's "topic, treatment, intent, and effect."[10] Slattery defines topic and treatment as the ideas that identify sensationalism, and defines intent and effect as the ideas that question the coverage's purpose and consequences.[11] She points out that there may be a positive spin on sensationalism. This argument tries to examine that sensationalism isn't always harmful and should not be discounted completely as a negative force influencing the public. Slattery says that there is a distinction between sensationalistic stories on moral life and the sensationalistic stories that could cause community harm.

A weakness of her argument arises when she discusses the intent of a journalist in producing a sensationalistic story. She seems to use speculation to examine her

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[9] Ibid., 6.

[10] Ibid., 7.

[11] Ibid., 7.

argument where she needs more facts to prove that point. She discusses the possible role of a journalist using sensationalism for a moral life but most of her argument comes from studies on early American journalism that was rooted in religious beliefs.[12] Very little of her argument comes from anything of today's journalism in the United States. "The relation between the news professional as a member of a moral community and the shape or nature of news as we know it has yet to be articulated."[13] Slattery is exploring that relationship between the reporter and the nature of sensationalistic news

Slattery continues by writing that the effects of sensationalism lead to social reform and that some stories are wrongly labeled as being negatively sensational. "The scholarship on the problem of sensationalism, then suggests that some of the news that is considered sensational serves the purpose of keeping the public's finger on the pulse of the moral community."[14] She argues this kind of news sensationalism will benefit the community. It's just the journalist's responsibility to determine if the story is sensational for the moral life (betterment of the community) or sensational for its own selfish purpose (more money or more attention on the news source). She defines the moral community as "citizens of a democracy" who have political interests driven by their moral interests (protecting their community from drugs, violence and other harmful events) because "moral standards govern behavior."[15]

Slattery's article doesn't prove sensationalism causes fear. Her arguments touch upon the fact that sensationalism can be used in the media for either conscious or

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[12] Ibid., 8-9.

[13] Ibid., 9.

[14] Ibid., 10.

[15] Ibid., 7.

unconscious purposes. Her argument is that sensationalism could be injected into stories to motivate the community toward a purposeful cause.

In the article "Perceptions of Sensationalism among U.S. and Mexican News Audiences," David Perry discusses the perceived sensationalism in the media amongst U.S. and Mexican audiences. The article puts sensationalism into two categories. One category treats sensationalism as a "researcher-defined property of communication contents, such as bloody graphics or crime news."[16] The other view of sensationalism "emphasizes audience reactions."[17] Perry's goal was to compare the conceptions of sensationalism and also test his hypothesis that an audience in one country will perceive their news coverage as more sensational than a foreign country's news coverage.

In the study, the participants were told that they were partaking in a study on sensationalism and had to define the term sensationalism through a series of 12 bipolar adjectives (words like accurate-inaccurate, good-bad, responsible-irresponsible, wise-foolish, acceptable-unacceptable, colorful-colorless, interesting-uninteresting, exciting-unexciting, hot-cold, active-passive, agitated-calm, and bold-timid).[18] The stories the participants reviewed were stories based on their location in their country.

The results of Perry's study had several findings. He found that the Mexican participants defined sensationalism with the adjectives representing it as a "less-positive or less-active conception."[19] This means they saw sensationalism as something that

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[16] David K. Perry, "Perceptions of Sensationalism Among U.S. and Mexican News Audiences," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, no. 1 (2002): 82-86.

[17] Ibid., 82.

[18] Ibid., 83.

[19] Ibid., 84.

portrays a person or event(s) in a negative light. In one of the analyzed stories, about a plane crash in Mexico, the Mexican participants rated the crash as more sensational than another story about a United States plane crash. Perry discovered that the United States participants saw little difference in sensationalism among the stories, whereas participants from Mexico saw more sensationalism in stories that were closer to home geographically.

There are some weaknesses of the study that Perry points out at the end of the article. One is that the participants were students and may not have had the best conceived notions of what sensationalism was.[20] The study may have been swayed because the participants were told the study was about sensationalism in the news. Perhaps if they were not told what the study was about the results would have turned out differently because they would not have known what to look for. Another weakness of the article could have been its limited study range. If the author would have broadened the focus to include a wider range of both areas they may have found more complete results.

In the end, the article does show that there is a perceived notion of sensationalism in the media. Some, although not all, have seen some kind of exaggerated news in the stories they read. Perry writes "news sensationalism may be a function of the geographic and/or cultural proximity of news events…"[21] Perry concludes that audiences or readers may perceive sensationalism based on close geographic locations. Basically, Perry argues

[20] Ibid., 84.

[21] Ibid., 85.

that the further away a news story takes place the less sensationalism the reader perceives in the article.

Perceiving Sensationalism

In an earlier work by Karen Slattery in 2001, she writes that broadcast news began moving public affairs reporting from informative pieces to more sensationalistic pieces that were tailored to draw more emotion from the audience. Slattery's study examines whether more sensationalistic news may influence the audience negatively. The audience may then have a skewed opinion of the world around them.[22] The researchers' method revolved around analyzing sixty network newscasts from the big three networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) from 1968 to 1996 (a 28 year span).

Each broadcast was examined for content of national news (within the U.S.'s border), international news (stories involving the U.S. and another country), and foreign news (stories without the U.S.'s involvement).[23] They further broke down their analysis into story topics. The topics examined were government stories (government actions and elections), community affairs (which Slattery defines as "non-governmental public affairs reporting"), sensationalism (stories about "violence and crime, accidents and disasters, and sex and misconduct not rising to the level of a crime or anything that caused "unwholesome emotional responses in the average audience member"[24]) and human

[22] Karen Slattery, Mark Doremus, and Lisa Marcus, "Shifts in Public Affairs Reporting on the Network Evening News: A Move Toward the Sensational," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 45, 2 (2001): 290-302

[23] Ibid., 293.

[24] Frank Mott, *American Journalism* (New York: 1962) quoted in Karen Slattery, Mark Doremus, and Lisa Marcus, "Shifts in Public Affairs Reporting on the Network Evening News: A Move Toward the Sensational," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 45, 294.

interest (which comprised of stories that "might evoke benign emotional responses, i.e., stories of kindness, generosity, noteworthiness, and pathos; or the humorous, novel, and/or heartwarming").[25] As each news story was examined they then labeled it as one of their topics. Two other topics were also included by the researchers. These were "war/major conflict" (described as organized conflict between conventional forces, insurrections, or uprisings) and "other" (described as editorials, analyses, promotional announcements, and tags.)[26]

To further dissect the amount of time devoted to sensationalism, the researchers coded non-election government stories and community affairs stories for the incorporation of "embedded sensationalism." Slattery defined embedded sensationalism as a news story that has "a visual portrayal or detailed description of a topic or topics that taken alone would be coded as sensationalism and/or human interest."[27]

The results of the study found that in 1968 news sensationalism was rare; only 0.7 percent of the stories showed any sensationalistic characteristics. Public affairs reporting showed a strong 57.1 percent but dropped to 47.8 percent in 1996. Sensationalism news coverage rose in 1996 to 6.1 percent.[28] Despite the low findings of sensationalistic news coverage in the first part of their research the researchers found that "embedded sensationalism" (sensationalism elements in public affairs reporting with likes of sex,

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[25] Ibid., 294.

