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Viewers' Reactions to Ordinary People in Television News Events

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Viewers' Reactions to Ordinary People

in Television News Events

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Acknowledgements

To Doug for being a flexible leader

To Frank for being a friend and motivator

To Terry for being the epitome of patience.

To Tom, my husband, who is the best supporter I know of women and opportunity.

Thank you.

Abstract

Viewers' Reactions to Ordinary People in Television News Events
examines two hypotheses relating to respondents' reactions to
viewing violent events or the likelihood of violent death as
portrayed on the major news networks. Research centers on
reactions of viewers to ordinary people caught in extraordinary
news events. Results of two free-flow written exercises are
discussed.

Research excludes reactions to viewing those in the news,
such as police personnel, soldiers etc., whose lives might be
expected to be involved in violent or dangerous events.

Preface

<u>Viewers' Reactions to Ordinary People in Television News Events</u> is
not intended to be a paper about terrorism. The content often
seems precipitated by terrorist events. This is the result of
event rather than intention; 1985-1986 does seem to be the year
terrorism penetrated American consciousness. Other catastrophic
events include the volcanic eruptions in Columbia, the major
earthquake in Mexico City, and the explosion of the Space Shuttle
<u>Challenger</u>. In all instances, ordinary people, and their
families, have been caught in an extraordinary television news
event.

Viewers' Reactions to Ordinary People in Television News Events

Violence in television has risen more than one hundred percent (100%) since 1980 according to a recent commentary written by Senator Paul Simon (D./IL). In response to the increase in violence shown on television, the Senator will soon introduce a bill which will require a ten second warning to parents (Simon, 1985). The particulars of the bill are not available, but one is left to speculate how the major news networks will address such legislation in their handling of the evening news. How violence should be presented to the viewing audience is very much a matter of current concern. Professor George Gerbner of the University of Pennsylvania (Bruce, 1983 citing Gerbner) believes television to be the 'flag ship of electronic communication was [is] so set in its 'centralized ritual' that there was [is] no prospect of any significant amendment to its role in the foreseeable future.' The impact from viewing will solder those sensitivities that we as individuals and as a nation bring in reactions to the messages with which we must deal.

From a perceptual standpoint television violence can be divided into three categories:

1. Television violence in fictionalized situations

2. Television in a war/expected reality

3. Television violence in an ordinary/everyday reality.

Virtually every incidence of televised violence can be codified in one of these three modes. Each is unique and each poses its own set of dilemmas for television decision makers.

Television violence in a fictionalized setting has been the subject of ongoing research since at least 1952. Early impetus was given to the study of television violence and children by a column written by Jack Mabley (Coleman, 1978) in the Chicago Daily News. He noted that his wife and her friends kept track of the number of violent acts viewed by children on Saturday morning and tallied over two hundred incidences. This tally led to hearings by the Chicago City Council where the matter stopped.

Two subsequent groups brought pressure to bear on the amount of violence shown on television: the church and the Parent-Teachers Association (PTA). The Surgeon General at the urging of Senator John O. Pastore (D./RI), Chairman of the Senate Communications subcommittee, commissioned a series of studies which culminated in the U.S. Surgeon General's report on Television Violence. The report issued a strongly worded statement that, "television violence, indeed, does have an adverse effect on certain members of our society."

Professor Gerbner, at the University of Pennsylvania has spent his academic career studying and documenting the nature of

violent programming on television. The <u>Violence Index and Profile</u>
(Gerbner, et al., 1977) has evolved from this research. The <u>Index</u>
is composed of a set of seventy-one (71) tables used to tabulate
the various incidences of violent acts. Gerbner explains the
weighting and components in a rebuttal article to a CBS attack
(Owen, 1972 internal paper cited by Gerbner, 1977,) on the
<u>Violence Index</u>.

What are these weightings and components? The Violence Index
is composed of (1) the percent of programs containing any
violence, plus (2) the rate of violent episodes per program,
plus (3) the rate of violent episodes per hour, plus (4) the
percent of major characters involved in any violence, plus
(5) the percent of major characters involved in any killing.
Each of these measures has a specifically defined meaning and
function in our analysis. The *only* "weighting" is that we
double two rates (2 and 3) in order to raise the low
numerical values of these ratios to the level of importance
that we believe the concepts of the frequency and program
saturation of violent incidents deserve when combined with
the other numbers which, being percentages, typically have
much higher numerical value. No one is forced to agree with
or follow that simple assumption. The individual components
for all years are included in our reports and are available

for any combination. (p. 300)

As a result of growing pressure from church and P.T.A. groups, advertisers whose products were threatened with boycott and Congress via the U.S. Surgeon General's Report, television networks designated 7:00 - 9:00 p.m. as Family Hour in 1973. The move to the "family hour" concept was led by CBS.

Gerbner (1977) found that the policy had a profound effect on the incidences of violence, but by 1977 CBS had undergone a subtle change in network policy and had lifted its lid on violent acts during family viewing time.

Let us look at the individual components of the "family hour" Index for 1973, 74, 75, and 76.

