HIT OR MISS?
THE IMPACT ON A PUBLIC FIGURE FROM ONE NEWS ITEM

Amiee J. Shelton, Roger Williams University
ashelton@rwu.edu

Caitlin Fisher, Roger Williams University
cfisher@rwu.edu

ABSTRACT

This study investigates framing of news stories through the lens of the agenda setting function of mass media. Specifically, this intuitive study examined how the tone of one article and the time that has passed since exposure influences an individual's perception of a public figure. A sample of college students (N=147) read an article about a public figure and was surveyed either two days or two weeks later. Findings show that the tone of the article affected respondent's perception of the public figure. The individual's level of ability to relate, sympathize and believe the public figure was a "good" person was affected by the passage of time. Additionally, this study investigated respondents' perceptions of the effect media coverage has on public opinion. The results from this study underscore the impact even limited media, has on the public agenda.

Keywords: publicity, agenda setting, media impact

INTRODUCTION

"The entire study of mass communication is based on the premise that the media have significant effects" (McQuail, 1994, p. 327). To this end, numerous empirical studies have found that negative information is capable of significantly affecting consumers' beliefs and attitudes. In fact, Koenigs, Richey and Fortin (1975) found that a single item of negative information has the capability to neutralize five pieces of positive publicity. Other research has found negative information to be more enduring than positive information (Cusumano & Richey, 1970; Richins, 1984). Thus, the media has the power to determine attitudes. This study investigates framing of news stories through the lens of the agenda setting function of mass media. Specifically, this intuitive study examined how the tone of one article and the time that has passed since exposure influences an individual's perception of a public figure.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Agenda-Setting Theory, first investigated by Walter Lippman (1922), describes the phenomenon concerning media impact on public opinion. Even in 1922, far before the 24-hour news cycle and social media, Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to influence opinion and attitudes with images. McCombs and Shaw (1972) concluded that the mass media

exerted a significant influence on public awareness and concern of salient issues. This awareness and concern leads to attitude formation. The media has continued, even in current times, to have a powerful effect on public opinion.

Attitudes can be explicit and implicit. Explicit attitudes are those that people are consciously aware of and that clearly influence their behaviors and beliefs. Implicit attitudes are unconscious, but still have an effect on individual beliefs and behaviors. While mass media aids in the formation of attitudes pervasive in society, the assumption that media reflects reality is false. In fact, one of the basic assumptions underlying most research on Agenda-Setting is that the press and media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it. Media draws public attention to certain topics, determined by editors. In this way, journalists and editors set public the public 'agenda.' Thus, the way in which the news is created, the frame in which the news is presented, is a choice made by the journalist. Therefore the mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events. According to Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) "They give the story a 'spin,' . . . taking into account their organizational and modality constraints, professional judgments, and certain judgments about the audience" (p. 120). Frames influence the audience's perception of news, but at same time, people's information processing and interpretation are influenced by pre-existing meaning structures or schemas (Scheufele, 1999).

Two concepts of framing must be considered for both presenting and comprehending news: media frames and individual frames. According to Gitlin (1980), taken together, the two types of frames while "largely unspoken and unacknowledged" they "organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for us who rely on their reports" (p. 7). Entman (1991) differentiated the two frames as "information-processing schemata" of individuals and as "attributes of the news itself" for media (p. 7). Tuchman (1978) offered a similar definition for media frames: "The news frame organizes everyday reality and the news frame is part and parcel of everyday reality … [it] is an essential feature of news" (p. 193). Media frames are also working routines for journalists. Here, frames allow journalists to quickly identify and classify information "to package it for efficient relay to their audiences" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 7). Media framing obviously includes the intent of the sender, but motives can be unconscious (Gamson, 1989). Therefore framing systematically affects how society comes to understand news and events (Price, Tewksbury, & Powers, 1995).

Additionally, individuals attribute meaning to news stories through individual frames. These "mentally stored clusters of ideas guide individuals' processing of information" (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Specifically, "short-term, issue-related frames of reference have significant impact on perceiving, organizing, and interpreting incoming information and on drawing inferences from that information" (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 56). Thus, the basis of the Framing Theory is that the media focuses attention on certain events and then places them within a field of meaning. Individual framing takes place when decisions are formed and altered based on how information is presented to an individual (McCloy, Beaman, Frosch, & Goddard, 2010).

Attitudes have been defined as relatively stable opinions containing a cognitive element and an emotional element. Attitudes are considered evaluations based on, or developed from, three

general classes of information: (1) affective or emotional information, (2) cognitive information, and/or (3) information concerning past behaviors or behavioral intentions (Zanna & Rempel, 1988). Further, evaluations or attitudes are viewed as influencing three modes of response, including affective, cognitive and behavioral responses. Because attitudes can be based on different sources of information, individuals can hold more than one attitude toward the attitude object depending upon whether the individual is led to focus on their feelings or beliefs (Zanna, 1990).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) accounts for the differences in persuasive impact produced by arguments that contain ample information and cogent reasons as compared to messages that rely on simplistic associations of negative and positive attributes to some object, action or situation (Cacioppo & Petty, 1979). There are two "routes" towards persuasion: central and peripheral. The key variable in this process is involvement; the extent to which an individual is willing and able to 'think' about the position advocated and its supporting materials. When people are motivated and able to think about the content of the message, elaboration is high. This involves scrutiny of persuasive communication to determine the arguments' merits. If the individual evaluates a message as reliable, well-constructed and convincing, it may be received favorably even if it contrasts with the receiver's original position on the message. Elaboration involves cognitive processes such as evaluation, recall, critical judgment, and inferential judgment. When elaboration is high, the central persuasive route is likely to occur; conversely, the peripheral route is the likely result of low elaboration. Peripheral-route processes do not involve elaboration of the message through cognitive processing of an argument's merits. They rely on a message's environmental characteristics: the perceived credibility of the source, message presentation quality, and/or the source's attractiveness or a catchy slogan, when the argument is weak or lacks evidence. The peripheral route is a mental shortcut as such, which accepts (or rejects) a message based on external cues, not thought. It is used with complex messages or when targeting an immature audience.