[26] Ibid., 294.

[27] Ibid., 294.

[28] Ibid., 297.

crime, and violence) had risen from its 10.7 percent coverage in 1968 to 29.7 percent in 1996.[29]

This study does expose sensationalistic elements in the news media. However, the findings are limited to the television media. The strengths of this article are the evaluation of random newscasts and a long timeline of news history to study. This allowed the researchers to not only find sensationalism in broadcast news, but to show how its use has expanded over the years.

In conclusion, Slattery and her co-authors write that it is the media's responsibility to provide information that is accurate and will "enlighten" the public to make decisions.[30] Also, they found that the embedded sensationalism in public affairs stories meant for subjects like government and community affairs, were spun to contain elements of the drama of violence, crime, and other "emotionally arousing content."[31] While this study by Slattery doesn't show the effects of sensationalism, it does examine how and where sensationalistic stories appear in the news media.

Another study of sensationalism in the broadcast medium discovered that two magazine news programs held different values when it came down to sensationalistic style stories. Maria Grabe and her colleagues define sensationalism as stories that provoke "more sensory and emotional reactions than what society has deemed proper to desire or experience."[32] The study compares the news coverage of *60 Minutes* and *Hard*

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[29] Ibid., 297-298.

[30] Ibid., 298.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Maria Elizabeth Grabe, Shuhua Zhou, and Brooke Barnett, "Explicating Sensationalism in Television News: Content and the Bells and Whistles of Form," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 45, no. 4 (2001): 637.

Copy. The researchers selected the news magazine genre because they often use flamboyant production techniques and their representation of "publicly recognized sensational and respectable programs."[33] The sample of data included broadcasts from July 1st to December 31st, 1996 (a six month period). The researchers watched 54 programs (27 each) using individual segments from each program as the base for analysis of the study.

The study reveals sensationalism may not be used by every media program or organization. Some organizations may rely more on sensationalistic stories just to make a quick dollar regardless of how that story affects its subject or reader. In this study, *Hard Copy* often used sensational topics for its half hour news program. Only 4.9 percent of *Hard Copy's* stories focused on politics, while 1.6 percent focused on economics. These numbers are compared to the 34.6 percent (political segments) and 8.4 percent (economic segments) on *60 Minutes*.[34]

The researchers write that the two different programs have both found their niche in reporting news. *60 Minutes* takes the responsibility of informing its audience about traditional news topics and they take themselves seriously. *Hard Copy*, on the other hand, focused over half of their stories on celebrities in 56 percent of their stories, while also reporting about violence, scandal, and other emotionally rousing subjects.[35]

Other techniques used by both news agencies were dramatic music and flashy camera techniques whether it is a sensational or non-sensational story. But, it was the

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[33] Ibid., 639.

[34] Ibid, 645-646.

[35] Ibid., 651.

news program *Hard Copy* that used these techniques in their sensational stories more often, relying on them to draw out the emotional aspects. *Hard Copy* holds a larger percentage of sensational content than non-sensational content.[36]

The researchers found that *60 Minutes* operated using dramatic music effects and camera techniques for their non-sensational stories.[37] It was non-sensational stories that took up a larger part of *60 Minutes* air time than sensational (non-sensational stories on topics like politics and economics were close to half of the program's air time).[38]

The study demonstrates how two media sources in the same medium can utilize sensationalism in their reporting. *Hard Copy* uses the techniques for flashy, quick, and emotional stories to garner ratings, while *60 Minutes* utilizes sensationalistic techniques to make their non-sensationalistic topics more interesting to the audience. In theory this will get the audience to pay attention to the important stories so they can be more informed.[39]

In conclusion, the authors explain that writers can take the sensationalism out of a topic such as crime to make it a completely informative piece. But, sensationalism can also be injected into a non-sensationalistic story to make it more fascinating and perhaps even get people to care more about the topic.[40] The results of Grabe's study show why sensationalism is used in the news: to draw an audience that gets caught up in the emotional aspect of the stories they read or see.

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[36] Ibid., 650.

[37] Ibid., 650-651.

[38] Ibid., 651.

[39] Ibid., 652.

[40] Ibid., 652.

Effects of Sensationalism

Today's media constantly present stories which contain elements of drama and excitement to keep readers, viewers and listeners tuned into the news. When does it go too far? Can sensationalism go as far as causing fear to arise in the thoughts of its audience? When the media constantly covers an event for an extended period of time and covers it from every angle, it is possible that sensationalistic stories could arouse fear in the audience.

Fear causes a person's heart to race a little faster, or makes them feel a little jittery, or they're anxious about the unknown. Fear is a human emotion that is caused by a thousand triggers in everyday life no matter how big or minute and is a psychological state of mind that affects everyone. Fear is referred to as a "complex psychological phenomenon,"[41] in the article "Fear and the Regulatory Model of Counterterrorism." The author writes that "a fearful person often misperceives, or acts as though he misperceives, the magnitude of the risk."[42] Perhaps a more complete definition of fear comes from the article "Fear: A Genealogy of Morals." The article is an examination of fear and how it has been studied throughout history; it goes back to the days of Aristotle. The author, Corey Robin, writes that fear is an "involuntary response to danger."[43] Robin also says that fear "arises in the absence of laws and education."[44]

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[41] Posner, Eric A., "Fear and the Regulatory Model of Counterterrorism," *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* 25 no. 2 (2002): 684

[42] Ibid., 684.

[43] Robin, Corey, "Fear: A Genealogy of Morals," *Social Research* 67 no. 4 (2000): 1086

[44] Ibid., 1086.

The article "Children and the Discourse of Fear" examines the usage of fear in the media with children. The author studies news stories in three respected national newspapers in the United States, from 1987 to 1996, to show the ways children are constantly associated with the word fear.[45] One weakness is he doesn't limit himself to a specific age group of children, so a child could range from an infant all the way to a teenager. Another weakness is he analyzes three newspapers in the United States; the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Arizona Republic. The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times include large daily readership followings, and the Arizona Republic is a prominent regional newspaper with a smaller national focus. While these three newspapers may constantly associate children and fear, this may not be the case with every news station or paper in the nation

Altheide writes "children are a powerful symbol for protection as well as punishment not only of those who would hurt children but also of the children who are blamed for social ills."[46] He demonstrates how children are used in the media as both victims and victimizers.

Fear is a human emotion that sticks with a person. Because of constant bombardment of stories symbolizing fear in the news, people begin to associate the subject of those stories (oceans and shark attacks are an example) with fear. Altheide's claims that when fear is routinely associated with children and the places they go to, places like "schools become linked with crime and fear."[47] Altheide's evidence draws on

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[45] David L. Altheide, "Children and the Discourse of Fear," *Symbolic Interaction* 25, no. 2 (2002): 229-250

[46] Ibid., 233.

