The death of Diana: an Australian news diffusion study

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Abstract

News of Princess Diana's death was diffused rapidly through the population of Brisbane, with interpersonal communication playing a major role. Support was found for Riffe and Stovall's "emotional response" hypothesis: those most emotionally affected by the news (women rather than men) were more likely to communicate the news to others.

Introduction

The tragic and unexpected death of Princess Diana was communicated rapidly around the world by a combination of mass media and interpersonal communication. It was to be one of those seminal events, like the assassination of President John Kennedy, where people were to recall for the rest of their lives what they were doing when they heard the news. And as with the Kennedy assassination, heightened interest in the news was a global phenomenon.

Diana, her companion Dodi Fayed and driver Henri Paul were killed in Paris in the early hours of Sunday, 31 August 1997. With the events occurring overnight, most people in Europe and Africa first had access to the news as they awoke on Sunday morning. In the Americas, news of the accident was broadcast on Saturday evening.

In Australia, as well as in much of Asia, it was Sunday morning when the fatal crash occurred. First news of the accident was broadcast in Australia's eastern states in mid-morning, while news of Diana's death was broadcast in the early afternoon. The news was generally known to Australians, New Zealanders, Pacific Island residents and east Asians before Europeans and Africans, who woke to announcements of Diana's death.

The enormous outpouring of grief at the death of the 36-year-old princess and the saturation media coverage of her death and funeral over the following week and beyond indicated the importance of these events to media and public. University of Maryland Journalism Dean Reese Cleghorn (1997:4) called it "the biggest media event in history". Phillip Knightley quotes the finding of the press clippings agency, Durrants, that "the coverage of the death and funeral in the world's newspapers and magazines by far exceeded that generated by any other event, anywhere in the world, at any time in history" (Knightley 1998: 17). With 79 per cent of all viewers in Sydney, Diana's funeral was the most watched event ever on Australian television (while, ironically, the second-most watched event, with 75 per cent, was Diana's wedding in 1981) (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May 2000).

In the aftermath of a major media event research can help add to our understanding of the nature of news, including the role of people in receiving and communicating news. In this study, diffusion of news of Diana's death is studied through a survey of Brisbane people the weekend after the fatal accident.

News diffusion theory

The study of how people heard and communicated the news of Diana's accidental death is within the tradition of research into diffusion of news, which is itself a subset of communication research into information diffusion processes in general (Rosengren 1987a,b).

Much research has been undertaken on the diffusion of news — or, as sociologist Charles Wright put it, "how news gets around" (Wright 1986). The research, with a tradition of more than 50 years (De Fleur 1987), has mainly been conducted in the United States, although a collection of European studies was published by the *European Journal of Communication* in 1987.

A great deal of research has focused on which media are most effective in communicating news. As one would expect, the timing of news events affects the role of different media in communicating the news (Rosengren 1987b). For news which breaks in the late afternoon or early evening, television has a dominant role, while radio is more important for overnight developments or for events occurring during the day (within the same time zone). Newspapers have a more important news breaking role for events occurring in the late evening or very early morning.

The more important a news event, the more quickly it will be diffused throughout the population. For example, Greenberg (1964) found that 90 per cent of people knew of the Kennedy assassination within an hour of the shooting. The rate of diffusion of a news event can generally be represented

graphically with an S-shaped curve, indicating a rapid increase in diffusion of the news followed by a gradual flattening out (see, for example, Weibull, Lindahl and Rosengren 1987).

Another important finding has been that the more 'major' or significant a news event, the more likely it is to be communicated interpersonally rather than directly via the media. According to Greenberg (1964:494), "[w]hen a news event is of near-epic or crisis proportions, interpersonal channels of communication are as important as the mass media in disseminating initial information".

Thus, those who first become aware of a major event (normally through the media) tend to pass the news on to other people. In the case of the Kennedy assassination, for example, 50 per cent of people in California first heard about the shooting from another person (Greenberg 1964). Stories which have an immediate and overwhelming impact on people are likely to be passed on by word-of-mouth. Such a finding is associated with the "two-step flow" theory of communication developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld, and the concept of "opinion leaders" (Katz 1957).

