Effects of Television News Media Narratives on Social Behavior

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Abstract

Narratives define television news media. Often, these narratives can have profound effects on the attitudes, beliefs, and social behavior of viewers. This paper explores some of those effects, examining how television news narratives divide and isolate societal groups through stereotyping, violence normalization, desensitization, and an overemphasis on partisan political conflict and drama. Two alternative television news models are presented as opportunities for increasing media literacy, critical thinking, and civic engagement: the Public Health model and an "Infotainment" model, based on the phenomenal success of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. The author concludes by suggesting that rising populist anger and skepticism against the mainstream media can be positively leveraged to pressure corporate powers into offering higher-quality journalistic programming.

Television News Media Narratives and Their Effects on Social Behavior

News media are ubiquitous. They are all around us, in the form of newspapers, radio, websites, larger-than-life tickers in Times Square, and, of course, television. According to *Free Press* ("Ownership Chart: The Big Six", a "national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to reform the media," the mainstream news media is now almost exclusively controlled by what some call "The Big Six." These multinational giants, including General Electric, Disney, News Corp, Time Warner, Viacom, and CBS Corporation, manage everything from the production to the distribution of news story content for all the major media outlets. Herman and Chomsky (1988) describe this consolidated media institution in the context of a "Propaganda Model." They explain how the very structure and operations of this institution are filtered and biased in a way that supports the agenda and interests of elites rather than that of average citizens. Even before power was so highly concentrated in mainstream news media, Walter Lippmann (1922/2010) presciently described propaganda as, "A group of men, who can prevent independent access to the event, arrange the news of it to suit their purpose" (p. 33).

Lippmann, Herman, and Chomsky are keenly aware of the profound effects mainstream media has on public opinion, social definitions, and individual perceptions. Because of this influence, it is important to understand news media from a social psychology standpoint in order to protect democratic representation and help citizens better inform themselves within an environment surrounded by propaganda. In this paper, I am going to explore some of these media effects by looking at related theories and research that show how news media can shape attitudes, beliefs, and social behavior.

I will begin with a discussion of news stories as narratives. Here I will introduce a phenomenon called "transportation" (Green & Brock, 2000) and explain how it enables media to

persuade viewers, listeners, and readers to think in a certain way. After that, I will look at how mainstream media artificially divides people up in society and puts them at odds with each other through the promotion of stereotypes, as well as the desensitization to and normalization of violence and aggression. Lastly, I will discuss the recent trend in specialized, mainstream cable networks, positioning themselves as partisan news sources and offering a persistent narrative that affirms the pre-existing political beliefs of a particular target niche, while contemptuously vilifying opposing perspectives. I will conclude by exploring a couple of alternative models for the presentation of television news media.

Want to Go for a Ride?

Besides its ubiquity, much of the power of mainstream media comes from its ability to engage people by immersing them into a story or narrative involving a world they may never directly experience within their own personal lives. As Lippman (1922/2010) states, "The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined" (p. 23). Borrowing Richard Gerrig's term, "transportation," Green and Brock (2000) expanded Gerrig's concept into a fully testable model that they call Transportation Theory. They use this model to examine narrative content and determine the consequences of transportation in terms of its effect on readers' emotions, immediate physical awareness, and susceptibility to persuasion. Green (2004) specifically defines transportation as an "integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings, focused on story events" (p. 248). This convergent mental process has the capability to immerse readers in imagery, elicit significant emotional responses, and cause readers to avoid engaging in critical thinking as they tune out contradictory real-world facts (Green & Brock, 2000). Ultimately, transportation can impact real-world beliefs, social attitudes, and political opinions.

To evaluate their theory, Green and Brock (2000) conducted experiments with undergraduate students to test how transportation affects character evaluation. During these experiments, they also looked at whether explicit reading instructions, including classification of the story as fiction or non-fiction, can decrease how much readers become immersed in or take on the attitudes and beliefs suggested within the narrative. Green and Brock's results allowed them to conclude that transportation is indeed a distinctive, unconscious process that has the power to override cognitive elaboration, even when such elaboration is deliberately encouraged or stimulated.

Appel and Richter (2007) also studied how transportation may be a mechanism through which people can be persuaded when reading narrative pieces. They found that various assertions made in a modified fictional text have a persuasive sleeper effect on everyday beliefs, due to transportation. Transportation is called a persuasive sleeper effect because the magnitude of influence increases over time. It turns out that Lippmann's (1922/2010) intuition may have been correct when he said that: "The types acquired through fiction tend to be imposed on reality. Thus there can be little doubt that the moving picture is steadily building up imagery which is then evoked by the words people read in their newspapers" (p. 70).

I Can't Quit You, Baby

While the transportation experiments I discussed focus exclusively on written narrative texts, their results could easily be extrapolated to news media as well. I will discuss this connection between narratives and news media in more detail in the next section. The effects of television news media, in particular, may be most compelling because of the medium's immersive and even addictive qualities (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2004). They reveal that television addiction is indeed a real phenomenon. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi determined that

TV conditions people to feel relaxed whenever they turn it on and feel stressed whenever it is not on. In addition, common cinematographic camera and editing techniques keep the viewer alert and attentive by activating the orienting response, an innate movement-detection response in humans and other animals (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2004). Leveraging these technical capabilities, televised narrative content can keep the attention of viewers and perhaps transport them to an even greater degree than written narrative content can. This explains why children often look so intently "tuned in" when they watch TV and why they are much less aware of what is going on around them in their physical environment. Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi describe how viewers commonly remark, "'If a television is on, I just can't keep my eyes off it'," or "'I feel hypnotized when I watch television'" (p. 4). They additionally discovered that families go through very authentic withdrawal symptoms when cut off from the TV, and television watching significantly affects these families' direct social interactions.