[47] Ibid., 234.

the coverage of the Columbine shootings. Altheide writes "the term 'Columbine' not only implies school but also fear, social control, and above all, loss."[48] In one article, from the Arizona Republic Altheide examines reports on the negative feelings that students experience when they hear the word Columbine.

Altheide finds that, from the 1980s and the early 1990s, fear from the news section spread to other parts of the newspaper from the 1980s to the early 1990s, such as the Life section.[49] When fear moved from big cities to the suburbs, Altheide concludes that it damaged the peacefulness of children's everyday lives. It was then, that fear was not only associated with crime but the audience's environment. This allowed the discourse of fear to move into different sections of the newspapers.[50]

He concludes his research by saying that the combination of entertainment and news sources has promoted fear in the media to a much higher degree. He also points out that an "expansive public discourse of fear can contribute to stances and reactive social policies that promote state control and surveillance." In other words, if the media promoted fear in the news it might lead to communities taking action to improve communication and the policing of neighborhoods, thereby reducing the possibility of risks. This is similar to Karen Slattery's study in which she argued that sensationalism could lead to just as much a positive reaction as it could be used in a negative manner.[51]

The strength of Altheide's study is he successfully backs up his claims with examples and good research to point out that there is a discourse of fear used in relation

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 244.

[50] Ibid., 244.

[51] Ibid., 247.

to children in the media. Weaknesses include the limited areas in which he focused his research. In larger media markets, where violence and crime are more likely to occur, there may be more stories with children and fear than found with a smaller market.

Altheide's study shows the media have the ability to influence what the readers think. According to Altheide, if the news media reports on a topic, such as Columbine as Altheide writes, and associate that topic with fear in every story, then it could be argued that the constant coverage would eventually lead the audience to feel scared or panicky every time they think of the topic at hand. But, that kind of fear may eventually lead to a social change that would be better for the world, Altheide argues.

Claudette Guzan Artwick and Margaret Gordon examined the image of cities in their own daily newspapers, in the article "Portrayal of U.S. Cities By Daily Newspapers." The authors write that "the reality of cities is perceived as a continuing urban crisis."[52] This is the basis of their argument that the media might be blamed for the perceived image of "war zones" and other negative images among the media audience.[53]

The researcher's methods began with the analysis of the content of eight daily newspapers. The papers were from a sampling from July 8-12, 1991, and were chosen from a variety of markets (from less than a million to more than 4 million) and geographic distribution.[54] The dailies included papers like the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Courier-Journal (in Louisville, Kentucky), the Seattle Times, and the Los Angeles and New York Times. They coded local stories, which were defined as coverage of events

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[52] Claudette Guzan Artwick and Margaret T. Gordon, "Portrayal of U.S. Cities By Daily Newspapers," Newspaper *Research Journal* 19, no. 1 (1998): 54-63

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

within 50 miles of the city publication, into several different categories such as story type, sensationalism, context, focus on problems, and sources.[55] The researchers had coded sensationalism as anything that used words or language to make something more than what it was or expressed emotion out of proportion to the event.[56]

In the methods section of the article, the authors point out one of their researchs own weaknesses. The eight newspapers they selected may not be completely representative of all the dailies in the United States. Also, they only sampled a week's worth of stories so it's only a tiny example of a constantly shifting industry.[57]

The results of the sensational aspect of their research found that out of all the stories they examined, two out of 10 headlines were highly sensational. The researchers measured sensationalism by examining the severity of stories and the emotional language used in the stories.[58] They rated stories on sensationalism on high levels (vehicle deaths, murder, scandals, etc.), moderate levels (unusual incidents or conflict), and low levels (straight news like a dedication ceremony) of sensationalism. The researchers wrote that all news contains sensational elements. Even when a story is recorded as having "low" sensationalism, the authors say, it is still sensationalistic because it contains an emotion-rousing phrase or word. This is also true for a straight news story about an accident on the highway.

The researchers found that while there was a hint of highly sensational stories in the headlines of the sampled newspapers, the majority of them only had moderate levels

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

of sensationalism (35 percent).[59] In their conclusion, the authors write "sensational subject matter appeared more frequently in story headlines than sensational language."[60] This means that newspapers chose to report "bizarre, violent events" in their headlines despite the milder language in the actual story. Their research expands beyond sensationalism in that it also takes a look at fear and framing issues within the portrayal of the cities in the local press. Artwick argues that the sensationalism they examined help create the image of big cities as "war zones."

Sensationalism and Fear

Fear, mass media effects, and sensationalism are continually examined in the media. Because sensationalism is an emotion-rousing practice used in news coverage, researchers sometimes examine its effect on the mass media audience. The book *Mass Hysteria* by Lisa Blackman and Valerie Walkerdine is about 'mass psychology' or group psychology. A large part of the books' research is on the psychology of people but in chapter three, the book delves into the media and its possible influence on society.

The chapter begins with Blackman discussing a case of a woman who killed a sailor after she watched the movie *Basic Instinct*.[61] A psychiatrist claimed the woman already had been treated for depression and that alcohol played a factor in the murder.[62]

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Lisa Blackman and Valerie Walkerdine, *Mass Hysteria: critical psychology and media studies* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 39

[62] Ibid., 39.

However, the local paper focused on the fact that the woman had seen the movie and insinuated it could have influenced her to lure the sailor and then commit the murder.

Because of movies, like *Basic Instinct*, the nightly news or daily newspapers become scrutinized for exposing programming that is "desensitized" to its audience thereby breaking down the "skills and capacities central to civilized conduct."[63] In another look at possible media effects on the human mind, she writes about two ten-year-old boys on trial for the murder of James Bulger in Liverpool, England. Two big questions surrounded the case. First, were if the boys were influenced by violent media (a movie called *Child's Play 3*) or secondly was their behavior a social or psychological problem?[64] Ultimately, it was determined near the end of the trial that the boys were raised in a poor social environment of abuse. However, when the case came to a close the videos were implicated as the cause for the crime because it seemed the only way to justify the action of the two boys.[65] No one wanted to believe the boys could have committed the crime of their own volition.

It seems that it was the environment the boys were raised in that triggered the crime against James Bulger. The authors even point out that no one could prove that the two boys ever watched the video but it was blamed because people "needed" an explanation of why a crime like this could happen.[66]

Other objectives of the chapter are to describe how people have studied mass media and its effects on the audience. The two most common research types are

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[63] Ibid., 40.

[64] Ibid., 41-42.

[65] Ibid., 42.

[66] Ibid., 42.

experimental and correlational, both designed to measure effect of exposure to television and other media.[67] Blackman and Walkerdine write that the experimental method of research finds that the content of a television program is the independent variable for the control group. The researchers would then manipulate the independent variable to see the effects on "thought, belief, and conduct."[68] The results are then turned into a statistical analysis for examination of the media's effect on the human mind. The correlational method takes a different approach. The correlational method takes place in a natural environment or what is called "field studies" or "naturalistic" studies. Researchers studied the hours of television watched and its effect on behavior.[69]

The rest of the chapter further delves into the research on media influence based on the results of how much the audience consumes every time it watches the news, television shows, and movies. The authors examine several studies to show all the different aspects in which the media does have some influence over its audience.