Percent of fall season CBS family hour programs containing any violence: 50, 50, 27, 63. Percent of hours containing violence: 60, 56, 31, 60. Rate of violent episodes per program: 4.4, 3.1, 1.8, 1.4. Rate of violent episodes per hour: 5.9, 3.9, 3.1, 2.2. Percent of leading characters involved in any violence: 43, 29, 23, 32. Percent of leading characters involved in killing: 13, 7, 0, 0. It is clear as we report, that while the number and rate of "family hour" violent incidents declined, and killing by or of leading characters was eliminated, the percent of programs

with violence and characters involved in some violence has

increased, making the overall "family hour" Index 127 in

1973, 100 in 1974, 60 in 1975 and 101 in 1976. (The

corresponding Index numbers for *all* CBS drama were 174, 174,

154 and 181.) The factors that determine these movements are

clearly not our measures but network policy and its

application by the network's department of Standards and

Practices. If next season's program mix shows a policy of

replacing the "lid" on more or all aspects of violence, we

shall be pleased to report it. (p. 301)

The critical findings, as an upshot of vast amounts of

quantitative research, amount to four points on which there seems

to be general agreement.

    1. There is some indication that viewing violence increases

aggressive behavior.

    2. This relationship is found only in some environmental

contexts.

    3. This relationship seems to be causal only for some

children.

    4. Quantitative research alone is not sufficient for

analysis, understanding and application.

    Linné (1977) noted three main questions: the type of

violence, the effects produced, who will be influenced. She finds

research supports a difference between what is perceived as justified or unjustified violence. Professor Berkowitz (Meyer) negates the catharsis hypothesis and notes that a frustrated child is likely to become aggressive after watching entertaining violence. The U.S. Surgeon General's report supports that "the most responsive to television violence are those who are highly aggressive to start with..."

Another major outgrowth of television violence research was the development of content analysis; although clearly, quantitative research is valuable. The data collected notes the number of television sets, how many are on at a given time; who watches what for how long; what is the statistical profile of the viewer. The Finish Minister of Science and Culture noted that (Gerbner citing Bruce, 1977) 'the knowledge that television violence is harmful has not stopped the production of violent television.'

The totality of the message seems the essential aspect to address. Gerbner's Cultural Indicators have shown that the impact of television violence cannot be judged on the basis of a single message but must be evaluated on the impact of message consumption. He found, for example, that people who watch a lot of television in America are more apt to be fearful of going out, denote more incidences of crime, and call for more law and order.

Gerbner noted that a vast consumption of certain messages can lead to:

1. wrong concepts

2. wrong norms

3. wrong values

In fictionalized violence, control is relatively simple to envision. Control over fictionalized violence can be gained by the pressures of the market place. Control can be gained by the sensitivity of the creative artists and producers. It can be gained by control of the set by vigilant parents. Control could even include early warnings for violent programming. There are a number of methods of violence intervention. While intervention is a possible course of action in the entertainment field, it is a different situation when the program content is a news event.

The [evening] news has not always been the premier program it is today. In 1936 CBS allocated only about thirty minutes per day to radio news coverage. When television began to develop as a medium, Douglas Edwards was tapped for newscaster because he could think quickly and looked pleasant. (The term anchorman had not yet been created.) Matusow (1983) relates that television news coverage was given so little credence Edward R. Murrow and his band of intelligentia did not want to be saddled with it.

Murrow felt many stories were not appropriate for television.

'What seemed to concern television isn't the horror of the atom bomb,...but the unique picture it makes'. (p. 49) The impact of the visual, the verbal, and their cumulative effect is a fertile field for academic research.

Violence and the evening news is indeed a valid topic for continuing research. From a viewer's perspective one may note that violence can be seen from two vantage points. One perspective is that of viewing those who are culturally expected to encounter violence: soldiers, police officers, Central Intelligence Agents, et al. Violence is or may be a natural consequence of their endeavors. Another perspective is that of encountering an ordinary citizen [one like you or me] caught up in a news event fraught with the potential for violence or death: a beserk person in a mall or McDonalds, a terrorist takeover of a plane or ship, a natural catastrophe such as a flood or volcanic eruption. All involve ordinary people seized in the moments of extraordinary events.

Of the two perspectives most awareness has centered on the effects of war footage; most of that cognizance was derived from the vast quantities of footage given to the Vietnam war, primarily on evening news coverage. Almost an entire generation grew up with war footage and the evening meal at 6:00 p.m. Two brief incidences epitomize the worse of Vietnam coverage: The Loan

execution and the Don Webster narrative. Both are extremely violent, and both pose extreme ethical questions for television news personnel.

The Loan execution clearly showed General Loan raise his gun to the head of a soldier accused of desertion and squeeze the trigger. Adams and Schreibman (1978) give a thorough account of the incident.

Another incident cited by Meyer (1971) illustrates the moral/ethical dilemma of the news-gathering organization

Background

On November 3, 1969, CBS News broadcast a newsfilm report from South Vietnam narrated by CBS correspondent Don Webster. The film showed a South Vietnamese unit of 200 soldiers and six American advisers on a mission in an area occupied by North Vietnamese soldiers. After a brief encounter with the enemy, the South Vietnamese discovered a wounded North Vietnamese soldier. Then, in what Webster described as 'one of those atrocities which occurs from time to time in war,' a South Vietnamese soldier executed the helpless prisoner by stabbing him with a long knife. The film was cut as the knife entered the prisoner's chest, but Webster added that the dead man's body was 'slit open'. (p. 277)

Meyer's research centers on the effect of the broadcaster's description on viewers and would be of value to anyone interested in news management. The research does not, however, directly address the hypothesis posed in this study. In fact, the amazing aspect of Vietnam coverage is the lack of qualitative research. A major electronic search through ERIC, Dialogue and Dissertations International netted only two articles, neither of which dealt with the Vietnam war. It seems that it is not until the 1970's that research related to the effects of viewing television violence examines impact/effect on viewers regarding news coverage. Major qualitative research is virtually void. This is perhaps a limitation of academic research technique development in the field of qualitative research during this time.