Beyond television's inherent addictive qualities, it is also important to recognize how much Americans today rely on TV network news. Ever since its introduction in the mid 20th century, people have progressively substituted newspaper reading for television viewing as their preferred method for learning about their world (Putnam, 1995). Additionally, today's children automatically use television as an educational tool for political socialization (Johnson, 1996).

Narrating the News

Studies on transportation show that this immersive and persuasive phenomenon is unique to narratives, as opposed to other types of content (Appel & Richter, 2007). However, it is important to recognize that news stories are actually structured in a narrative format quite often, especially on television (Smith, 1997). In other words, they are not simply objective reports of events. News stories present a storyline with a particular perspective and portray an event within

a context of conflict and resolution. Furthermore, according to Smith (1997), narrative themes

and character roles are commonly repeated across news stories, creating a system of mythology.

He discusses how news reports consistently present tales of suffering, injustice, and corruption.

They also create heroes (often politicians or military members) and pit them against villains (e.g.

Al Qaeda terrorists) (Smith, 1997). Goldfarb (2006) recognizes this particular pattern in the

"War on Terror" narrative that is commonly presented through the mainstream media, which

portrays American heroes as fighting an indefinite battle against foreign, Islamic fundamentalist,

terrorist villains. In the previous century, America's most dominant national narrative similarly

showcased Americans as freedom-loving heroes who must fight against the evil tyranny of

Communism, in what Lippmann (1947), himself, coined "The Cold War."

Like a movie "based on a true story," delivering news in a narrative format transforms

news content into a story about reality rather than a purely objective depiction of reality itself

(Bird & Dardenne, 1997). Lippmann (1922/2010) recognized that through the inherent

assimilative process of news-gathering, journalists construct the narrative for a story by

translating a real, physical environment into a subjective, and frequently biased, "pseudo-

environment." Such a pseudo-environment is designed in an effort to structure the messy,

complex reality of actual events into an abstracted, simplified form that the public can

understand; but this approximated account of reality, as we have learned, affects social behavior

in the real world by shaping attitudes, beliefs, and values, as well as by promoting a particular

worldview (Lippmann, 1922/2010). When a small concentration of elites control the media

institution, it is easy to see how the storylines in news might be based on a particular agenda that

is not necessarily in the best interest of the rest of the democratic public (Herman & Chomsky,

1988).

These subjective narratives are even more amplified in today's 24-hour cable news environment. Smith (1997) recognizes, "If television news is structured as a matter of policy, we should expect to find certain networks, stations, or groups emphasizing certain kinds of narratives" (p. 325). Narrative techniques offer journalists, program producers, and other institutional stakeholders more freedom to subjectively interpret the news, which leads to dubious "expert" opinions and the dramatic, sensationalized punditry that generally exists on cable networks such as Fox News and MSNBC (Smith, 1997; Manjoo, 2008; Morris, 2007).

This narrative format also offers a sense of familiarity and makes viewers feel more comfortable and relaxed, which Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi (2004) found was a major reason people watch television in the first place. The common themes and "mythological" social actor roles played on a particular station gently signal to viewers that they are watching a perspective that fits well with their political allegiances and internalized value system (Smith, 1997). In other words, these affirmations make viewers feel a sense of security that the perspectives on their network of choice will not create tension in the form of cognitive dissonance and unfamiliar social representations (Manjoo, 2008; Moscovici, 1988). Later, I will provide an in-depth discussion about how such opposing agendas and narratives on cable news channels can paradoxically lead to a lack of exposure to diverse opinions and an exaggerated partisan polarization. First, however, I will discuss how news media might potentially interfere with dialogue and constructive political debate by artificially dividing people into opposing groups through stereotypes and depictions of violence.

Typecast: The Impact of Media-Perpetuated Stereotypes

Whether intentional or not, the mainstream media, in the aggregate, tends to underrepresent and negatively stereotype women and racial minorities (Johnson, Bushman, &

Dovidio, 2008; Tuchman, 1997). As discussed earlier, mass media often constructs a mythological, familiar narrative around a news story in which certain types of people are consistently typecast in specific character roles (Smith, 1997). According to Gerbner (1998), these narrative patterns are particularly common on television. He explains how television is a top-down, one-way communication medium that assumes audiences to be passive consumers. He calls television "a centralized system of story-telling," and compares television to religion, based on its "repetition of patterns (myths, ideologies, 'facts,' relationships, etc.) which serve to define the world and legitimize the social order" (p. 177). Through his cultivation theory, Gerber points out that watching repetitive narrative patterns on television can cultivate and mainstream stereotypes. Indeed, despite North America's ethnic diversity, cultural sensitivity to political correctness, and rhetorical focus on gender and racial equality, the media still manages to propagate crude stereotypes, as it attempts to conveniently shoehorn various social actors into these limited narrative templates (Johnson, et al., 2008; Smith, 1997).

According to an article on the official website of *The Media Awareness Network* ("Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News"), a Canadian non-profit focused on the development of media and digital literacy, there is a very small percentage of news stories primarily focused on Blacks and Latinos, but when a story is presented about people in these minority groups, they are most likely to be portrayed in a negative light and perhaps even represented as a "villain" within the greater narrative. In the same manner, the media often scapegoats immigrants, especially when reporting about crime, terrorism, or social welfare abuse ("Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News"). This article states that immigrants, along with religious and racial minorities, frequently receive suspicious treatment by the media, commonly casting them as foreigners or outsiders to be potentially feared by the rest of the public. A recent example of this was the

sensational media focus on the proposed mosque construction next to Ground Zero in New York City, as evidenced by the op-ed piece in the New York Post titled, "Mosque Madness at Ground Zero" (Peyser, 2010). Women are similarly cast into stereotypical roles as victims, passive consumers, or domesticated homemakers, dependent on male support and guidance (Tuchman, 1997). Like minorities, female social actors rarely get the opportunity to play legitimate authority figure roles in media narratives. These spots are typically reserved for white males instead (Smith, 1997).