Blackman argues that the media can have an influence over the audience by saying movies and television have a hold over the audience and could lead them to believing they could do things that are not socially acceptable.

There are several different mediums that contain sensationalism within their content. The realm of television and broadcast news is no different from print media. However, with the use of sensationalism in today's media, constant exposure to sensationalistic stories could cause anxiety and worry in the audience.

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[67] Ibid., 43.

[68] Ibid., 43.

[69] Ibid., 43.

In the article "The Scary World in Your Living Room and Neighborhood" the authors look at how much sensationalism and agenda setting influence the thoughts of the audience on crime in their area. Kimberly Gross and her co-authors argue the media set an agenda for the public. They claim most news reports would focus on crime because crime is what people want to know about.[70] They ask "whether exposure to violent television programming makes people merely exaggerate the incidence of crime in the real world, whether it makes them feel threatened or fearful."[71]

The method of the study examined a metropolitan area of Washington, D.C. The survey included men and women of 18 years or older. Through a series of questions the researchers hoped to find whether the media caused fear or if there was another factor, namely 'real world' experiences.[72]

The researchers found two different groups of people one that is affected by the news they watch and another that is affected by the real world around them. Researchers found those who constantly watch their local news broadcast were more likely to state crime was a big problem than those who never watched it.[73] They also found a group of people who were more affected by the real world of crime rather than the world they see through their television. They argue this may prove that "real world" factors may be the real reason for a fear of crime and not what people see on the television.[74]

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[70] Kimberly Gross and Sean Aday, "The Scary World in Your Living Room and Neighborhood: Using Local Broadcast News, Neighborhood Crime Rates, and Personal Experience to Test Agenda Setting and Cultivation," *Journal of Communication* 53 (2003), 413

[71] Ibid., 412.

[72] Ibid., 414.

[73] Ibid., 418.

[74] Ibid., 418.

The researchers, in the end, found that while there seemed to be proof of agenda setting in the local media, there was not much evidence to show it had caused fear to arise in the audience. People were already scared from their real world experiences.[75] Gross's research is an example of how sensationalism could influence the audience. Her findings included audience members who were exposed to sensationalistic crime stories believed that crime was a much bigger problem in their area than it was.

David Altheide's book *Creating Fear* argues media and popular culture are "the most important contributors to fear."[76] His book is an extension of his earlier article "Children and the Discourse of Fear." The role of fear in the media and how the audience reacts to it is also explained.

Altheide discusses about how fear is used in the media in the chapter "The Problem Frame and the Production of Fear." He begins by describing how fear is used to gain an audience. "Publishers and editors love drama, evil, and suffering. They disapprove of its occurrence while celebrating its aftermath," Altheide writes.[77] He demonstrates how news organizations use fear to gain and captivate an audience. His examples include a *Newsweek* magazine cover with a silhouetted figure with red eyes and the single word evil with bright red letters.[78] Other brief examples he cites are Columbine High School, Satanism and other visuals of individual crimes, and international tragedy. He also writes that it's not just the events that are covered that may cause fear in the

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[75] Ibid., 418-419.

[76] D. Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2002), 6

[77] Ibid., 43.

[78] Ibid.

audience but also how the media reports their commonality.[79] The reason for all this, Altheide writes, is not only to fill air time and "informing the public" but also to earn advertising revenue.[80]

Altheide, in his chapter "The Discourse of Fear," compares how the usage of the words 'victim' and 'fear' is used in print and broadcast media.[81] Altheide looks at the change of the word usage in two major media outlets, the *Los Angeles Times* and ABC newscasts. Althiede found that the usage of 'fear' and 'victim' in both the Los Angeles Times and ABC newscasts rose from 1987 to 1994, however, found the *Times* overall usage declined from 1990 to 1997. ABC "drastically expanded" the use of the word 'fear' by 40 percent while 'victim' usage increased by 68 percent.[82] This suggests the media continually bombard the audience with the subject matter in a sensationalistic context; the results of this kind of exposure could lead the public to fear they will be the next 'victim.'

There are various techniques the media employ to gain the attention of an audience. Fear appeals are another such example used for health campaigns. The article "Scary Warnings and Rational Precautions: A Review of the Psychology of Fear Appeals" is a look at fear appeals and their effect on the audience. Ruiter and his co-authors describe fear appeals as a persuasive campaign to arouse fear to promote

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[79] Ibid., 43.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., 89.

[82] Ibid., 89.

precautionary actions.[83] The authors write that fear arousal enhances message acceptance, thus the use of fear appeals.[84]

These health campaigns are designed to alert people of a growing health problem, such as HIV, by emphasizing the threats as well as ways to take preventive measures.[85] The HIV campaign entailed preventive campaigns in the 80s and 90s that used images of death (tombstones or the grim reaper) to strike at the heart of the viewers.[86] However, the purpose of this article is to examine the effectiveness of such campaigns. Could the direct use of fear in the media influence the audience to take action? The authors found that the use of fear appeals is not as effective as one might believe. It is actually the emphasis on precautionary measures have more impact on the audience than fear appeals.[87] This article on fear appeals is another example of using fear and possibly even sensationalism as a way to promote a positive social change, much in the same line as Slattery and Altheide had previously argued.

Sensationalism and fear are subjects that are examined in the context of the news. But, a way of researching how the news is portrayed to the audience lies in the theory of framing. Framing theory was developed to study and analyze the media. Introduced by the sociologist Erving Goffman in 1974, framing is the concept of how events and issues

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[83] Ruiter, Robert A.C., Charles Abraham, and Gerjo Kok, "Scary Warnings and Rational Precautions: A Review o f the Psychology of Fear Appeals," *Psychology and Health* 16 no. 16 (2001), 614

[84] Ibid., 615.

[85] Ibid., 613.

[86] Ibid., 613.

[87] Ibid., 626.

are portrayed by the media, journalists, and their audiences.[88] Some researchers have identified factors that demonstrate framing a story. In one book, called *Getting the Whole Story*, the authors give five factors that create a news frame. One factor they include explains how a journalist may allow his/her personal preferences or values to control the way they write the story.[89] Another factor that goes into framing a story is the journalists' understanding of what is most important to the community and how widely the story affects the people reading it.[90] The journalists' views of what elements of the story are the most significant are a factor. Journalists also take into consideration their news organization's policies and procedures.[91] The last factor is the deadline factor. Journalists often don't have enough time to get everyone they really need for the story so the frame depends on time and who can be reached by the deadline.[92]

Framing and Sensationalism

With the expansion of fear and sensationalism in the news, one might be able to see how media outlets are presenting the world around them. Framing has become a way of looking at how news is presented to its audience. It is also a way to see if the news stories influence public feelings and/or opinions. Sensationalism is a part of framing, in that if a story is exaggerated or given a certain tone by the writer, then the writer has

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[88] Stephen D. Reese, Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., and August E. Grant eds., *Framing Public Life* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001), 7

[89] Gibbs, Cheryl and Tom Warhover, *Getting the Whole Story: Reporting and Writing the News* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002), 161.