It is not until terrorism in Israel (Nossek, 1979) reached a high level that serious attention was directed at the effects of news footage on viewers' reactions. [An interesting set of essays may be found in On Terrorism and Combating Terrorism edited by Ariel Merari, 1985. It is an editing of the proceedings of an International Seminar on Terrorism held in Tel-Aviv in 1979.]

For all practical purposes the ordinary viewer has been essentially ignored by major research efforts. As quantitative methodology is modified, as qualitative methodology is refined, and as the two methods become mutually constructive, the nature of

impact/effect research will be enhanced. A new and fertile field for academic inquiry will be/is emerging.

The events in world news from July 1985 - July 1986 make it paramount that we as a society and as a news consuming population develop an understanding of the impact of news upon us. The dates themselves are not as arbitrary as they may initially appear. Within that year period, major news events occurred which with the increasing sophistication of electronic communication focused world attention upon persons caught in these events as never before in history.

"I think (Schultz, 1985) it takes a while for a society like ours to register a problem and take it in - take it into your gut as well as your head." Secretary of State Schultz was speaking to the Achille Lauro incident; numerous events in 1985 alone thrust the ordinary citizen into world television news.

-TWA Flight 847

-Earthquake in Mexico City

-Volcanic Eruptions in Columbia

-Air crash at Dallas

-Achille Lauro Takeover

-Malta Flight

-Mall Sniping/ 3 dead

All of these events have common elements 1) all made major

network news, 2) all involved violence, 3) all involved ordinary
people caught in an event over which they had virtually no
control, 4) in all, television played a major role in acquainting
the world with the particulars of the event. In all events
television coverage was swift, intense, and personal.

The Achille Lauro incident serves as graphic evidence that the
ordinary citizen may become embroiled in a television world event
quite by accident. On the fifth day of the cruise, the ship had
755 passengers. Among the group were eleven friends, including
Marilyn and Leon Klinghoffer. The ship was taken over on Monday,
seemingly on an almost unintentional basis by Palestinian
terrorists. Klinghoffer, 69, confined to a wheel chair was
subsequently shot and thrown overboard. Here was an elderly
New Jersey hardware dealer, on a cruise with his wife and friends,
his children at home in the United States, suddenly shot in an
international incident (Time, 1985).

The widow, Marilyn Klinghoffer, at an emotional news
conference said:

> My husband is every man and my family is every family. For
> the first time we realize that this can happen to anyone. At
> a time, anywhere...It is essential that all of us become
> soldiers in the battle against terrorism. (Mid-Illinois
> Publishers, 1985)

Brian Jenkins, an expert on Crisis Management for the Rand
Corporation, speaking in the U.S. News and World Report (1985)
notes two chilling points. He notes that television offers
terrorists tactical advantage and that Americans are the number
one target. Every viewer can recall the television charade staged
by the captors of TWA Flight 847. Those who watch the news are
familiar with the conference by the emissary of the Archbishop of
Canterbury, Terry Waithe, negotiating for the release of four
Americans from their Lebonese Captors. Jenkins notes that:

> Terrorists write the scripts in which they and their hostages
> are the central figures and governments are forced to react.
> In the case of the Achille Lauro... they might have been
> tempted to prolong the episode had television coverage been
> present. (p. 27)

Through negotiations the terrorists were finally removed from
the Achille Lauro. Under Egyptian control the four were being
flown to a safe haven when the plane was forced to land in Sicily
by United States Navy interceptors.

Reactions were jubilant. Time magazine (1985) quoted
President Reagan: 'What we want is justice done...We did this all
by our little selves.' and U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Veliotes said,
'Leon Klinghoffer is dead...We insist they prosecute those sons of

bitches.' (p. 27)

'Thank God we finally won one.' exclaimed Democratic Senator
Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York.

'It's a glorious day in American history,' agreed Republican
Congressman Robert K. Dorman of California.

'We Got '"Em' shouted a headline in U.S.A. Today.

Kevin Kirby, 28, a Detroit garage attendant (Newsweek,
(1985), echoed countless Americans as he declared 'It's about
time. We needed to prove that we were not going to sit and take
it anymore'.

Noting the essential lack of academic research relating to
the reactions of ordinary citizens to either being caught up in
extraordinary incidences themselves or reacting to viewing of such
incidences is important. Perhaps this research is missing
because, fortunately, these experiences and the rapidity with
which they can now be covered via satellite and other
technological means are relatively new to us as a society.
Perhaps it does take some time to "take it into our guts" as
Secretary of State Schultz noted.

The research (Meyer) that does exist indicates that two
elements are crucial to viewers' perceptions: 1) Does the viewer
perceive the violence to be justified or unjustified? 2) How is
the event described by the news reporter?

...violence presented on media should be condemned only when it is presented for its own sake, when it exploits its audience and when its consequences are morally and socially indefensible. In its final analysis, the media cannot pretend that violence does not exist. Those who would prefer to avoid exposure to media portrayal of violence have the option to turn off the set... (Colman citing Stanley and Steinberg).