Lippmann (1922/2010) acknowledges:

In putting together our public opinions…we have to describe and judge more people, more actions, more things than we can ever count, or vividly imagine. We have to summarize and generalize. We have to pick out samples, and treat them as typical…To pick fairly a good sample of a large class is not easy." (p. 112)

Basically, Lippmann is admitting that stereotyping is a natural human tendency. Furthermore, he suggests that media inherently involves summarizing and skewing, which consequently encourages the use of stereotypes. It is a convenient heuristic that people use to categorize others in their social environment, as well as construct public opinions and judgments about them. Mainstream media play a substantial role in the development of these heuristics or stereotypes. As Tuchman (1997) states, "Americans learn basic lessons about social life from the mass media" (p. 151). Because of this power that mainstream media wields, and in light of concerns about its portrayals of women and minority groups, many researchers have closely examined how these selective depictions might impact the attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of media consumers.

Johnson Bushman, and Dovidio (2008) are particularly interested in the role media plays in category and stereotype priming. They conducted a study to determine the consequences of such media-based priming and whether it can lead to stereotype application in the form of support for harmful treatment or reduced empathy. Johnson and colleagues focused specifically on representations of Black men as violent criminals and Black women as promiscuous within news and entertainment media. One of their experiments tested whether viewing photos of Blacks looting would lead White students to associate Black Hurricane Katrina evacuees with criminal behavior and thus ultimately become more accepting of harmful police treatment towards these displaced Blacks. Their other experiment tested whether sexually-tinged rap songs (performed by a Black female such as Lil' Kim) would lead to greater promiscuity attributions and reduced empathetic concern while reading the story of a young Black woman who accidentally became pregnant. Both experiments demonstrated a significant effect of biasing media stimuli on racial attitudes and beliefs. More specifically, this proved that such media did indeed prime the White student participants to selectively apply negative stereotypes and thus inconsistently judge Blacks and Whites who were in need. Johnson et al. concluded that this suggestive media content conditioned the White participants to react in a racist manner or at least gave them permission to openly express suppressed negative feelings and beliefs that they privately held about Blacks.

In another study involving the media's priming of sexual stereotypes about women, Ferguson et al. (2005) examined the effects of a "Jerry Springer" episode that involved female guests who demonstrated blatant promiscuous behavior. They found that exposure to this particular episode led subjects to generally apply primed stereotypes to unrelated women. Specifically, they perceived less victim trauma and imposed more responsibility on the victim in

their interpretations of sexual harassment cases. Even more interesting is the fact that this media exposure, in the study, affected non-sexual judgments of women as well, such as potential for academic success.

Fantasy Depictions of a Violent, Scary, Sad World

Stereotype priming is not the only way in which mainstream media divide and interfere with broader societal interactions or relationships. Because a corporate-owned, for-profit media institution means that coverage of news is frequently ratings-driven. The simple reality is that violence, conflict, and shocking, sensationalistic news stories are highly stimulating (Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000). These types of stories grab the attention of viewers as they are flipping through channels and keep them emotionally and visually fixated (Grabe et al.). Therefore, as Johnson exclaims, "News departments believe that violence sells and that violence is what the public wants" (p. 213). However, multiple empirical studies have shown that viewers actually prefer nonviolent TV programs. (Diener & DeFour, 1978; Weaver & Wilson, 2009). Weaver and Wilson's results suggest that it is really action people are attracted to, and because violence is inherently coupled with action, it is automatically assumed by media producers that viewers prefer to watch violent content. In truth, violence simply stimulates the evolutionary based orienting response discussed earlier (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2004). This natural response may force viewers to pay attention but it doesn't mean that they necessarily enjoy the violence they are watching.

Johnson (1996) conducted a study in which he monitored four news programs across several television stations for a 6-month period to test whether stories involving violence, conflict, and suffering (VCS) truly did dominate these news broadcasts. Two of the stations were local New York affiliates, one was a major broadcast network (CBS), and one was a 24-hour

cable news channel (CNN). His results indicated that over half of the stories and over half of the total broadcast time were devoted to VCS. Furthermore, he found that VCS-related content was much more likely to be showcased in leading, top stories.

The real concern, according to Johnson (1996), is that television networks are not depicting a realistic view of everyday life in local communities, or the overall society that we all live in. He points out that television was originally designed as an entertainment medium, and thus, the companies that produce and distribute content for television are inherently built around an entertainment-oriented business model. Being entertaining is what generates ratings, and increasing ratings is what generates profits.

As mergers and acquisitions have occurred, major television networks have come to be owned by parent companies dedicated to the production of entertainment (e.g. Viacom, Walt Disney). Journalism and civic engagement, therefore, plays no part in the history of some of these major commercial entities that now control the mainstream media. In the case of Walt Disney, which purchased ABC back in 1996, the company is best known for constructing colorful, animated fantasy worlds that co-exist both on screen as well as in the physical world, in the form of amusement parks. Today, this same company controls a major television news network that citizens in a democratic society heavily rely upon to provide them with pertinent, accurate information about the real world so that they can effectively engage in empathetic dialogue and constructive, reality-based deliberation (McCoy & Scully, 2002). Additionally, Gerbner (1988) points out that this sort of media consolidation, along with the tight connections between those that produce and distribute mainstream television programming, leads to surprisingly consistent messages, ironically designed to appeal to the broadest, most heterogeneous audience. Gerbner's cultivation theory shows how long-term exposure to these

homogenous messages on television socializes a diverse population, artificially cultivating a

shared, oversimplified view of reality and thus "mainstreaming" the attitudes and beliefs of this

massive, widespread audience.

