

# IS THE MEDIUM THE MESSAGE?: AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST WITH MORBID NEWS

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*This study examined whether medium is an important factor in arousal of curiosity about morbid events. A total of 131 undergraduate students read or viewed six reports: one good news story, one neutral story and four morbid stories. One group read print versions only, while a second group saw photographic images depicting these events and a third group viewed televised versions of these events. Subjects rated stories on a 100-point thermometer rating scale measuring attraction-aversion. Television news reports, somewhat contrary to expectations, did not evoke more curiosity about morbid events than did print or still photo accounts. Television may be getting a bad rap, the authors suggest.*

When Pennsylvania official Budd Dwyer committed suicide during a press conference in January 1987, television coverage of the incident was criticized sharply, although most stations cut the tape before the shot was fired. Somehow, coverage of this event by print reporters and photojournalists did not stir the same scorn from the critics or the public that TV news accounts evoked.

The "bad news" bias of journalism professionals has been of increasing concern generally, and much of the criticism has been leveled specifically at television news. Both practitioners of the profession<sup>1</sup> and news consumers<sup>2</sup> have complained that TV news exploits graphic and grotesque news events for the purpose of increasing ratings in the competitive race for profits.<sup>3</sup> Two common responses to these criticisms are that, first, the morbid event is newsworthy<sup>4</sup> and, second, that this is what the audience wants.<sup>5</sup>

A common criticism leveled at television is that it is excessively morbid in its presentation of news.<sup>6</sup> Even those who have pioneered the

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**Journalism  
Quarterly**  
Vol. 69, No. 4  
Winter 1992  
921-928  
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field of television news identify the medium as uniquely able to portray tragedy because it is so visual.<sup>7</sup>

Researchers have also noted the near universal appeal of stories about disturbing, unpleasant, tragic events.<sup>8</sup> Haskins has observed that "throughout history humans have been drawn to public spectacles involving bloody death and disfigurement to helpless victims, to public hangings and crucifixions and decapitation."<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the present study is to examine whether the medium is an important factor in the arousal of curiosity about morbid news events. Haskins defines morbid as highly unpleasant or negative — that which may be considered unwholesome, unhealthy, noxious, gruesome, frightening, punishing, revolting or repugnant.<sup>10</sup>

- <sup>1</sup>Robert M. Steele, "Video Ethics: The Dilemma of Value Balancing," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 2:7-17 (Spring/Summer 1987); C. Smith, "News Critics, Newswomen and Local Television News," *Journalism Quarterly*, 65:341-346 (Summer 1988).
- <sup>2</sup>J. Gordon, "Soul Search: Are the Lessons for the Reader or the Journalist?" *News Photographer* pp. 19-30 (March 1986); J. B. Haskins and M. Miller, "The Effects of Bad News and Good News on a Newspaper's Image," *Journalism Quarterly*, 61:3-13 (Spring 1984); N. Hentoff, "Privacy and the Press: Is Nothing Sacred?" *Saturday Review*, July 17, 1979, pp. 22-23; A. McCarthy, "Is Good News News?" *Commonweal*, July 12, 1985, pp. 393-394.
- <sup>3</sup>Av Westin *Newswatch: How TV Decides the News*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982); C. R. Hofstetter and D. M. Dozier, "Useful News Sensational News: Quality, Sensationalism, and Local TV News," *Journalism Quarterly*, 63:815-820 (Winter 1986); Garrett, J. O'Keefe and Kathleen Reid-Nash, "Crime News and Real World Blues: The Effects of the Media on Social Reality," *Communication Research*, 14:147-163 (April 1987).
- <sup>4</sup>David Altheide, *Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events* (London: Sage Publications, 1976); Hofstetter and Dozier, *op. cit.*
- <sup>5</sup>Ira Eisenberg, "The Selling of the News," *San Francisco Focus*, October 1990, pp. 65-69, 102-103. Westin, *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup>George Gerbner, L. Gross, M. Jackson-Beech, S. Jeffries-Fox and N. Signorelli, "Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9," *Journal of Communication*, 28:176-207 (Summer 1978); Westin, *Ibid.*; Konrad Burdack, "Reporting on Deaths: The Perspective Coverage of Accident News in a German Tabloid," *European Journal of Communication*, 3:81-89 (March 1988).
- <sup>7</sup>N. Bohannon, "Flashbulb Memories for the Space Shuttle Disaster: A Tale of Two Theories," *Cognition*, 29:179-196 (February 1988); Sig Michelson, *The Electric Mirror* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972); Westin, *Ibid.*; W. G. Woodall, D.K. Davis, and H. Sahin, "From the Boob Tube to the Black Box: Television News Comprehension From an Information Processing Perspective," *Journal of Broadcasting*, 27:1-23 (Winter 1983).
- <sup>8</sup>J. B. Haskins, "The Trouble With Bad News," *Newspaper Research Journal*, 2:3-16 (Winter 1981); J. B. Haskins, "Toward a Psychobiological Theory of Motives for Human Communication Behavior," Unpublished paper prepared for presentation to the International Communication Association conference, Boston, 1982; J. B. Haskins, "Curiosity and Aversion for Morbid Messages: A Model, Proposed Explanations, and Effects," Unpublished paper prepared for presentation to the International Communication Association conference, Honolulu, 1985; F. Fedler, T. Counts and P. Hightower, "Changes in Wordings of Cutlines Fail to Reduce Photographs Offensiveness," *Journalism Quarterly*, 59:633-637 (Winter 1982); T. Goldstein, *The News at Any Cost: How Journalist Compromise Their Ethics to Shape the News* (New York: Simon & Schuster 1985).
- <sup>9</sup>J. B. Haskins, "Morbid Curiosity and the Mass Media," in Proceedings, "Morbid Curiosity and the Mass Media," Symposium sponsored by the School of Journalism, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the Gannett Foundation, April 5-6, 1984, p. 1.
- <sup>10</sup>Haskins, *Ibid.*