[90] Ibid., 161.

[91] Ibid., 161.

[92] Ibid., 161.

framed that story using sensationalistic elements. Framing has been researched as a theory for media effects, as in the article "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects" by Dietram Schuefle.

The author examines how framing can be used to broaden the understanding of media effects.[93] Breaking down framing into two different categories, media frames and individual frames, helps Scheufele understand how framing might have an effect on the audience.[94] He doesn't focus on whether that effect might be persuasive, informative, or induce fear, he simply focuses on how other researchers might use framing to analyze media effects. Scheufele defines media frames as an organizing of information technique that shapes "meaningless and nonrecognizable happenings into a discernible event."[95] He defines individual frames as points of reference used to process new information.[96] This article is a clear guide on in how to look at framing and how to use it in research to analyze media effects. He is concise on how to use framing in future research and looks at several studies to enforce his theories.

This article is an example of how a journalist might frame a story with sensational words or phrases that will evoke some sort of response from the audience. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the author described two framing techniques that will help the audience first understand the story and then possibly see if those frames have any influence on the audience.

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[93] Scheufele, Dietram A., "Framing as a Theory of Media Effects," *Journal of Communication* 49 no. 1 (1999), 103-122

[94] Ibid., 106.

[95] Ibid., 106.

[96] Ibid., 107.

Another article examines framing theories and even provides a study showing framing can carry influence over the media's audience. The article "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects" is about framing and the influence it can wield. Thomas Nelson and his co-authors examine the theory of framing and then take their knowledge and use it in an experiment to see what kind of influence a frame can have over the audience. The influence becomes the development of positive or negative attitudes to the current state of the environment around the audience.

The article does not expose framing and sensationalism as fear inducers. The authors claim that framing can have influence over the audience. This means any story that is framed with an element of sensationalism could induce fear or hysteria amongst the public.

The author's define framing as a tool that organizes and presents information that defines the story or a problem in the story and gives a series of considerations on the subject.[97] Nelson and his colleagues also argue that "frames can be meaningful and important determinants of public opinion."[98] They also claim framing is a tool used by "persuaders" to change or influence opinion.[99] This brings up the argument that if framing is a tool to persuade or inform public opinion and a journalist who interjects great emotion and exaggerated facts into his/her story about a topic than the public might be misled into believing something that may not even be an issue. This is how framing can be used to analyze sensationalism in the media.

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[97] Nelson, Thomas E., Zoe M. Oxley, and Rosalee A. Clawson, "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects," Political Behavior 19 no. 3 (1997), 221

[98] Ibid., 224.

[99] Ibid., 225.

The authors stress that framing effects aren't the result of new information in the frame. It is the fact that the frame puts the emphasis on one aspect that gives it more weight in the audience's mind.[100] The authors set up their research by discussing the use of framing as a persuading tool. Their analysis includes other previous studies and theories.

They conducted an experiment to see what effect framing might have on the public's opinion of welfare policy, especially those with a pre-conceived notion of welfare policy.[101] The author's hypothesis is framing has an effect on the audience. They wanted to measure how much influence it would have on an audience that has little or no knowledge of welfare policy versus those who have some familiarity of the subject.[102] The first part of their experiment began by testing 116 Ohio State University undergraduates knowledge of welfare policy before exposing them to a frame and its content. This separated the informed from the less informed which allowed the researchers to measure the effect of the frame on each of the groups.[103] The second part included one question about welfare policy. There were two versions of the question given to different subjects. The two versions framed welfare policy as a "giveaway to the undeserving" or as a "harmful drain on the economy."[104]

Nelson and his partners found enough data to support their hypothesis. First they found little to no variation in support between the two issue frames because both had

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[100] Ibid., 233.

[101] Ibid., 228.

[102] Ibid., 229.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

reasons for not supporting welfare. The reason for this is that the researchers wanted to see how familiar their test subjects were with different arguments about welfare. While the analysis revealed little difference between the two framing issues, the regression analysis showed that frames did influence support for welfare. Nelson and colleagues claimed that the test subjects who blamed welfare on external events beyond their control showed greater support for welfare; those who had a "positive affect" for the poor were also likely to support welfare spending.[105]

The two issue frames, however, influenced what the test subjects thought should be blamed for poverty and welfare spending. They found support for welfare spending was stronger in the recipient frame ("emphasized beliefs about poverty by stressing that people on welfare 'don't deserve special treatment'")[106] than in the economy frame ("emphasized the possible economic threat posed by 'excessive' welfare spending).[107] Nelson states the recipient frame operated on beliefs of poverty rather than on attitudes towards the poor.[108] In the economy frame the researchers found that those who had more faith in the economy had a more favorable spin on welfare spending than those who were more pessimistic about the economy.[109]

Nelson concludes their article stating there is evidence to support their idea that there is psychological impact because of framing. They write "framing can affect the

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[105] Ibid., 231.

[106] Ibid., 231.

[107] Ibid., 231.

[108] Ibid., 232.

[109] Ibid., 232.

balance of considerations that individuals weigh when contemplating political issues."[110] They also conclude framing effects were stronger amongst audience members who were familiar with the subject matter.[111] This might be because the test subject would weigh more thought into the frame and perhaps adjust his or her ideas of the frame because it seemed to have more clout. While, the article does not prove that framing can induce fear by emphasizing stories with sensationalist elements, it does suggest that framing can have an impact on the media's audience.

This article is an example of how stories are framed by the media and then perceived by the audience. If this study used a more emotional topic such as a heated political issue or a high profile murder, the writers of the stories could have injected more sensationalistic elements. Perhaps the researchers would have found the same thing as they did with the welfare issue, that a number of topics in the news (framed) a certain way could influence public opinion.

An example of framing and media effects exists in the book, *Framing Public Life*. The chapter, "Framing the Motorcycle Outlaw," demonstrates the effects of framing and how stories can have an effect on public opinion. The author discusses the evolution of the perceptions of motorcycle groups throughout the last fifty plus years.[112] The author argues that years of Honda slogans, a Harley renaissance, Happy Days and "the Fonz" were enough to shake the image of the motorcycle outlaw.[113] The author writes of an event that began to change the way motorcyclists were perceived and the beginning of a

[110] Ibid., 235.

[111] Ibid., 235.

[112] Reese, Gandy, Jr., and Grant, 185.

[113] Ibid., 185.

news frame that would prove difficult to shake.[114] "Seizing the opportunity, the news media satisfied audience desire for sensation and information, defined the biker "not-a-citizen"…"[115] The author shows through analysis of various news reports in magazines and newspapers (such as *Life* and the *Los Angeles Times*) the framework and sensationalism that portrayed bikers as being less than civil.