Because leveraging an entertainment model for television journalism is

counterproductive to democracy because it stereotypes and divides people up into mythological

segments, superficially casting them as heroes, villains, and victims (Tuchman, 1997). At the

same time, this model consistently exaggerates the amount of violence, conflict, and tragedy that

actually occurs in real life (Smith, 1997). Johnson (2006) insists, "If one compares what the

media report and what is really taking place in the world, it is clear that violence coverage is

excessive and that frequency of reporting bears no resemblance to actual incidence" (p. 209).

The material implications of such a system are substantial. Stories are deliberately assembled so

that the tragic and emotional aspects are dramatically overemphasized (Johnson, 2006). Visual

images are carefully selected to elicit the most attention and shock value, while artificial, urgent

tension is generated through the strategic use of music, slow motion and other production

techniques (Herbert, 2008). Additionally, accounts of the reported events themselves are reported

as isolated episodes rather than presented within a more global context (Coleman & Thorson,

2002; Grabe et al., 2000).

As part of his cultivation analysis, Gerbner (1998) introduced the "mean world

syndrome" to explain how constant, long-term exposure to violence and negative news on

television promote a distorted perception of the real world as dangerous and mean. Johnson

(1996) alludes to Gerbner's mean world syndrome, stating, "The more people watch television,

the more they believe that the television world is the real world" (p. 212). This also relates back

to my earlier discussions about people becoming transported into the narrative of a story (Green

& Brock, 2000) and people heavily relying on television to inform them about the state of the outside world (Putnam, 1995). "The negative images on television tend to create feelings of danger, mistrust, intolerance, alienation, and gloom" (Johnson, 1996, p. 212). Eventually, viewers may succumb to this cynical narrative that is ubiquitously presented on television and begin to adopt beliefs that the community and environment they live in is truly a scary, wicked place (Gerbner, 1998). As individuals' perceptions are changed by their television viewing experiences, these perceptions may ultimately influence and shape broader, collective social representations across an entire community or society (Moscovici, 1988). Therefore, it is crucial to remember that hegemony prevails over democracy when people fail to engage in direct dialogue and deliberation (Goldfarb, 2006; McCoy & Scully, 2002). At that point, social representations become primarily based on top-down narratives of fear, violence, and terror (Goldfarb, 2006; Moscovici, 1988).

These media decisions have very real consequences for those in trouble or in need around the world. When the media selectively covers sensational events but fails to provide historical context or sustained coverage of the situation as it progresses, it may encourage well-intentioned individuals and humanitarian groups to react impulsively and irrationally. In an attempt to create compelling drama, news coverage may mischaracterize events as acute crises that require rapid external interventions (Jakobsen, 2000). According to Jakobsen (2000), this compels viewers to lobby for a flood of short-term emergency relief and monetary donations that ultimately could end up being misallocated.

Hurricane Katrina and the 2010 Haitian Earthquake are recent examples in which news coverage of an immediate crisis encouraged helping behavior that may have done more harm than good. Flooding the Haitian markets with subsidized rice from foreign countries, for

example, destroys local markets and keeps Haiti from becoming self-sufficient (Mandelbaum, 2010). The affected people truly needed a steady flow of long-term, strategically targeted resources so that they could maintain civilian control over their own rebuilding process and not become handicapped or exploited by oppressive external powers (e.g. military, private contractors) (Amster, 2010; Copeland, 2010; Mandelbaum). However, the mass media focused too heavily on the immediate chaos on the ground, getting caught up in the moment-to-moment events, rather than spending more time examining "the root causes of impoverishment and imposed vulnerability that made the disaster possible in the first instance" (Amster, 2010, para. 6). Amster adds that the media's embedded perspective led them to overemphasize security issues such as looting and protection of private property.

The mass media frequently overemphasizes crime. In fact, there are 2-3 times as many TV news stories containing violence, conflict, or suffering than there are instances of violence within entertainment-based television shows (Johnson, 2006). Despite, this disparity, the majority of research conducted on media violence still focuses exclusively on entertainment content, such as movies, television dramas, and video games. Meanwhile, researchers often ignore the effect of violence in news broadcasts altogether (Johnson, 2006). According to Dill (2009), the media industry often argues, despite much evidence to the contrary, that people can easily make a distinction between fictional violence and real violence. Therefore, the industry claims that people are not negatively affected when exposed to fantastical portrayals of violence. Johnson reminds us, however, that when it comes to depictions and footage of real world violence, even media executives cannot deny that such exposure is more likely to lead to aggressive behavior in viewers. These viewers' beliefs and behaviors are still significantly

affected even if they can consciously and cognitively recognize a difference between fantasy and

reality (Dill, 2009).

<div align="center">**Living in a Numbed Down Society**</div>

One of the major concerns about violence in television and other forms of entertainment

media is that it desensitizes viewers and leads to a decrease in helping behavior (Bartholow,

Bushman, & Sestir, 2006; Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman,

2007). Bushman and Anderson (2009) conducted both a lab and a field experiment to determine

the effects of media violence on helping behavior. In the lab experiment, college student

participants were asked to play either a violent or nonviolent video game. Meanwhile a fight was

staged right outside of the lab and the participants were timed on how long it would take for

them to help. Those exposed to the violent video game took significantly longer to help, were

less likely to think the fight was serious, and were less likely to even notice the fight occurring.