More than 25 years ago, Marshall McLuhan advanced ideas regarding the distinctions among media. McLuhan's<sup>11</sup> famous aphorism that the "medium is the message" suggests that portrayals of morbid news events through the medium of television could arouse more curiosity than the same stories found in newspapers and other print media. This study explores McLuhan's proposition that the communication process differs by medium.

While many mainstream mass communications scholars in the United States have rejected much of McLuhan's obfuscated theoretical writings, one of his central premises is assumed by academics and considered common sense by average Americans. The idea that the medium is the message is no longer radical. That the medium affects the perception of the content has become conventional wisdom. Yet in reviewing the research literature, there is not a single study that directly tests McLuhan's proposition that medium affects perception.

The common sense approach to the differences among media would indicate perceivable differences in content perception. Television is understood to be a more visceral and visual sensory experience while print media are more linear and rational. Practicing journalists, assuming differences between print and television, write and package news reports specific to each medium. But what about morbid news events that are covered by photojournalists, newspaper reporters and broadcast journalists? Is there an observable difference in audience perception of the same news content when the medium is varied?

Differences by medium have been discovered, however, regarding memory for mass-mediated news messages.<sup>12</sup> Extrapolating from an information-processing perspective, one would expect that if differences in cognitive processing and recall exist for the variable of medium one should also discover differences in the perception of the messages by medium.

Fedler, Counts and Hightower<sup>13</sup> found that changing the printed cutlines of newspaper photographs did not alter the perceptions of offensiveness of the visual images. Yet Furnham and Gunter's<sup>14</sup> study reported results that indicated recall of news stories was greatest for print reports.

The corpus of research literature on the effects of media for news

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<sup>11</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964)

<sup>12</sup>A. F. Furnham and B. Gunter "The Primacy of Print: Immediate Cued Recall of News as a Function of the Channel of Communication," *The Journal of General Psychology*, 116: 305-310 (July 1989); A. F. Furnham, E. Proctor and B. Gunter, "Memory for Material Presented in the Media: The Superiority of Written Communication," *Psychological Reports*, 63:935-938 (December 1988); B. Gunter *Poor Reception: Misunderstanding and Forgetting Broadcast News*. (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987).

<sup>13</sup>F. Fedler, T. Counts and P. Hightower, "Changes in Wording of Cutlines Fail to Reduce Photographs Offensiveness," *Journalism Quarterly*, 59: 633-637 (Winter 1982).

<sup>14</sup>Furnham and Gunter, *loc. cit.*

reveals a gap in our understanding. Memory studies indicate differences across media, but little work has been done on perceptual differences across media. If we are to advance the research on cognitive processing of media messages, we must determine whether memory differences are due to the medium of message delivery or due to perceptual differences in audiences. In short, the literature has assumed memory differences are attributable to the messenger — the medium — and not a function of the differentiated perceptions of print vs. image within the audience member.

Likewise, the critical debate about television news coverage of morbid events will not progress until solid evidence is found for viewers' increased perception of offensiveness of such news stories that is attributable to the medium of television. The question is begging to be asked — is the medium of television perceived to be more morbid in its portrayals of a disturbing and gruesome event than print or photographic reports?