This attitude begs reality. People will watch television. Bruce (1983) contends that: "It was a middle class conceit to say 'turn it off' because those who could utter and mean such an instruction already had relatively rich lives". (p. 179)

Given that the majority of viewers will not turn off the set, what does the research indicate? Again, perceptions are affected by the viewer's sense of justice and the reporter's presentation of the event.

Linné (1977) cites French research regarding violence and the news. This group divided cases of violence into four types:

1. miscellaneous events such as crime and accidents

2. kidnapping

3. taking of hostages

4. riots and demonstrations

They found the strictest security needed to be maintained in

kidnapping incidences and that hostage taking tends to arouse
public indignation.

This same sense of justified and unjustified violence is
supported by Berkowitz that, "Angered people who view film
violence in a justified context will be significantly more
aggressive toward the instigator than people who view unjustified
film violence." It must be noted that this research involved
fictionalized events and did not address the ordinary person
viewing events relating to ordinary people. However, the
reactions noted by numerous sources following capture of <u>Achille</u>
<u>Lauro</u> hijackers substantiate the same reaction in real life.
Baran and Henke (1976) note that presentation of violence by the
directives of the television code is potentially harmful to the
viewer. "The viewer sees none of the agony and suffering. The
violence is presented unaccompanied by its real world negative
cues." (p. 30) Meyer found that apparently "viewing justified
violence reminds subjects that society condones violent behavior
toward ...those who 'ask for it'." (p. 284)

Since the viewer's perspective is colored by a sense of
justified or unjustified conditions, the manner in which the news
is reported becomes paramount. Linné (1977) noted that French
journalists, editors, and magistrates viewed it as sufficiently
crucial to recommend that only experienced newsmen be detailed to

situations in which the most important thing is the victims'
lives. Linné further noted that German broadcasting organizations
have set up crisis management teams which operate in close
association with the Federal Government. Joint decisions affect
what is to be shown when, and how.

The danger here, of course, is the recognition that
television is caught between being used as an instrument of groups
attempting to further their cause and being seen as a tool of
government. Vice President Agnew is probably the highest American
government official to ever attack the press so directly. "Are we
demanding enough of our news presentations?" began his attack on
network news in a speech given in Des Moines. Meyer notes that
Agnew was merely zeroing in on what research knows about the role
of the news reporter.

Meyer (citing Lang and Lang in a documented study conducted
in 1953) reiterates the findings of a live news event. Two
versions of a MacArthur Day parade were studied. Viewers'
perceptions of the parade were directly influenced by whether they
were in actual attendance at the parade or whether they heard a
reporter's description. Another experiment cited by Meyer
involved the same film described by two different reporters.
People seemed to accept the reporter's description as fact.

Given the vast amount of fertile material for research, the

vast influence that television news wields, and the implications of the data generated, it is little wonder that television research is an important area. Here to date most research has centered on fictional violence. As the incidences of ordinary citizens caught in extraordinary events rises, and there is every indication they will, a new and vastly important area of communication research will evolve.

This research will, in all likelihood, evolve from three broad categories of research already classified by Adams and Schriebman (1978): production research, content research, and effect research.

In any discussion of production research one must address the question - What is news? To whom is the information news? What is the relationship between the management and the news? simply put - Where does the accountability rest in the decision making process?

The answer to these questions can obviously be a source of discomfort to news personnel. In order to arrive at some measure of comfort, news people have developed the concept (myth?) of objectivity. They cultivate a sense of the impersonal to distance themselves from the content.

Consider for a moment the technique of shifting the scenes in news coverage. In less than a five minute span the viewer is

hustled from New York to Athens to Lebanon to Washington. The

viewer is led from a controlled news desk to the hustle of an

airport to the chaos of a battlefield to the hallowed halls of

Congress. All this is wrapped into a spot by button-down collared

news personnel. (The effect is to sanitize the dirtiness the

viewer has just seen.) The tone is objective, uninvolved. The

story selection has been made, and this is the news.

Donna Woolfolk Cross (1983) in her book Mediaspeaks tells the

following story (p. 57).

Recently one of my freshman college students remarked to

me, 'Well, you know you can't believe...anything the Russians

say.'

'What about us?' I asked the student. 'Can you believe

what we say?'

He looked shocked. 'Well, of course!' 'We're a free

country. We get to hear what's really going on.'

Production research analyzes the choices about what is "really

going on."

A second form of television research is content research. It

is difficult for content research to stand completely on its own

merit. Most content research is done to analyze two processes:

social science explanations or reform of the medium. Content

research does not analyze the effect of the programming or how it

was selected. Rather, its purpose is to determine how much

coverage was given and in what order it was given.

The research in this area seems to be undergoing some change

from quantitative to both quantitative and qualitative with the

growth of two sub-types: depiction and form research. "Depiction

research is directed toward how stories are covered in terms of

slant, depth, or form" (Adams and Schreibman, 1978, p. 20). Form

research attempts to look at types of news such as bad news,

aggressive news (Patterson and McClure, 1976).

The third form of television research is effect research.

This method seeks to "determine the political and social

consequences of network news broadcasts for individuals and

society" (Adams and Schreibman, 1978, p. 26). This type of

research may be divided into two categories: process and impact.

Process research seeks to define how media has impact. It

emphasizes interpersonal and psychological processes. There are a

number of theories related to this type of research including the

"two-step model" and uses and gratification theories.