The field-based study involved a random selection of adult moviegoers who were not

aware they were part of a study. A confederate (young woman) pretended to have an injured

ankle outside a movie theater. She dropped her crutches before and after moviegoers went to

watch either a violent or nonviolent movie. The moviegoers were timed on how long it took

them to help. They found that those who came out of the violent movie took significantly longer

before helping the confederate retrieve her crutches. These experiments supported their

hypothesis that exposure to violent media reduces helping behavior through desensitization

(Bushman & Anderson, 2009).

Berkowitz (1962) hypothesized that more realistic violence has a greater impact on

aggression than fictional violence because observers are more easily able to associate the

situation that they are watching with events in their own lives. When watching a war movie, for

example, viewers who were lead to believe it was a true documentary were more impulsively aggressive afterwards (Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973). Berkowitz and Alioto propose that these viewers were more aggressive because they saw the movie violence as justified (in order to stop the bad guys), and thus they were more easily able to rationalize other real-life aggression as being justified as well. Based on these studies, it is reasonable to suggest that exposure to news media violence could actually amplify the negative effect on helping behavior that Bushman and Anderson (2009) demonstrated in their study, if witnesses interpret violence against others as being justified.

Helping behavior is related to what Putnam (2000) calls "social capital," a form of generalized reciprocity, in which one person unconditionally helps another with the soft expectation that someday that person will give back by helping out a third, unrelated person. In a healthy society, this pattern of "paying it forward" continues on indefinitely. Social capital is positively correlated with generalized trust, civic engagement and community participation (Manjoo, 2008; Putnam, 2000; Shirky 2009). According to Shirky, social capital leads to many societal benefits, including better health, less crime, and increased prosperity. Logically tying this all together, if exposure to constant television violence decreases the helping behavior of many viewers within a community, then social capital is depleted, people become less trusting of each other, civic participation wanes, and society, as a whole, is negatively impacted. Once again, referencing Gerbner's (1988) "mean world" phenomenon, this effect is compounded because a concentrated focus on violence in television news media leads frequent viewers to believe their communities have lower social capital and thus behave accordingly with less mutual trust and less willingness to help others.

Violence in news media also produces a normalizing effect. People begin to accept the idea that aggression is an appropriate response for both individuals and governments to achieve their strategic goals or obtain what they desire (Johnson, 1996). Singer and Singer (2008) discuss how watching lots of television can cause young children and even adolescents to struggle with distinguishing reality from fantasy. This inability to separate reality from fantasy becomes a much larger problem when exposure to media violence leads to more aggressive fantasies (Singer & Singer, 2008). Furthermore, television media can condition and prime aggressive scripts in the same way that it does with stereotypes (Anderson & Dill, 2000). The GAAM model explains how violent media, as a situational input variable, interacts with factors such as personality traits, arousal level, and current emotional state to catalyze particular aggressive behaviors (Anderson & Dill, 2000).

Hurley (2004) complements the GAAM model by explaining how humans are different than other animals in that we are more likely to engage in full-fledged imitation rather than just approximated emulation. She explains that imitation tendencies are heightened in an aroused state. While adults can suppress these imitative urges more than young children, they are still unconsciously prone to them, especially when primed by visual and verbal representations, such as violent media, within their social environment. Charartrand and Bargh (1999) refer to this phenomenon as the "chameleon effect." They argue that simply perceiving behavior by others can lead to an unintentional mimicking of it. Hurley takes the chameleon effect a step further and suggests that when humans watch media depicting violence as a means to a particular end, they tend to imitate these patterns in real life.

Selling Fragments of Affirmation

Much of this paper has dealt with how mainstream news media manages to artificially partition and categorize people through the use of narrative templates, the propagation of stereotypes, discouragement of helping behavior, and normalization of violence and aggression. However, there is another way that mass media fragments a society that we haven't yet discussed.

One of the big problems with ratings- and profit-driven news coverage is that it is inherently designed to pander to particular audiences in order for the company running the network to keep a target demographic tuned in to their programming (Johnson, 1996; Morris, 2007). The plethora of cable news channels that have emerged in recent years have exacerbated the situation because they allow these companies to divide up the public into numerous target market segments (Manjoo, 2008; Turow, 1998). Just like consumer products, the networks and programming are specifically branded, positioned, and marketed in order to appeal to the respective demographic they hope to reach (Johnson, 1996; Turow, 1998). More importantly, Turow points out that this system allows advertisers to disseminate their television ads most effectively and efficiently by matching the products and services they sell to the target audiences of the network. In fact, Turow believes this sort of targeted advertising model may be the biggest force behind the increasing fragmentation of media and culture in America. From a free society perspective, one would naturally expect that more choice is a good thing in terms of exposure to diversity of opinion and deliberative democracy in our society. However, many observe that this isn't exactly how things have worked out (Manjoo 2008; Morris 2007; Sunstein, 2010).

Recent Pew Research Center data reveals a sea change since the early 1990s in terms of where Americans obtain their news (Manjoo, 2008). Before this time, most Americans got their news from newspapers or one of the major network evening news programs (Manjoo, 2008). In

contrast, a substantial portion of today's Americans gets their news almost exclusively from cable TV sources (Manjoo, 2008). Furthermore, the Pew data shows that viewers choose to watch particular cable stations based on their political party affiliation and they often hold great contempt or distrust for stations that they believe support the opposing party (Manjoo, 2008).

Morris (2007) suggests that claims of partisan bias in media have always been prevalent (by both Republicans and Democrats), but the big difference now is that entire cable networks have emerged which capitalistically pander to these skeptics. Fox News Corporation (FNC), according to Morris, started this trend by positioning itself as a more objective alternative to mainstream news coverage that allegedly has a liberal bias. As a result, they have benefited more than anyone from this new fragmented media environment, despite scientific evidence, cited by Morris, showing that FNC's own coverage is biased and heavily supportive of the Republican agenda. Morris' analysis of Pew data supports his hypothesis that those with negative perceptions about liberal bias in mainstream media do indeed tend to gravitate towards FNC.