Is the medium the message? We hypothesize that: television news reports evoke greater curiosity about morbid events than either print or still photo news accounts of the same event. To date, the effects of medium on curiosity about morbid events have not been directly addressed. Conventional wisdom holds that print media cannot match the interest appeal of television for morbid stories. This experiment was designed to test this common assumption.

This study similarly represents a test of McLuhan's proposition. A direct test of the hypothesis of media effects is possible with the parsimonious design described below. While there are inherent limitations to experimental design, it remains the only method capable of determining causal relationships between or among variables. With the experimental design, the effect of medium (print, photo, video) on attraction-aversion for morbid news events can be studied. Or, in other words, the method allows us to address the question of whether TV news reports arouse greater curiosity about morbid news events than print or photographic accounts of the same events.

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## Method

Undergraduate students (N=131) enrolled in an introductory course in mass communications during spring 1990 received an extra-credit point for their voluntary participation. A post-test only experiment with three treatment groups was conducted.

Each group was exposed to these six news reports which appeared in the following order:<sup>15</sup>

1. Coinciding with President Reagan's inauguration in January of

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<sup>15</sup>The video versions were culled from the Peabody Collection housed by the College of Journalism at the University of Georgia. ABC, NBC, CBS National Network news programs, as well as stories submitted by local affiliates for consideration in the Peabody Award competition were the sources for the video presentation. The selected print stories and photographs were taken from the *Washington Post*, and *Miami Herald*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Fred Fedler's Reporting for the Print Media*.

1980, American hostages were released from the Tehran embassy after 444 days of captivity.

2. Presidential candidate Gary Hart's relationship to model Donna Rice was disclosed.

3. Pennsylvania State Treasurer Budd Dwyer, who was prosecuted for criminal wrongdoing, called a press conference at which he pulled a handgun out of a manila envelope and shot himself.

4. On January 28, 1986, the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff killing seven crew members, including the first teacher in space, Christa McAuliffe.

5. Jim Jones directed his cult followers to drink grape Kool-Aid laced with cyanide in a mass suicide at a remote compound in Guyana, South America.

6. As Americans began to leave Vietnam an airlift of American women and Vietnamese orphans ended in a tragic plane crash that killed many aboard.

The first report was selected as a "good news" story while the second was used as a non-morbid negative news report. The intent of beginning with these two news reports was to set benchmarks to the four morbid news stories.

One group (N=35) received print news reports; the second group (N=50) received only photographic images of these news events. The third group (N=46) viewed the same news stories on videotape.

Curiosity about the stories was operationally defined in terms of an attraction-aversion scale. A thermometer rating scale<sup>16</sup> was used for each of the six news stories, and subjects were asked to rate each story from 0-100. The zero rating meant subjects couldn't stand the story and positively would *not* want to find out more about it. The 100 rating at the top of the thermometer indicated subjects were extremely curious about the story and definitely would want to find out more about it. The midpoint, 50, meant subjects were not really for or against finding out more about the story. Subjects were instructed to rate the news reports as if they were seeing them for the first time, even if they had seen or read these stories before. The instruments were collected after subjects had finished viewing or reading the news reports and a debriefing session was held.

A series of six one-way analyses of variance tested the effects of medium on the 0-100 ratings of the stories. Post hoc contrasts and the Student-Newman-Keuls procedure were obtained for each ANOVA.

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## Results

The results of the one-way analysis of variance failed to support the hypothesis that television news reports evoke greater curiosity about morbid events than either print or still photo news accounts of the same event. Of the four stories dealing with morbid events, only one — the

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<sup>16</sup> J. B. Haskins, "Pretesting Editorial Items and Ideas For Reader Interest," *Journalism Quarterly*, 224-230 (Spring 1960).

Challenger story — elicited significantly more curiosity from subjects seeing it on television than from those seeing it in print or still photo versions.

The probability of the *F* obtained from the ANOVA of the Challenger story is highly significant ( $p < .01$ ). Further analyses, using contrasts and the Student-Newman-Keuls post hoc test, indicate the television presentation is significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) from the print and photo versions of the Challenger tragedy.

The analysis of variance of only one other story — the positive news of the 1980 hostage release — showed significant differences by medium ( $p < .05$ ). Post hoc tests revealed that the photo and video versions were significantly more attractive than the print story of the hostages' release.

Analyses of the other four stories tested (three morbid and one non-morbid negative) showed no significant differences among the three modes of presentation.