Impact research, on the other hand, assumes the delivery of a

message and concentrates on the nature of the result of the

message. Research in this arena is psychologically and

qualitatively oriented.

Impact research may be both visual and verbal. Research may

be designed to test varying combinations. No paper would be complete without alluding to the classic case of impact research the so called "Loan execution" from the Vietnam war. The "Loan execution" is the epitomy of all questions which must be addressed in any study of death and the evening news.

The following research is designed to study the impact of viewing violent events or the likelihood of violent death on respondents who watch the major networks handling of this nightly ritual (Cater and Adler, 1974). A recent article in the Communication Quarterly (Spring, 1984, pp. 128-129) says it very succinctly:

1. The experience of emotion is a fundamental way of apprehending the world.

...

3. Emotional consciousness is an experience that transforms the world.

EXPERIMENT I

Hypotheses

Two hypotheses guided this research. The first hypothesis was generated largely by conversations about the major television networks' handling of the hostage crisis of June 14, 1985 with the

takeover of TWA Flight 847. The hypothesis was intended to test

for a predictable reaction to the viewing of violence as a portion

of network news. "Violence," in this study, refers to the

"purposive act of a person who inflicts harm, pain, injury, death,

etc. on another individual or group. This basic definition has

been used in nearly all previous studies of film..."(Meyer, p.

277.)

Hypothesis I: Given recogniton that television does

graphically display violent death, respondents will react

negatively to the showing of such events.

Despite the complexities of variables underlying the use of

mass media to communicate catastrophic events, the concept of

repugnance as a reaction to media violence would seem predictable

based on expected human reactions.

Hypothesis II: The respondents will identify a need for

families of victims to reconstruct the events of a violent family

death by watching it on television.

De Spelder and Strickland (1983) note in The Last Dance that,

"Many survivors of sudden, unexpected deaths want to reconstruct,

in as much detail as possible, the events surrounding the death as

a means of coping with their loss".(p. 23)

This reconstruction need was first noted as a reaction to an

extended newspaper article related to the sudden, violent death of

a young girl. A picture of the scene, including a picture of the mother learning of the death, was widely circulated. Despite public outrage at the publisher, the mother was reported to have found it comforting to be able to construct the reality of the event (De Spelder and Strickland).

The hypothesis theorizes that respondents would identify a family's "need to know" which would transfer to all forms of media.

The Sample

The instrument was administered using a free-flow written response asking respondents for reactions to two situations. The first situation asked for a personal reaction; the second situation asked for a perceptual reaction. The instrument was administered using four class groups with no pretense of selecting a randomized non-probability sample (N=45).

The respondents were chosen on the basis of accessibility. All respondents were students during the summer of 1985 at either Eastern Illinois University or Lake Land College. Both institutions derive their populations essentially from the Midwest and East Central Illinois in particular. No attempt was made to screen respondents other than on the basis of being a student.

Insert Table 1 about here

The instrument was administered during a time span from June 24 to July 11, 1985.

The Instrument

A two item free-flow writing exercise asking respondents to describe their reactions and perceptions was designed. An 8-1/2" x 11" sheet of paper was used leaving approximately ninety percent of the white space available for responses. Subjects were asked to describe two situations.

1. Describe your personal reactions to the presentation of violent death or the likelihood of violent death as portrayed by the major news networks.

2. Describe your perceptions of the effects on families of victims of violent death as shown by the major news networks.

Method

The research method - a phenomenological study - was based on the nature of the hypotheses. An analysis of two effects of watching the evening news portraying violent death was the impact under scrutiny. Since the nature of the study sought a descriptive reaction, it was felt that the investigation needed to give as little structure as possible to the respondents.

Procedure

1. Background reading, listening and viewing gave impetus to the initial reaction from the researcher.

2. Two hypotheses were generated.

3. An instrument was designed to test the hypotheses.

4. The instrument was administered giving a minimum of verbal cues and directions.

5. Responses were read with the researcher marking descriptive reactions.

6. Because the statements were open ended, a content coding scheme was devised based on reoccuring themes throughout the responses.

7. The hypotheses were tested.

8. Other results were noted.

Limitations

1. Very little demographic data was gathered relating to respondents since it was not the intent that either hypotheses test for variables based on age, sex, etc.

2. Since the researcher was working alone, coding did not undergo the scrutiny and validation of a second analysis.

Content Analysis

After the samples were completed, a coding system was devised. This system was based on reoccuring themes in writing. Word to word, key phrases, were used as codes where possible. A chart was organized on which to categorize the types of responses.

_____

Insert Table 2 about here

_____

*The term repugnant was selected to cover a multitude of adjectives, such as hate, sick, angry, shocked, etc.

Hypothesis I: Given a recognition that television does graphically display violent death, respondents will react negatively to showing of such events.

The hypothesis was verified. Respondents were found to react negatively to the graphic display of violent death shown on television. Fine levels of responses could be clearly identified.

1. Personally repugnant

2. Concern for callousness

3. Unnecessary to the extent

4. Repugnant but necessary

5. Doesn't affect me

Respondents gave a full range of reactions moving from ("It

makes me really sick.") to it doesn't affect me ("I can sit here
in my cozy little world and watch it.").