News reports often portrayed the motorcyclist as someone who would not obey the law. This image, the author says, started as far back as 1947 when bikers rode through a California town ignoring the requests of local police.[116] This article began the downward image and framing of stories based on motorcycle groups and motorcyclists themselves. Later articles called for action against these "mounted hoodlums."[117] The chapter flashes forward to the even darker image of the Hell's Angels. The author writes "their drunken antics, disheveled and sloppy appearance and general oafishness betrayed bikers as undesirable, even among other motorcyclists."[118] These are the types of themes and attitudes that run through the articles the author examined.

Frames of this nature can arouse a sense of fear in the audience and cause them to act on false information. The stories about the outrageousness of the biker's actions as forces that the police could not control, were written in a sensational manner. One report that the author examined looked at the events of a rally in New Hampshire in 1965. Riots had broken out and reports stated that Hell's Angels had set fire to a car with a family in

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[114] Ibid., 185-186.

[115] Ibid., 185.

[116] Ibid., 187.

[117] Ibid., 187.

[118] Ibid., 187.

it and stood up against the National Guard waving a Nazi flag.[119] The author found that the mainstream media were so focused on reporting outrageous events that they stretched the truth for more compelling stories. The truth boiled down to the fact that the riot damage was minimal, no families were burned in their cars and most of the locals thought that the festival was a success and would be invited back the following year.[120]

Even when bikers tried to improve their image with charity events such as anti-drug campaigns, blood drives, and toy runs, the frames and stereotypes of bikers prevailed in stories about them.[121] The media continued to focus on biker murder trials and drug scandals that were dominating the news. This frame instituted a stereotype of the motorcyclists. In reality, it was just a couple of bad people ruining the image of a group that wasn't so bad at all. These frames and sensational stories had an effect on public opinion, often causing outcries for officials to get tough on these individuals. The frames persisted despite goodwill among some, if not a majority, of motorcyclists. The author found that a trend began in 1994 when news stories began to back away from the heavy frames of bikers being inhuman; some stories even portrayed them as entrepreneurs and philanthropists.[122] While some bikers admitted to wrongdoing they also pointed out that they were not the only criminals and shouldn't always be treated as such. One biker argued that politicians have been convicted of crimes and said, "why aren't they calling the Senate a criminal organization?"[123]

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[119] Ibid., 189.

[120] Ibid., 189.

[121] Ibid., 189.

[122] Ibid., 190.

[123] Ibid., 190.

The author concludes the chapter with thoughts on how and why the negative image of the biker persisted in the news. He acknowledges the media's intent to inform the public of the happenings in their surrounding environment, but also criticizes the created myth of the biker.[124] The article ends with the author discussing the frame that was used to describe the bikers and their actions and how that image began to wear away with the good deeds of other motorcyclists.[125] He also criticizes government officials and mainstream media for jumping to conclusions by writing sensational stories that put fear into their audience.

Framing can be used to analyze sensationalism as well as the appearance of fear in mass media. Altheide acknowledges in his book, *Creating Fear*, that using framing theory is one way at looking at the use of fear in the media.[126] Altheide writes "fear may be most important when it is implied as part of a general framework through which events are cast."[127]

Altheide, for his research, uses the problem frame as a way to analyze the media. He writes "the problem frame promotes fear on a routine basis, and this in turn promotes victimization as a widely viewed and read status."[128] Altheide breaks down the problem frame like this: "something exists that is undesirable, numerous people are affected by this problem (it is relevant), unambiguous aspects or parts are easily identified, it can be changed or 'fixed', there is a mechanism or procedure for fixing the problem, and the

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[124] Ibid., 192.

[125] Ibid., 193.

[126] Altheide, *Creating Fear*, 34

[127] Ibid., 35.

[128] Ibid., 47.

change or repair agent and process is known."[129] He claims that the media have rationalized the problem frame which generated more reports about fear.[130] In other words, the media had decided that using the problem frame is okay because it can garner an audience. It can rouse a fearful emotional response at the beginning of a news story and then by the story's end it has a resolution to the issue at hand. However, Altheide argues that the problem frame could be misleading to the audience. It's the characteristics of the problem frame that result in the media's focus on fear. The problem frame's characteristics include narrative structure, universal moral meanings, specific time and place, unambiguous content, focus on disorder, and cultural resonance.[131]

Altheide uses the news coverage on child neglect and abuse is the example to describe how the problem frame can be misleading to the audience. One example of child abuse is missing children. Through previous research, Altheide states that the media "erroneously" claimed that hundreds of thousands of children were abducted then brutalized by strangers while all the "stranger kidnappings" were actually relatively low.[132] It ignored parental abductions and children runaways and secondly it started a media frenzy over missing children. The audience was bombarded with "photos and pleas on milk cartons, billboards, network news shows, in mass mailings, and of course in numerous movies and documentaries."[133] Actions were then taken such as new legislation, policy changes, increased criminal sanctions, and millions of dollars of

[129] Ibid., 49.

[130] Ibid., 47.

[131] Ibid., 47.

[132] Ibid., 51.

[133] Ibid., 51.

budget allocations.[134] These actions led to more pressing issues, such as runaway and abandoned children, with little to no resources to help the bigger problem.[135]

Altheide comes to several conclusions about the problem frame and the role of entertainment in news reports today. He writes that the media employed entertainment elements to grab the audience into watching the news while at the same time informing them of what's happening in the world around them.[136] It is after a subject has been "processed through the problem frame" that the audience associates those subjects with fear.[137] In the end, Altheide concludes by saying "fear is more visible and routine in public discourse than it was a decade ago."[138] The media practice of reporting on sensational topics and promoting fear through the news could show the audience a world full of problems and take drastic measures to correct them.[139] In other words, the audience might see a problem on the news but that problem is only a portion of a much bigger issue.

Altheide's argument is an extension of fear and sensationalism in the media. It's an example of how the news stories can influence an audience and even be misleading (when sensationalism is concerned). If the media frames a story a certain way by emphasizing a minor but more provocative detail to make the story more eye catching, then it may lead audience to react to something that isn't worth a reaction.

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[134] Ibid., 51.

[135] Ibid., 51.

[136] Ibid., 54.

[137] Ibid., 57.

[138] Ibid., 58.

[139] Ibid., 58.

In another article, "When Bad Things Happen In Good Places: Pastoralism in Big-City Newspaper Coverage of Small-Town Violence," the author Russell Frank looks at the framing of small towns in big city media coverage. The article is an example of how framing can be used to analyze the use of sensationalism in the media. The author argues that there is a frame for stories, particularly crime stories that take place in small towns. This frame or stereotype the media use could give the audience the wrong impression about small towns and even instill a level of fear in the reader.

Frank examines the articles to find why small towns are framed as sleepy places with a close knit community, where people aren't afraid to leave their doors unlocked when they're not at home.[140] The articles also focus on the "anomaly" of the crime that occurred in "such a peaceful place."[141] Frank focuses on the metropolitan newspapers that portray rural towns as ideal places to live.