Repulsion hypothesis suggests that we are not necessarily attracted to others simply because we perceive them as similar. However, on the other side of the coin, significantly disparate attitudes often do lead to repulsion (Rosenbaum, 1986). Following the logic of repulsion hypothesis, people tune into FNC, not because they feel like the FNC personalities are particularly similar to them, but rather because these news show hosts stand in vehement opposition to liberals, who conservative Republican voters are often repulsed by. Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) call this phenomenon the "hostile media effect." Regardless, this pandering by networks such as FNC internally legitimizes viewers' beliefs and attitudes by using professional journalists, experts, and other perceived authority figures to socially sanction these personal perceptions about news media.

Pointing to research by Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979), Manjoo (2008) discusses a related phenomenon from social psychology called "biased assimilation," which suggests that people interpret information in a manner that supports their own previously held views. People claim they want objective news, but, when given the choice, they filter information so that it fits in comfortably with their worldview (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). The brilliance of FNC is that it fills this dichotomized need perfectly. With a wink and a nod, the network convincingly markets itself as being "fair and balanced," but its actual coverage is very friendly towards Republican views (Morris, 2007). As I suggested earlier when discussing narrative templates, a specific mythological narrative is constructed for the right-leaning target audience so that cognitive dissonance is alleviated (Manjoo, 2007; Smith, 1997).

In basic social psychology, there is a basic theory known as "similarity-attraction." It states that we are more likely to be drawn to those who have similar attitudes and beliefs to us (Miller, 2005). Wetzel and Insko (1980) found, more specifically, that people are attracted to others who are most similar to the ideals that they have. In the case of FNC, their viewers are kept happy and satisfied through continuous affirmations that their particular idealism and understanding of the world is correct.

Recently, MSNBC has attempted to partially emulate FNC's marketing and operating model by positioning itself as the liberal alternative to FNC. They hired a slew of hosts who are sympathetic to the views of Democrats (Rosenthal, 2010). Regardless of political affiliation, though, the psychology behind these competitive market strategies remains the same.

Manjoo (2008) discusses another technique used by cable news to encourage and affirm viewers' partisan positions on various issues. Aaron Lowin, according to Manjoo, introduced this technique during the 1960s, calling it "weak dissonance." It involves presenting a straw man in

the form of a weak or absurdly extreme argument from the opposing political camp and then ridiculing it or immediately knocking it down (Manjoo, 2008). This trick is used so often by cable news program hosts, such as Bill O'Reilly and Keith Olbermann, that Manjoo claims, "Weak dissonance is the engine of cable talk" (p. 43).

Johnson (1996) states:

Television stations define their identities by their news programs, and what is shown on the air is carefully orchestrated not only to produce high ratings but also to conform to the network view of the world. Unfortunately, the construction of reality according to television tends to serve the interests of the disseminators rather than the public. (p. 213)

By leveraging biased assimilation, presenting scenes of weak dissonance, and selling stereotyped myths, cable news stations give viewers the illusion of diversity and choice, but in reality, this fragmentation only benefits the advertisers and corporations who control these stations (Johnson, 1996). As ratings and profits rise for these pandering cable networks, social capital decreases (Manjoo, 2008). Viewers are left divided and isolated within separate realities, each armed with their own personalized set of selectively filtered facts, but without any constructive understanding of opposing viewpoints (Manjoo, 2008). Such a state of affairs caused Morris (2007) to conclude, "This phenomenon exposes a possible irony of the fragmented media era: as the number of available news sources increases, the likelihood that the public is exposed to counterattitudinal perspectives might actually decrease" (p. 726).

Making Media More Healthy for Public Consumption

Up to this point, I have focused on many of the challenges and negative consequences of mainstream television news media and the entertainment-centric corporations who control this media. However, there are positive alternative models and solutions out there to consider. These

alternatives offer hope, demonstrating that television shouldn't be automatically discounted as a fatally flawed medium for presenting informative news and helping people connect to their social world around them.

One such alternative model, proposed by Coleman and Thorson (2002), comes from the field of public health, and it is partially inspired by the Public Journalism movement that began in the mid 1990s. The Public Journalism movement, according to Goldfarb (2006), involved an experimental model in which journalists and academics attempted to play more of a community-organizing role, while actively partnering with the general public to promote dialogue, deliberation, and grassroots-inspired solutions. Instead of dispassionately reporting the news based on a top-down, elitist agenda, public journalists encourage local community members to set their own agenda, and then assist these community members in becoming more contextually enlightened on the issues that are most important to them (Goldfarb).

In their Public Health model of reporting, Coleman and Thorson (2002) were particularly interested in media coverage of crime and violence. They point to attribution theory to describe how Western culture favors individual responsibility over collective action and how American journalists reflect these values within their narratives. Furthermore, Coleman & Thorson suggest mass media does a poor job of reporting crime and violence because the coverage is usually episodic rather than thematic. This means that such news stories are presented in an isolated, disjointed manner instead of insightfully connecting these stories together and representing them within a greater societal context (Coleman & Thorson, 2002). In other words, the symptom is reported without any larger analysis of the disease causing it (Coleman & Thorson, 2002). This can inherently lead television news media to misattribute crime and violence to intrinsic "evil" qualities in individuals rather than focusing on the real underlying causes. Like epidemiologists,

Coleman and Thorson suggest we should classify crime and violence as a mortal public health issue, in the same realm as cancer or vehicular deaths, and they insist that the media should focus more globally on risk factors and prevention strategies. Drawing from the literature, they point out that providing risk factors and causal information in a news story about crime or violence can reduce fear. In their own study, involving the embedding of public health information in newspaper stories, Coleman and Thorson found that this contextual data creates empowerment by shifting the blame to society as a collective whole and encouraging a greater focus on holistic, community-based crime prevention measures. This trend toward the use of risk factor models in media research can also be detected in more recent language of aggression theorists, such as Anderson (2004).