Two interesting sub-sets emerged from the data. The
respondents displayed ambivalent reactions to the role of the
television medium. There seemed to be an overwhelming feeling
that television exploited the situation to improve ratings. This
reaction, valid or not, is evident in the high number of
incidences in which respondents identified this feeling (N=23).
[As an aside, the Chicago Tribune of June 30, 1985 noted that,
"...Rather enjoyed his highest share of the ratings since January,
1984" during the Flight 847 hostage crisis.] However, when
similar categories are combined and tabulated, what to do about
the role of television in handling violent death shows an obvious
split in responses.

Examine the response alluding to the management of television
network news. Combine "Media is going its job and repugnant but
necessary to show reality." The responses total 31. Combine the
categories for "censorship, editing and restraint" with
"unnecessary to the extent". The response that would in some way
limit television total 27. These responses identify some
generally felt conflicts in the role of television. Granted,
television has a job to do, but must it do it so graphically? The
sense of trust the public has placed in television has declined

steadily from its high in 1978 (Harris Survey, January 1985).

_____

Insert Table 3 about here

_____

Hypothesis II: The respondents will identify a need for families
of victims of violent deaths shown on television to reconstruct
the details of the death by viewing the event as shown by the
major networks.

Hypothesis II was found to be a null hypothesis. No
respondent identified the reaction reported by DeSpelder and
Strickland in the earlier citation. There are a number of
conjectures that might be made based on the respondents' samples.
However, they would be conjecture and, obviously, could serve as
the framework for further research.

In the writing sample no respondent identified himself as
having had direct experience-violence of any sort that later had
been shown on television. While respondents showed a high level
of empathetic identification with families of victims, the
experience level may have been insufficient to identify the need
to reconstruct the event as a part of the death coping mechanism.
Some respondents, in fact, identified the opposite referring to
the perceived experience as "nightmarish" to see the scene over

and over.

_____

Insert Table 4 about here

_____

Two major response areas were identified: invasion of privacy
and recognition of the trauma of such an event. These responses
seem well within the realm of predictable results.

It is significant to note that the second response was
appreciably shorter than the sample asking for a personal
reaction.

Results Experiment I

Hypothesis I was found to be as theorized, while hypothesis
II was found to be null.

Discussion

The data collected would lend itself to a more thorough
study. A number of questions and observations seem open to
interpretation and further research.

1. How can we account for the perception that violence
improves the ratings garnered by the news on the major networks
while most respondents found it personally repugnant?

2. Many respondents noted some sense of need for the
management of the news, i.e., censorship, editing, self restraint.

What guidelines would respondents propose? What would be the
implications for the First Amendment?

3. What factors would account for the high level of
respondents' "personal identification" with families of victims as
expressed in the writings?

Experiment II

The same reactive free flow writing instrument was
administered following a six month interval to again test the
hypotheses. This procedure was followed to allow for 1) a
contextual change in news coverage 2) limitations of an individual
codifying results. The intent was to expand the base of the
inquiry. The second writing exercise was administered on February
17, 1986.

Writing samples were taken from two groups. As in the
previous study, one group was selected at Eastern Illinois
University and one at the Lake Land College. Both groups, again,
were aware they were participating in a study; again, the sample
(N=86) was targeted on the basis of accessibility. Perceptual
reaction was still the major thrust of the inquiry. Comparable
circumstances were maintained in both methodology and procedure.

Insert Table 5 about here

Discussion

The second samples were read and codified on the basis of sample one, i.e., the same terms were used to codify responses; additionally, new categories were developed based on the responses. The actual text words were used to codify wherever possible. Some root-word or phrasing occurs in almost every category with the exception of repugnant. Repugnant again served to codify a number of unpleasant, usually strongly worded, reactions.

Experiment II

Hypothesis I: Experiment II

Given recognition that television does graphically display violent death, respondents will react negatively to the showing of such events.

The hypothesis was, again, verified. Respondents were found to react negatively to the graphic display of violent death shown on television.

Comparable results were noted in the following categories:

1. Media doing its job

2. Repugnant but necessary

3. Personally repugnant

4. Concern for callousness, not real

The second set of respondents gave contrasting reactions in two

previously identified categories.

1. Exploitation, ratings, news first

2. Editing, censorship, self restraint needed.

3. Doesn't affect me.

The second set of respondents were more prone to giving the press free rein than were the first respondents. A higher proportion also felt what they were viewing did not affect them. [This would be an interesting research study in itself.]

Insert Table 6 about here

Additionally, the second set of respondents expressed concerns in four clearly identifiable themes which were not prevalent in Experiment 1.

1. Concern for children viewing

2. Need for "good news" time

3. Something needs to be done about [the causal situation]

4. Seeing vs hearing news, impact of visual

Hypothesis II: Experiment II The respondents will identify a need for families of victims to reconstruct the events of a violent family death by watching it on television.

The hypothesis was, again, found to be null. Responses displayed a close identification with family members, the trauma,

the grieving, the pain. This identification may explain the high

number of responses which expressed concern for the invasion of

family privacy and that repeated viewing of the event was "not

good for the family". [The reader may wish to recall that the

second writing sample was taken on February 17, 1986. The space

shuttle <u>Challenger</u> exploded January 28, 1986. This is not to

imply a cause-effect relationship; that would be a matter for

further research. However, numerous writing samples did make

specific reference to families of astronauts and this event.]