**TABLE 1**  
*Analysis of Variance of Stories 1-6 by Medium*

	Jan. '81 Hostages Released	May '87 Gary Hart Donna Rice	Jan. '87 Budd Dwyer Suicide	Jan. '86 Challenger Explosion	Dec. '79 Jonestown Massacre	April '75 Vietnam Orphan Plane Crash
<b>F Values &amp; Means</b>						
Medium						
F Values	3.9414*	1.0867	1.2394	4.9368**	1.6382	.5391
Print	64.14a	52.51	67.20a	77.54	82.80	67.06
(N=35)						
Photo	75.48b	45.84	72.18a	81.74	80.84	61.90
(N=50)						
Video	76.39b	54.15	62.26b	90.96	74.04	65.80
(N=46)						
Total	72.77	50.54	67.37	83.86	78.98	64.65
(N=131)						
* <i>p</i> is less than .05; ** <i>p</i> is less than .01						
Means with different subscripts differ significantly at <i>p</i> is less than .05.						
<sup>1</sup> Scores derived from 0-100 thermometer scale of attraction-aversion. Higher means indicate greater curiosity about the story.						

## Discussion

TV news may be getting an undeserved bum rap for its coverage of graphic and grotesque news events. Television reports about morbid news events were not perceived to be significantly different on the 0-100 attraction-aversion scale than photo or print accounts of the same news stories, with the exception of the reports on the Challenger tragedy. The only other story with significant differences by medium was the "good news" story of the release of American hostages from Iran for which

television was most highly rated on the scale.

Since significant differences by medium were not discovered across stories with respect to curiosity about morbid events, the significantly higher ratings given television for the Challenger story warrant further discussion. The subjects were undergraduates and may have been predisposed in some way to this story. As the Kennedy assassination and man landing on the moon were memorable events for the previous generation, the Challenger story may be paramount in this cohort's collective conscience.

Watching the videotape of the Challenger tragedy, subjects could relive the expectation of the moment before launch, see with the omniscience of the camera lens, and experience the explosion anew in a way not captured by the print and photo news accounts.

The Challenger story, regardless of medium, evoked the greatest curiosity of all six news reports among the respondents, with the highest overall mean rating of 83.86 on the attraction-aversion scale. The three other stories about morbid events garnered mean interest ratings of 78.98 for the reports on the Jonestown massacre, 67.37 for the Budd Dwyer stories and, for the accounts of the plane crash in which American wives and Vietnamese orphans died, a mean across media of 64.65.

The tentative conclusion that the medium is not the message requires that we acknowledge the limitations inherent in lab experimental methods.

The lab setting requires the use of a non-representative sample, as well as knowledge by the subjects that they are being tested. External validity, or generalizability, therefore cannot be claimed.

On the other hand, the experimental design is necessary to assure internal validity, or to demonstrate true effects, if any exist. External validity, therefore, is sacrificed in the lab experiment in order to secure internal validity.

In this study, then, it is acknowledged that the results cannot be generalized beyond the students studied. Among these students, however, we can claim differences or no differences due to the medium of the messages.

The selection of stories for this study was constrained because few stories about morbid news events were available in all three media: print, photo and video. Therefore, the selected stories were all of national importance and not representative of the routine coverage given to morbid events such as car accidents and local homicides. Because the six selected news items were given national attention, subjects may have already seen or heard about them and this might have contaminated their ratings. Any contamination effects would have been equal among groups, however, due to randomization.

Further research should use newspaper articles intact and also might investigate radio news. Television was the medium for which we had expected significant differences, and we turned to print and photo for comparisons. Yet in the real world, newspapers juxtapose print and photo in news accounts.

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This exploratory study raises serious doubts about one of the most common assumptions in the field of mass communications — that the medium affects perception of the message. The parsimonious design of this initial experiment has yielded results which call into question that conventional wisdom.

Future research plans are a series of experiments, such as those carried out by Iyengar and Kinder<sup>17</sup> on the agenda-setting function of the mass media, which will further establish the effect of story content and/or medium on the perceived attraction-aversion of news about morbid events. By following a strategy of conceptual replication, each experiment could isolate the key variables involved in audience attraction-aversion to morbid news.

Included in such a sequence of studies we suggest keeping our design which includes subjects who would be exposed to different media versions of the same stories. In naturalistic settings, audience members often compare several versions of the same news story and the common belief that TV news is more morbid should be further tested under these comparative circumstances.

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<sup>17</sup>Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).



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