By selectively reporting on sensational stories, a media agenda that is oriented towards entertainment and ratings can over-represent certain episodic events (Jakobsen, 2000; Johnson, 2006; Smith, 1997). For example, random murders by strangers are commonly covered on television, despite the fact that most homicides are actually committed by acquaintances or family members (Johnson, 2006). The problem here is that agenda setting theory indicates a strong correlation between the amount of coverage an issue receives and the importance that viewers place on it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Coleman and Thorson (2002) are concerned that selectively presenting certain types of events without enough context can inaccurately represent risk factors. According to Combs and Slovic (1979), "These misconceptions undoubtedly influence the way that people think about and respond to hazards in their personal lives. Such biases may misdirect the actions of public interest groups and government agencies, resulting in less than optimal control of risk'' (p. 837). Earlier, I discussed a very similar issue when mainstream media reports on isolated disaster events without presenting enough situational

context to inspire more cost-effective solutions and comprehensive social responses to these symptomatic, acute disasters (Jakobsen, 2000).

While Coleman and Thorson's (2002) study involved newspaper stories, their findings indicate some interesting opportunities for television and mainstream news outlets in general. First of all, they expressed concerns about local news outlets having the resources to adopt their proposed Public Health model and leverage it on a day-to-day basis. They claim that only the larger news organizations have the time, money, and technology to support this model. I speculate, if a strong business case can be made to the companies who back the major television networks that the Public Health model will help them draw a wide audience by creating compelling and popular news programs, then they may consider investing in the information databases, statisticians, dedicated investigative reporters, and public health experts necessary to produce this programming. Moreover, large global news and information networks, such as the Associated Press or Thomson Reuters could potentially take over some of the heavy lifting in terms of building the large database infrastructure for analyzing the risk and causal factors of violent crime in various communities across America. If some of this basic data mining and analysis can be outsourced, perhaps it may help the Public Health model of journalism become more feasible within smaller news organizations.

Coleman and Thorson (2002) suggest that feature departments take over some of the crime and violence reporting. This recommendation could potentially translate well into the world of television, as the large companies who own these news networks also produce theatrical movies and major television drama series. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume they might have the necessary infrastructure and sophisticated filmmaking resources to produce captivating follow-up stories or an in-depth, documentary-style miniseries that provides elaborated coverage

on a particular issue. Of course, such news programming may still be based on elite bias, stereotyped social actor roles, or sensationalized narrative templates, but simply pressuring the mainstream media to provide more sustained focus and contextual content in their news reporting is certainly a step in the right direction. These positive and negative dynamics are illustrated well by the following example.

CNN recently began experimenting with this documentary mini-series format. In 2008, they aired a four-hour documentary, called *Black in America*, which focuses on the meaning of living in America as a Black person (Sklar, 2008). The project was actually worked on over a period of 18 months, and the network deemed it enough of a success to produce a follow-up sequel which they aired in 2009 (Sklar, 2008). Luttermoser (2008), assistant arts and entertainment director for Cleveland's Plain Dealer newspaper, praised the effort, exclaiming that the documentary "does provide a tremendous forum for a discussion that moves beyond statistics, stereotypes and misconceptions. It does examine some popularly held beliefs, explaining some and exploding others" (para. 5). He also states, "'Black in America' dares you to care by introducing you to a wide range of people and viewpoints" (para. 11). On the other hand, Wingfield (2008), an assistant professor sociology professor at Georgia State, criticized the special for failing to showcase any Black individuals within the LGBT community and giving very little focus to issues specific to Black women. She also pointed out how the documentary perpetuates the stereotypical narrative that Blacks perceive success in school as "acting white," despite a lack of empirical data in support of this theoretical phenomenon.

Another significant finding that Coleman and Thorson (2002) uncovered in the results of their newspaper study was that the stories which had contextual public health information embedded in them were more negatively judged by participants than the control condition

articles which didn't include this broader set of data. While they declined to speculate on the

reasons behind this story rating disparity, it does highlight a concern that perhaps both television

executives and civic-minded advocates would share. If utilizing a more context-focused model in

their stories negatively impacts viewership, what would be the motivation of media executives

and producers to incorporate it? Clearly, making content engaging and compelling for viewers is

an understandable and reasonable goal. At the same time, it is important to ensure that the

entertainment factor does not compromise the journalistic integrity of the piece.

Learning to Laugh and Laughing to Learn

The dilemma of balancing entertainment and substance leads us to another alternative

mainstream media model that has demonstrated promise and incredible success in recent years,

proving that perhaps mixing entertainment with news is not always a bad thing. *The Daily Show*

with John Stewart, along with its sister spin-off, *The Colbert Report*, have not only become pop

phenomena, but they have also fundamentally changed the way many young people politically

inform themselves, as well as the way they perceive and analyze mainstream media (Klemplay,

2006). Klempay (2006), a student journalist for Ohio State's student paper, refers to these shows

as "infotainment" and he calls this new trend in news media "the defining political movement of

our generation" (para. 7). In fact, in the past several years, *The Daily Show* has peaked the

interest of researchers across many fields, ranging from political communications to education.