Insert Table 7 about here

Results: Experiment II

Hypothesis I was found to be as theorized as it was in Experiment

I. Hypothesis II was found to be null in both instances.

Implications

Five points are made clear by the process of undertaking this

research.

1. There is virtually no major scholarly communication

research being done in this arena.

2. Each category of reactive response is, in itself, an area

for further research.

3. There is vast potential for doctoral research in the subject area.

4. There is a readily available book subject for someone with the resources to follow up the impact on families of those involved in major news catastrophies within 1985, 1986 alone. Someone with network news credentials or a professor with university support would be an ideal author. A major news personality would probably have greater accessibility to those affected.

5. There are vast business, financial implications which can be derived from research information of this nature. There are results other than theoretical which can be derived from such research.

Conclusion

The legacy of Marshall McLuhan and Buckminister Fuller is a view of the future. That view is both global and provencial. It is global in that all people and nations are included. It is provencial in that we become intertwined with each other just as villagers in a closely intermarried community. McLuhan coined the phrase for this juxtapositioned concept: the global village.

In a 1974 article published in the Journal of Communication, McLuhan reiterated the concept.

The mysterious thing about this kind of speed-up of information, whereby the gap is closed between the experience and the meaning, is that the public begins to participate directly in actions which it had previously heard about at a distance in place or time. At instant speeds the audience becomes actor, and the spectators become participants. On Spaceship Earth or in the global theater the audience and the crew become actors, producers rather than consumers. They seek to program events rather than to watch them. As in so many other instances, these "effects" appear before their "causes". At instant speeds the cause and effect are at least simultaneous, and it is this dimension which naturally suggests, to all those who are accustomed to it, the need to anticipate events hopefully rather than to participate in

them fatalistically. The possibility of public participation becomes a sort of technological imperative which has been called "Lapp's Law": "If it can be done, it's got to be done" - a kind of siren wail of the evolutionary appetite.

This reality of public participation became spectacularly possible with the advent of direct satellite links taking television cameras almost anywhere, anytime. Perhaps the premier example, [which in this writer's opinion has not been sufficiently recognized], is the recent bombing of the Qaddafi compound in Libya. What other military action has been so carefully timed for prime news spots? What other military action has been carried live on the evening news? From the other side of the world? With only a thirty minute news window? What other military action has been so calculated to directly address the American people?

Communication is reaching the reality of a new era. Research must not lag behind. The show is not only on the road but in our living rooms, bedrooms, and bars. Everyone is both a viewer and participant. News research, what little exists in this immediate situational parameter, has not addressed the phenomenon. In the past we have had neither the need nor the opportunity. Now, we do and we must.

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Table 1

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate
Male	4	4	-	-	4
Female	7	12	-	3	11

Sex and Academic Level of Sample

Table 2

Describe your personal reactions to the presentation of violent death or the likelihood of violent death as portrayed by the major news networks.

Descriptive Responses	Number
Exploitation, ratings, news first	23
Media doing its job	15
Repugnant* but necessary, shows reality	16
Drawn to it	2
Turn off the set	5
Editing, censorship, self restrain needed	11
Tasteless	5
Unnecessary to extent used	16
Personally repugnant*	26
Concern for callousness, not real	16
Doesn't affect me	2
Violence breeds violence	4
Personal fear	7

Table 3

WHO DO AMERICANS TRUST?

"Do you have a great deal of confidence in the people running these institutions?"

The Military

Television News
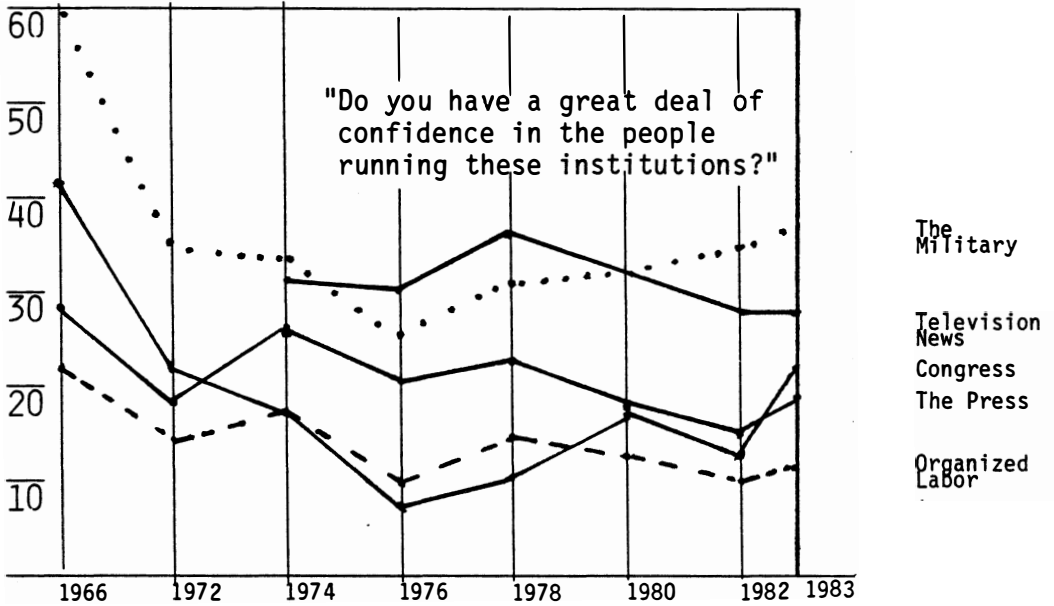
Congress

The Press

Organized Labor

Table 4

Describe your perceptions of the effects on the families of victims of violent death as shown by the major news networks.