Indeed it can be argued that a test of the importance or significance of a news event is the extent to which it is communicated interpersonally rather than through mass media (Greenberg 1964; Basil & Brown 1994). As an example, while 28 percent of Swedes heard about the 1986 assassination of their prime minister, Olof Palme, from another person (Weibull, Lindahl and Rosengren 1987), the percentage who heard about the same event interpersonally in six other countries varied between seven and zero (Kepplinger, Levendel, Livolsi & Wober 1987; Gantz & Tokinoya 1987).

Other variables are in play, of course. Riffe and Stovall (1989) found that people's emotional response to a particular event (the Challenger space shuttle disaster) was related to their tendency to communicate the news to others and to seek more information from the media. Basil and Brown (1994) identified the role of the importance an event to individuals in determining whether they passed the information on. Kubey and Peluso (1990:90) reported research that "1) social contact is among the most common ways of coping with stressful events and 2) people often use the media to alleviate stress and uncertainty".

Little Australian research has been undertaken on news diffusion, although it seems unlikely that Australian news processing habits are different from those which have been identified in the United States, Europe and elsewhere. My own earlier research (Henningham 1978) showed that the significance of an event was likely to be related to the extent of interpersonal transmission (with news of prime minister Gough Whitlam's dismissal from office in 1975 communicated interpersonally by 44 per cent of people). Television and radio

were dominant as news breaking media depending on the time of day: thus late afternoon breaking of the news of former prime minister Robert Menzies' death was "scooped" by television, while radio was dominant in communicating first news of rock singer Elvis Presley's death, which reached Australia overnight.

Aims

The primary aim of this research was to study the way in which news of Princess Diana's death was communicated to and by people in Brisbane. In addition, given the dominance of Diana as a subject in women's magazines, attention was given to male-female differences in diffusion of the news. Finally, the opportunity was used to test the finding of Riffe and Stovall's (1989) that emotional involvement with the events diffused is related to involvement in interpersonal communication.

Method

The accident which took Princess Diana's life occurred in Paris at about 12.30am on Sunday, 31 August — 9.30am, eastern Australian time. First news reports of the accident reached Australia shortly before 10am, while first reports of Diana's death were received at 1.20pm.

The diffusion study was conducted in Brisbane on Saturday, 6 and Sunday, 7 September, 1997, the weekend immediately after the accident. Interviews were conducted by telephone with 208 people whose names were drawn at random from the Brisbane telephone book, which covers the metropolitan area and adjoining local government areas.

The sample were a reasonable representation of the Brisbane population on the basis of demographic factors: 48 per cent were male and 52 per cent female; 39 per cent were in their 20s or teens, 24 per cent in their 30s, 14 per cent in their 40s, 10 per cent in their 50s, eight per cent in their 60s, and six per cent in their 70s or older. Fifty-four per cent were in white collar occupations (or members of families where the chief breadwinner was in a white collar occupation), while 46 per cent were in blue collar occupations; 37 per cent had had a tertiary education, while 23 per cent had had no education beyond junior secondary school.

Results

It was found that people had an overwhelming desire to tell others about Diana's death. People told family members and neighbours, while phone lines

carried increased traffic as people telephoned their loved ones. Some people rang relatives living thousands of kilometres away. Those who were most upset by Diana's death were most likely to want to tell others.

The same phenomenon was recorded after the assassination of President Kennedy, where the research showed that vast numbers of people in the US telephoned their spouses to discuss the killing. In this way they shared their grief and at a time of national turmoil sought assurances about the safety of those closest to them (Kubey & Peluso 1990).

The dominant medium for the news of Princess Diana's death was television: 40 per cent of those surveyed first heard the news from TV. A total of 29 per cent heard about her death from another person, while 28 per cent heard of it on radio (almost half of them while in their car).