To do his research, Frank used the internet database LexisNexis to generate stories that he could analyze for their content. LexisNexis would return search results from newspapers listed in the top 50 circulation in the United States. His search included events that have happened in Union, S.C., Jasper, Texas, and others. He chose stories from the time frame from 1994 to 1999.[142] The searches included words like sleepy, town, hamlet, or community mixed with words like kill, violence, or evil.[143] Frank states that the purpose of the LexisNexis searches was not to generate statistics but suggests that

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[140] Frank, Russell "When Bad Things Happen in Good Places: Pastoralism in Big-City Newspaper Coverage of Small-Town Violence," Rural Sociology 68 no. 2 (2003), 207

[141] Ibid., 207.

[142] Ibid., 209.

[143] Ibid., 210.

there was a pattern in how small town crime was portrayed in metropolitan newspapers.[144]

Frank's article is divided into sections that small town violence is most commonly categorized in: "everyone knows everyone else," "the front door is unlocked; the key is in the ignition," "small towns are sleepy," and "terrible things are not supposed to happen in small towns." In each section, Frank examines examples from newspapers why metropolitan papers portray the small-town violence like they do. One of the examples that is a *New York Times* article that reports on the abduction of a 15-year-old girl from South Amboy, N.J. The article calls South Amboy a place where everyone knows everyone else.[145] A *Denver Post* story refers to Glenwood Springs, CO. as a place where you could leave the keys in your truck.[146] Enumclaw, WA is given the label of a sleepy town known for catering to tourists rather than crime in the *Seattle Times* newspaper.[147] One more example that Frank finds is in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The paper refers to West Paducah, KY, as a place where things like crime just don't happen.[148] This article is an example of how big city newspapers frame small town crime.

This article is another example of how the media could be misleading to the audience. The framing Frank examined was influential in how big cities viewed small towns and crimes committed there. He discovered that certain terms used over and over again in news stories eventually found their way into public perception of small towns.

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[144] Ibid., 211.

[145] Ibid., 217.

[146] Ibid., 219.

[147] Ibid., 220.

[148] Ibid., 223.

The media had created an image that in small towns everyone knows everyone else and that people leave their houses with their doors unlocked. Well, if everyone in a small town left their doors unlocked wouldn't they just become a haven of crooks and criminals and then suddenly, everyone wouldn't leave their doors unlocked. This boils down to is the fact that the media image of a small town has misled it's audience to believe small towns are some kind of 'peace zone' when in reality a small town could experience just as much crime as a larger city.

This literature review has analyzed sensationalism and its role in today's news media. Sensationalism is defined as a way in which news organizations can make the news more exciting for the audience, but it's also a dangerous when facts are stretched and emotional elements are emphasized. These tactics used by the media, which have been examined by the researchers mentioned, can and sometimes do influence the audience. Whether that influence is a political belief or a fear of crime can vary. The purpose was to analyze sensationalism and its numerous components to determine a better grasp of its impact. This review has shown that there are numerous aspects of sensationalism; from its many definitions, to how it works, how it is used and even its potential effects on those who are exposed to it (which those effects can be argued to be either positive or negative on the audience).

Hypothesis

$H_{1:}$ Stories from upper-market newspapers, defined as having a circulation of 150,000 or more, will contain more sensational content than the newspapers from the middle and lower markets.

$H_{2:}$ N Stories from middle-market newspapers, defined as having a circulation of 75,000 to 150,000, will contain less sensational content than the upper market, yet more than the lower market.

$H_{3:}$ Stories from lower-market newspapers, defined as having a circulation of 75,000 or less, will contain the least amount of sensational content.

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to further define sensationalism and discover how often it appears in news reporting. The research that follows will contribute to previous research by attempting to give a more-precise definition of sensationalism and identify how and where it is used. What follows are the methods and the results of a study involving nine newspapers from around the United States to see which had more sensational content.

The nine newspapers were selected by location and circulation numbers. They represent each large region of the United States: the East Coast, the Midwest and the West Coast. From each region, a newspaper from each circulation category was selected. The upper circulation newspapers had a circulation of 150,000 or more, while the middle market papers had a circulation of 75,000 to 150,000 and the lower market had a circulation of 75,000 or less.

The papers from the upper market include the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette in Pennsylvania (circulation of 250,000), the Chicago Tribune in Illinois (circulation of 680,000) and the Boston Globe in Massachusetts (circulation of 450,000). The middle market newspapers include the Birmingham News in Alabama (circulation of 148,938), the Wichita Eagle in Kansas (98,948) and the North County Times in California (circulation of 92,212). The lower market papers are the Charleston Gazette in West Virginia (circulation of 51,166), the Statesman Journal from Oregon (circulation of 56,298) and the State Journal-Register from Illinois (circulation of 63,970).

One type of story – stories about sexual assault cases – was chosen from each newspaper for analysis. Sexual assault is sensational by nature and therefore stories about it would be more likely to have sensational content imbedded in them.

The selected stories shared several criteria. To qualify, the stories must have been part of a series of articles following the arrest of a suspect through a courtroom verdict. Stories qualifying for this research project would have to be coded as a local story. A story would be considered local if it was written by a staff writer from one of the selected newspapers. Furthermore, stories were not considered a local if they were extensively covered by other newspapers from other states and their reporters. If the story was covered in other area newspapers or competing papers this would not disqualify the story from being a local story. In other words, for a series of articles to be considered a national story the case must have been covered by at least two or more newspapers and their in-house reporters. One story or so on the wire will not make the story a national story. It would have taken a series of articles, again two or more, to make the story national.

Stories were found via LexisNexis or the newspapers' Internet databases. Stories were selected from the last five years. Some stories dated back further back than others, 1998 being the earliest, but all finished their court cases within the five-year limit. In the newspapers own individual database or Lexis-Nexis, the search terms used to find the stories were simply "sexual assault" and/or "rape." The "sexual assault" term turned up articles about rape from child molestation to sexual abuse. This found a series of articles, not national, from each of the selected nine newspapers.

Once the stories were selected, they were then coded for sensational content. Items were coded as sensational using the operational definitions from the pilot study

conducted prior to this research project. However, the definitions were updated to include more modern researcher's interpretation of sensationalism, while still being similar to Frank Mott's original definition. Sensationalism is a tool used to extract an emotional response from the reader by enhancing the subject material with heavy descriptions of the event and a lot of descriptive adjectives and emotional language. Sensationalism has been said to use "dramatic visuals"[149] to draw the reader in and captivate the audience. Sloan and Parcell said that sensationalism is used to appeal to emotional feelings like excitement, shock, fear and astonishment.[150] Mott stated that sensational stories have "subject matter and treatment which excite the emotions of the reader."[151] Story topics that Mott associated with sensationalism include "crimes, disasters, sex scandals and monstrosities."[152] Sensational content will also be coded as having "descriptive adjectives"[153] and "reflects themes of right and wrong and good and evil as well as themes of the unknown or unexpected."[154]

Furthermore, only descriptive adjectives, verbs or phrases in stories dealing with the accused or the accuser will be coded as sensational. Further breaking down of this coding was that a particular adjective or phrase that was coded as being sensational was marked as being either positive or negative towards the accused or the accuser. However, if a statement could not be coded as being positive or negative or was a statement of fact,

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[149] Nacos, "Terrorism as Breaking News," 23-52

[150] Sloan and Parcell, *"American Journalism: History, Principles, Practices", 267*

[151] Ibid, 442.