Entertaining stimuli and valuable knowledge about the surrounding world are both

common psychological needs (Katz, Gurevitch, & Haas, 1973). Media Dependency Theory

proposes that people become increasingly dependent on media as it exclusively meets more of

their needs. According to this theory, people also become more dependent on media during times

of social instability, ambiguity, or escalated conflict. In the midst of these uncertain periods,

media can help anchor people, allowing them to reevaluate their personal situations and beliefs

so that they can confidently make new choices (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). National

presidential elections are a perfect example of such a transitional period.

Fox, Koloen, and Sahin (2007) conducted a study to compare the substance present in *The

Daily Show* with traditional evening news programs. Using Media Dependency Theory, their

article asks the question whether *The Daily Show* can fulfill the political information needs of

young voters as or more effectively than traditional broadcast network news coverage can. To

answer this question, they separately analyzed the video and audio of the coverage of the first

presidential debate of 2004, as well as the 2004 Democratic and Republican conventions to

determine how much emphasis there was on hype or humor as opposed to substance. The results

surprisingly showed no significant difference in substance among any of the shows. However,

the authors concluded that *The Daily Show* might actually be more informative than traditional

newscasts. Referring to various surveys and research in the literature, they suggest that *The Daily

Show* viewers were more politically informed and that positive messaging combined with humor

could cognitively enhance memory and processing of information presented during the show.

Trier (2008) also discusses how *The Daily Show* uses humor to effectively critique the

mainstream media, while simultaneously educating viewers about media literacy and critical

thinking. Meanwhile, Baym (2005) argues, "The show uses techniques drawn from genres of

news, comedy, and television to revive a journalism of critical inquiry and advance a model of

deliberative democracy" (p. 259).

Despite the widespread enthusiasm for these shows and this fresh, new model of TV

journalism, Klemplay (2006) remains wary of a general shift toward infotainment. As much as

he himself praises Stewart and Colbert, he believes that their shows are rather unique in terms of

the amount of substance and critical thinking that they squeeze in between the comedy. He is

concerned that cheap knockoffs will soon flood the airwaves, and through the dissemination of

these copycat shows, the legitimate substance will eventually become diminished, leaving this

new brand of educational infotainment in the same problematic state as the rest of the

mainstream media.

Another potential issue is that many consider these shows to have a liberal bent (Smolkin,

2007). After all, Colbert's show is centrally based around parodying *The O'Reilly Factor*, a

blatantly partisan, Republican-leaning program on Fox News. Stewart has famously feuded with

FNC for years and, in return, FNC loves to paint Stewart and his show as Democratic

propaganda (Berr, 2010). Viewers who identify with FNC may very well take Stewart's attacks

on their preferred news source personally. This alienation is unfortunate because it means that

conservative leaning viewers may not get the opportunity to equally benefit from the valuable

media literacy lessons that these shows teach.

In Rachel Smolkin's (2007) article, "What the Mainstream Media Can Learn From Jon

Stewart," she examines the role that *The Daily Show's* truly plays in news media and political

culture. She suggests that people obsess too much over the comedy aspects of the show and

whether Stewart and his ensemble cast practice true journalism or not. Smolkin concludes that

the true value of this show is its ability to expose hypocrisy, both in politics and the rest of the

mainstream media. She claims the show reveals the absurdity of "balance," as journalists

perceive it today, and it clearly illustrates how propagandists have learned to exploit this concept

of balance, in order to obscure the truth and confuse the public. Smolkin believes that *The Daily*

Show effectively calls out journalists to become more courageous and deliver the news in a

straight and direct manner, rather than allowing the journalistic standard of balance to trump other journalistic standards, such as accuracy and truth.

Conclusion

Lippman states, "The analyst of public opinion must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the human picture of that scene, and the human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action" (Lippman, 1922/2010, p. 15). In this paper, I have explored that triangular relationship in terms of the way mainstream media narratives on television depict reality and how these portrayals cause viewers to behaviorally respond within their own social environments and communities. I have illustrated how corporate interests and consolidation of mainstream media create many challenges for democracy and deliberation by focusing more on keeping people entertained than informed. I have also examined how television news media can often be detrimental to a participatory, cohesive community, as it divides and isolates citizens into disparate groups through narratives that are based on stereotypes, overly focused on violence, and designed to encourage a sports-like mentality of political partisanship. Despite these negative effects and challenges, however, there are legitimate opportunities for alternative television news media models to emerge. Such models may help to better serve the collective public sphere and strengthen our democracy as opposed to threatening it. The two alternatives that I discuss in this paper, the Public Health model and the Stewart/Colbert Infotainment model, both show considerable potential in these respects.

In truth, the Internet revolution has changed the news media landscape considerably by enabling many-to-many communications and providing more potential for ad-hoc interaction (Shirky, 2009). These new technologies offer average citizens an unprecedented opportunity to

disseminate new narratives that challenge the hegemonic, stereotyped ones peddled by television networks (Goldfarb, 2006). At the same time, television is not going away anytime soon and many of the problems that exist today in mainstream television news will likely bleed over to the Internet as these two mediums gradually converge. Regardless, Americans have clearly lost a lot of faith in mainstream journalism (Morris, 2007). While Fox News and other entities can exploit and profit from this hostile media effect that Morris discusses for a while, such cynicism can only be pushed so far. Pandering, propaganda, and division do take their toll on a society. Morris claims, "Skepticism toward the media has intensified to unhealthy levels" (p. 708). I, however, disagree. I think that such raw skepticism towards news media is the first step toward a critical thinking mind. Perhaps, now, with the right combination of ad hoc communication tools and media literacy strategies, this brewing populist anger in America might be positively redirected toward pressuring television networks to offer higher quality news programming. With the younger generations leading the way, *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* prove that even corporate media giants, such as Viacom, will ultimately respond to market demands for smart, informative, educational, and engaging shows. As media psychologists, it is up to us to clearly define our role in this struggle.

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