Table 1: Source of information for news about Diana's death

(n=208)	
Television	39.9%
Radio	28.4%
Other person	29.3%
Newspaper	1.4%
Other	1.0%

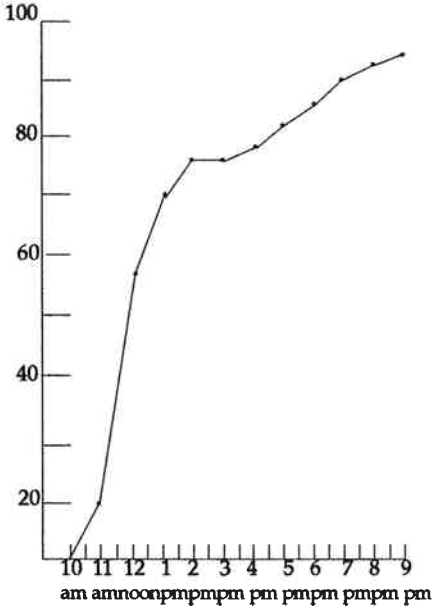
The proportion of people watching television on a Sunday morning seemed high. However it is important to note that 57 per cent of people had already heard about the accident, and many were tuning in for more news. Two-thirds (64%) of those who had heard about the accident actively sought out more information from the broadcast media.

Of those who had not already heard about the accident, 40 per cent were told about Diana's death by another person. In the context of the 50 per cent who heard about the Kennedy assassination from another person (Greenberg 1964), this figure indicates the major impact of the Princess of Wales' death on !people in general. Of the "other person" who communicated the news, 50 per cent were family members, while 37 per cent were friends. Of the total, 23 per cent heard first reports that there had been an accident on television, 20 per cent from radio, and 14 per cent from another person.

The spread of news about Diana's death did not quite follow the "S-curve" discovered in earlier diffusion research, where after a slow start there is a rapid rise in the number of people becoming aware of the news, with a final flattening out as "stragglers" come to hear the story. In this case, the curve was quite steep from the start, as people picked up the news from broadcast media in

mid-morning (Figure 1). A total of 66 per cent had heard the news within three hours. Some who had been out all day and away from broadcast media did not hear the news until mid-evening.

Figure 1: Rate of diffusion of news of Diana's death



Interactions with others

About 89 per cent of people said they talked about Diana's death with others on the Sunday and Monday after the accident. Seventy-seven per cent talked about Diana with family, 76 per cent with friends, 59 per cent with workmates, 46 per cent with acquaintances, 19 per cent with clients or customers and 19 per cent with strangers.

Discussions with others were fuelled by the news media. Most people sought more news from the media about Diana's death and its aftermath, with 69 per cent turning to newspapers, 94 per cent to television, 52 per cent to radio and 23 per cent to magazines.

Gender differences in responses to Diana's death

On the evidence of women's magazines, Diana had been an icon for women around the world: the combination of royalty, youth, glamour, a complex personal life and media pursuit had made the Princess of Wales a regular cover story in the magazines. (The different treatment of Diana by women's and men's magazines has been highlighted by Ring (1997).) Tragically, evidence has recently emerged that the suicide rate among young women increased in Britain by 17 per cent in the month after Diana's death (*Courier-Mail*, 30 October, 2000).

In the Brisbane survey it was found that women were far more likely than men to indicate that they were "supporters" of Diana. Asked whether they would characterise themselves as having been "fans" of Diana, neutral to her, or critics, almost twice as many women as men — 73 percent compared with 38 percent — said they were fans (Table 2). Hence it was considered important to look closely at differences between men and women in their reactions to news of Diana's death and in their media use.

Table 2: Male-female differences in general attitude to Diana

	Male (n = 96)	Female (n = 103)
Fan/supporter	38%	73%
Neutral	59%	26%
Critic	3%	1%

Question: Before the accident, would you say you were a "fan" or supporter of Diana, or were you more critical of her?

Women were more likely to have heard the news interpersonally than were men (31% to 25%). Their source of the news (if told by another person) was most likely to be a friend (52%), while of men who were told by another person, 57 per cent heard the news from a family member. (For women, 38 per cent heard from a family member, while for men, 26 per cent heard from a friend.) This suggests that women who heard the news through the media tended to pass it on to women friends.

Women were far more likely than men (85% to 46%) to seek more information from the media about the accident: almost all those women who heard about the accident turned to the media for more information. Eighty-four per cent of women watched television coverage of Diana's funeral, compared with 60 per cent of men.

Men and women were equally likely to say they had passed on news about the accident to other people: 49 per cent of both sexes told other people. (In many cases, of course, people were passing on the news to those who had already heard it.)