[152] Ibid, 442.

[153] Karen Slattery, "Sensationalism Versus News of the Moral Life: Making the Distinction," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 9, 1 (1994): 8

[154] Ibid, 8.

it was coded as being neutral. The operational definition for an item being neutral was a proven statement by the writer or source where the information was definitely known.

Results

Once the data was coded, it was inserted into Microsoft Excel to determine overall totals and the totals from each individual market. With those totals it was determined which markets had the most sensational content by calculating simple percentages.

The first hypothesis was proven wrong when it was discovered that there was more sensational content in the lower market than the upper and middle markets. The middle-market newspapers had the second highest number of instances of sensationalism, proving the second hypothesis correct. The third hypothesis was proven wrong when higher market newspapers showed the least amount of sensational content in the news stories.

The overall instances of sensational content in the lower market accounted for 44.4 percent, while the middle accounted for 35.3 percent and the upper market had 20.3 percent. The middle and upper markets combined had more sensational content (55.6 percent) than the lower market (44.4 percent).

Overall, the coded items, which break down to two different categories of sensational content and neutral content, show that there is a greater amount of sensational content than neutral content. Only 30.9 percent of the total coded items were neutral while 69.1 percent were sensational.

Examining the total sensational content (all three markets combined) showed that only 9 percent of the sensational content was positive while the other 91 percent was negative. Furthermore, looking at the lower market's positive and negative content overall (as compared to all the other markets), the statistics show that the lower market

newspapers had the most positive content with 42.4 percent and also had the most negative content with 44.6 percent. The upper market had 24.9 percent positive content and 19.9 percent negative content; while the middle-market papers had 32.8 percent positive content and 35.5 percent negative content.

As previously stated, the neutral content accounted for 30.9 percent of all the coded items. However, the total neutral items coded 23.3 percent accounted for the upper market which had the least amount of neutral content. The middle market had the second most neutral content with 34.1 percent and the lower market had the most with 42.6 percent.

The next step was to look at the accused and accuser totals which shed a little more light on which person the stories focused. The percentages for positive, negative and neutral content show there were more accused references than there were for the accuser. Positive sensational content had 59.2 percent for the accused and 40.8 percent accuser. Negative content was 80.6 percent accused references and only 19.4 percent accuser content. The numbers for accused and accuser from the neutral content were 75.6 percent and 24.4 percent, respectively.

The above data suggests there was more focus on the accused or the suspect of a crime than there was on the victim (accuser). The number of references made that fell under the accused category out weighed that of the accuser category.

The numbers within the markets revealed the same trends as the overall statistics; the research found that the lower market's data exposed most of its content was sensational. The sensational content more than 40 percent larger than the neutral content; 70 percent sensational and 30 percent neutral. The lower market's sensational content

was mostly negative (91.4 percent) while only 8.6 percent was positive. The coded items in the lower markets revealed that there was more content related to the accused than the accuser.

Even though the lower market unexpectedly had the most sensational content, the middle-market newspapers had the second largest amount of sensational content.

The compared coded items within the middle market, by itself, show that the difference between sensational and neutral content was large. With 1122 coded items, 68.9 percent of those items were deemed sensational while 30.1 percent were determined to be neutral, in the middle-market. Of the sensational content, 8.4 percent was positive and 91.6 percent was negative. Again, there is another huge difference between positive and negative content in the middle-market newspapers. The negative content heavily out-weighs the positive content. The positive, negative and neutral content continued the trend of having more accused content than accuser.

The upper-market newspapers had the least amount of data of the other two markets. The upper-market had the fewest coded items which is one of the reasons for the market to have the least amount of sensational content. There were 683 coded items in the upper-market, of those 66.2 percent was sensational and 33.8 percent was neutral. Looking at positive and negative content, 11.1 percent was positive and 88.9 percent was negative.

In all three markets there was a larger percentage of negative content than positive. Again there were more accused content than there was accuser among the three categories of positive, negative and neutral content.

Discussion and Limitations

The results of the data show that there is a difference between the markets and their levels of sensational content. One of the major factors contributing to the papers rank in reverse order (lower having the most, the middle second and the upper having the least) is because there were more stories in the series of articles coming from the lower market than the upper markets. There were 34 articles from the upper market, 48 from the middle market and 60 from the lower market.

A future researcher could pull a sample of every sexual abuse story from a time frame. For example, a future researcher may pull every sexual abuse case story from January 1, 2004 to December 31, 2004 from nine newspapers (or more) in the three different markets used in this research. This might present a better representation of the markets and their coverage of the sensational topic. The researcher could then analyze how many stories with a sensational topic appears in each market and develop an idea of sensationalism on the basis of the story subject and not the content of the story.

Another issue for future research is the study of sensationalism and the issue of fairness. This was included in the pilot study, but due to flaws in the coding was cut out. The future researcher can take the number of sources and see how many favor the suspect and how many favor the accuser. They can also analyze the appearances of each source in the story to see if one type of source is given a better placement in the story than another. This would allow to the researcher to examine how stories are framed for the audience. This could demonstrate another contributor of sensational content that this study failed to take into account.

However, the study did show that the upper-market newspapers with higher circulations aren't always the most sensational news sources. In fact, because an event may happen in the higher-circulation areas more often than those in the lower markets it means the upper market might write shorter, more concise stories to let the reader know the simple who, what, when, why, where and how. This will most likely allow for less sensational content to enter a story.

Future research might want to focus on comparing stories of similar size from the different markets. This is due to the fact that the upper-market articles were often shorter than those from the lower markets. Comparing content in stories of the same size might produce different results in determining which market has the most sensational content in their news coverage.

This research project focused on randomly chosen article series despite length; which perhaps misrepresented the data from the research. The lower market having more articles at greater lengths certainly gives it more opportunity to have higher levels of sensational content; which could misrepresent the sample of this research project.

Conclusion

The goals of the research were met, albeit two of the three hypotheses proven wrong. The research showed that there was more sensational content in the lower market newspapers than the upper and middle markets. While the result was unexpected it revealed that sensationalism does not appear in the higher-circulation areas alone. Sensationalism exists throughout the three markets and if future researchers should follow this path they might find something different depending on the number and length of articles in the sample of the three markets.

This research examined the definition of sensationalism and tried to give it deeper roots. It also examined different components of the media practice and exposed sensational content appearing in news stories in the three different markets. The research was successful in revealing the levels of sensationalism in three different circulation markets.

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