Descriptive Responses	Number
Exploitation...	9
Media doing its job	4
Repugnant* but necessary, reality	4
Drawn to it	1
Turn off the set	0
Editing, censorship...	7
Tasteless	0
Unnecessary to extent used	3
Personally repugnant*	0
Concern for callousness, not real	3
Doesn't affect me	1
Violence breeds violence	1
Personal fear	0
Invasion of privacy	19
Identifies with families	12
Recognizes the trauma	22
Good results	6

Table 5

Sex Academic Level of Second Sample

N=86

1 Sex		Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate
	Male	10	0	0	0	0
	Female	10	2	1	0	0
2 Sex						
	Male	0	1	15	15	0
	Female	0	2	17	13	0
T Sex		Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate
	Male	10	1	15	15	0
	Female	10	4	18	13	0
		20	5	33	28	0

Table 6

Describe your personal reactions to the presentation of violent

death or the likelihood of violent death as portrayed by the major

news networks.

Code	1	2	Total
Exploitation, ratings, news first	5	12	17
Media doing its job	4	16	20
Repugnant*, but necessary, shows reality	5	16	21
Drawn to it; some people drawn	0	16	16
Turn off the set	1	3	4
Editing, censorship, self restraint needed	2	5	7
Tasteless	3	4	7
Unnecessary to extent	4	9	13
Personally repugnant	14	21	35
Concern for callousness, not real	12	8	20
Doesn't affect me	5	11	16
Violence breeds violence	1	0	1
Personal fear	8	2	10
These items were additions based on the second samples			
Concern for children viewing	3	6	9
Need a "good news" time	6	1	7
Something need to be done about	8	2	10
Seeing, hearing, impact of visual	0	10	10

Table 7

Describe your perceptions of the effects on the families of

victims of violent death as shown by the major news networks.

Coding	1	2	Total
Exploitation, ratings, news first	6	5	11
Media doing its job		2	
Repugnant*, but necessary, reality	1	2	3
Drawn to it, some people drawn to it	0	0	0
Turn off the set	0	2	2
Editing, censorship, restraint	0	4	4
Tasteless	0	2	2
Unnecessary to extent used	0	2	2
Personally repugnant*	0	0	0
Concern for callousness, not real	1	1	2
Doesn't affect me		1	1
Violence breeds violence	0	1	1
Personal fear	0	0	0
Invasion of privacy	15	21	36
Identifies with family	4	4	8
Recognizes trauma	6	24	30

Table 7 (continued)

Coding	1	2	Total
These items were additional based on the second samples			
Griveing, sad, mourning, pain	7	15	22
Repeating helps family	1	7	8
Repeating not good for family	13	24	37
Nightmarish	1	2	3

First Name_____
Date_____
Class Level_____   F S J S G

Describe your personal reactions to the presentation of violent death or the likelihood of
violent death as portrayed by the major news networks.

Describe your perceptions of the effects on the families of victims of violent death as shown by the major news networks.

Appendix

SURVIVING DISASTER

What happens to people faced with catastrophe?

From the eruption of Vesuvius to the Great Fire of London,

from Northern Ireland's Bloody Sunday to a car accident that

takes the life of an only daughter, human history has always

known the terror of catastrophe. *When Disaster Strikes*

(Basic Books) is Beverley Ralphael's unyielding analysis of

what happens to people faced with horror and upheaval most of

us cannot even imagine.

Raphael's most involving work is on personal loss and

grief. She uses a great range of case studies to reveal

facts of human behavior that are as gruesome and sad as they

are spellbinding. Raphael explains, for instance, that

viewing the dead body of a loved one satisfies our need for

finality; by curbing our persistent, often excessively morbid

imaginations, it can also prevent the physical details of the

death from haunting the bereaved.

Raphael tells how the public nature of disaster can

pressure those who have lost homes or family into playing

artificial roles--asking them to turn grief on and off for

cameras, then expecting them to be "over it" as soon as the

fascination with their suffering has waned.

Recovery from the loss of a loved one, an astoundingly delicate process, depends more than anything on emotional release, and the movement through generally defined stages: numbness or denial; intense distress over the separation; anger and protest; mourning (which includes a review of life with the deceased); feelings of futility mixed with guilt; and, eventually, acceptance. People *do* recover-but each step is slow and painful.

Since this is fast becoming the decade of terrorism, Raphael's studies of group behavior in cities such as Beirut and Belfast have a particular urgency. Plagued by civil violence and international terror, these communities suffer from psychological distress that will last years longer than the physical scars. With the constant threat of new attacks, normal recovery from loss is next to impossible. The citizens remain in a limbo of mental torment.

By never prettifying, never mincing words, Raphael breathes compassion into her reader. On the AIDS epidemic she writes: 'The sad consequences for many victims of this modern plague are anger, guilt, rejection and isolation, and a lonely death of despair.'

Despite the sadness of her subject, Raphael returns to the idea that people *survive*, that life, so easily destroyed,

has tremendous value and is worth our greatest efforts of

preservation. A rare mix of scholarship and humanism,

When Disaster Strikes stands out as a heartening, even

tender study in an age of so much pessimism and destruction.

VOGUE, July, 1986 Book Review by David DeNicolo