Women told a greater number of people, however. While 45 per cent of males told one person the news, 45 per cent of women told three or more people. About one person in six — of men and women — telephoned other people to tell them about Diana.

Most people had discussions with others about the news at some stage during the day of the accident, but women were more inclined to do so: 95 per cent compared with 81 per cent of men.

In the week that followed, the tendency for both sexes was to talk to many people about the accident; again, women talked to more people. Women spoke to a median of 10 people, compared with a median of six on the part of men. Some 27 per cent of women spoke to at least 20 people, compared with 17 per cent of men.

When asked the type of people they talked to about the fatality, further gender-based differences were revealed, with women more inclined than men to talk about the news with friends, acquaintances and strangers (Table 3).

Table 3: People with whom accident discussed, by gender

	Male (n = 74)	Female (n = 99)
Family	75%	78%
Friends	66%	83%
Workmates	62%	54%
Acquaintances	37%	53%
Customers/clients	18%	20%
Strangers	15%	24%

Emotional response

Riffe and Stovall's (1989) finding that emotional response is related to the tendency of people to pass on news was tested with the Australian sample. People were asked two questions tapping their emotional response: (1) how upset were they by the news ("very upset", "quite upset" or "not really upset") and (2) did they weep at the news? Given that the shedding of tears by adults has been socially conditioned as a female rather than a male response, the latter question was not expected to be an ideal index of emotional response; nevertheless, it yielded comparisons worth reporting.

Of the sample, 31 per cent said they were "very upset" by the news, 41 per cent were "quite upset", and 28 per cent were "not really upset", while 29 per cent said they wept.

Table 4: News communication behaviour, by level of upset

	Tell others about the news	Discuss news with others
Very upset (n = 63)	56%	97%
Quite upset (n = 84)	54%	94%
Not really upset (n = 56)	34%	73%
Wept (n = 60)	68%	100%
Didn't weep (n = 147)	41%	84%

Of those who said they were very upset by the news, 56 per cent told other people about the events (Table 4). The percentage was similar for those whose reaction was "quite upset" (54%). By contrast, of those who indicated that they were not really upset, 34 per cent passed the news on to others. More than two-thirds of those who shed tears at Diana's death passed the news on to others, and every one of those who wept reported that they discussed the news with others.

People who were very upset passed on news about Diana to a median of three other people. The "quite upset" group passed the news on to a median of two, while those who were not really upset told a median of one other person. The "very" and "quite" upset groups discussed the accident with a median of 10 other people, compared to a median of five people with whom the not upset group discussed the events.

Of those who wept, 68 per cent passed on the news to others, compared with 41 per cent of those who didn't weep.

Most people of all emotional dispositions were inclined to discuss the Diana story with others. But of those who were upset, almost everyone discussed the story (97% of the very upset group, and 94% of those who were quite upset), compared with 73 per cent of the "not upset" group. Similarly, those who were upset talked about the story with a median of 10 people each, compared with five people each on the part of the not upset group. Hence this study confirms the US finding that emotional response is related to a desire to pass on news.

For this event, level of emotional involvement is clearly related to gender. Women were far more likely than men to be upset or to weep at the death of Diana (Table 5). Age was also a factor, with older people tending to be more upset than younger people.

Table 5: Level of upset at Diana's death, by sex

	Men (n = 96)	Women (n = 104)
Very upset	18%	43%
Quite upset	40%	44%
Not really upset	42%	14%
Wept	10%	44%
Didn't weep	90%	56%

Conclusions

News of Princess Diana's death had a major impact on people in Brisbane. The news was diffused rapidly, with two-thirds of the sample aware of it within three hours of initial reports of the accident. Interpersonal communication of the news was at a high level, while most people sought further information from the media and were anxious to discuss the news with others. Women were more likely to be emotionally affected by the news and to pass it on to other people, particularly family, friends and acquaintances.

This study confirms the "emotional response" hypothesis of Riffe and Stovall (1989). Those people (more often than not, women) who were personally more affected by Princess Diana's death were more likely to communicate the news to other people.

These findings help to broaden our understanding of the processes involved in people's reactions to major news. Clearly the people to whom news is directed are far from being passive recipients of the information: they are stimulated to act upon the news in some way. How they respond is also related to the importance in their lives of the people at the centre of the news.

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