Several factors affect the likelihood that individuals will evaluate information systematically and elaborate the considerations carefully. For example, individuals tend to evaluate issues carefully, if the issue is personally relevant (Petty, Cacioppo, & Haugtvedt, 1992). The "need for cognition" represents an individual characteristic, representing an inclination to apply a "central" or systematic route. Hence, when individuals exhibit a need for cognition, they are more likely to be influenced by strong rather than weak arguments. Moreover, Cacioppo and Petty (1979), suggest that those with a higher need for cognition are more motivated to think, rather than just having an increased ability to do so. These findings imply that when individuals are given a certain message, their need for cognition and affect can direct them to act and depend on their emotions or cognitive beliefs so that they are more influenced and persuaded by the message.

The Need for Affect is a separate motivational construct that captures the degree to which people enjoy experiencing strong emotions (Maio & Esses, 2001). Those Individuals who score high in the affect scale are more likely to view emotions as useful when making judgments and their emotional responses to information play a more important role in guiding the formation of attitudes (Huskinson & Haddock, 2006.

Finally, Fiske and Todorov (2011) found that individuals tend to overlook situational information when evaluating another's actions, ignoring behaviors and relying instead on prior impressions to assess the person's intentions. Therefore, media alone has not been found to singularly create attitudes. Instead, attitudes are formed from a combination of interpersonal communication and mass media.

Defining Public Figures

A public figure is legally defined as either a public official or any other person pervasively involved in public affairs, or according to the Unites States Supreme Court, someone who has "thrust themselves to the forefront of particular public controversies in order to influence the resolution of the issues involved" (1974, sect. III, para. 10). The term has significance in the United States regarding civil law, because it affects the resolution of certain types of lawsuits. These people are expected to tolerate more scrutiny than others, and consequently have more difficulties in winning cases surrounding the issues of defamation and privacy.

The idea of public figure is closely related to the concept of celebrity. However, being a celebrity and being famous are two different concepts. A person can be famous for their role in history, or for their position, such as Queen Elizabeth, but that does not make them a celebrity. Empirical evidence finds that a famous person is turned into a celebrity from the narrative surrounding the public persona. The main reason people want to read about public personas in the tabloids or in *People* or *Entertainment Weekly*, or watch "Entertainment Tonight" or "Access Hollywood" is because they are interested in their stories.

Many argue that America has become a society obsessed with celebrities, and this has profound impact on the business sector. Today, businesspeople are leveraging personal fame for economic benefit (Abril, 2011). Factors such as social media and round-the-clock financial news are forcing executives into the limelight. Additionally, businesspeople have been shedding their skins as private citizens and transforming themselves into public personas. No matter your business, a personal connection with the public is necessary to be successful. "Previously this rapport was mediated through advertising, but today that rapport is often mediated by the individual businesspeople themselves. Executives are encouraged to inject themselves into the debate in order to remain relevant…" (Abril, 2011, para. 6). These additions to the roster of quasi-celebrities have increased the amount of news stories disseminated about public figures. Theoretical or abstract analysis is not covered in most media because often there is not time to devote to the analysis. "Public figures are covered frequently in the news because it is in the public interest to know anything about these officials that might affect their wielding of power or their discharge of the public trust" (Hodge 1994, p. 197). Lastly, Lukeman (1991) found that the simple presence of a celebrity in news coverage increases the odds for higher recall.

While the impact of mass media is well documented, we wanted to explore how much impact one print-news story has on public opinion regarding a public figure. To begin with, we chose a public figure, not a celebrity. This public figure would be a CEO of a major corporation, one that presumably would wield power and influence over the marketplace. Understanding that tone/framing by the media plays a large role in the attitudes cultivated, we had to manipulate the

tone of each story in order to look at the effect on public opinion.

Our Study

In our study we investigated the effects of exposure to a single news article about a public figure on public opinion. We were particularly interested in if the tone of the single article would affect attitude, and if that attitude would persevere. In addition, we tested to what extent the media exposure influenced perceptions of the public figure, and what respondents remembered the most about the media coverage.

Phase one of this study provided participating university instructors a short script to read simply acknowledging that the article was intriguing, and that the students should read it. The instructors then proceeded to distribute one of three articles for students to read. An equal number of undergraduates (N = 145) read one of three news articles describing a public figure. We varied the framing of the article to be slanted positive, neutral or negative. Two days or two weeks later, they read a short biography of the public figure, and answered questions concerning the likeably and reputation of the public figure. In this second phase, student researchers administered the materials consisting of informed consent, pre-test measures for affect and cognition, a biography, and the post-article questionnaire. The pre-test questionnaire was structured by the Need for Affect and Cognition Scale to evaluate participant's cognition and level of need for information in determining their opinion. The post-article questionnaire included scaled measures to quantify previous knowledge of the public figure, current perceptions, memory of article read, and basic demographic information. Additionally, the post-article questionnaire requested that participants recall what they remembered about the featured public figure through an open-ended format. Words were coded into the following categories: positive, negative, balanced (neutral).

Participants

Our study's respondent's ages ranged from 18-23 years old, with the mean age of 20. Courses were mainly affiliated with psychology and communications. The majority of participants had no previous knowledge of our public figure, with only five participants indicating they had heard her name prior to the study.

Factor Analysis

The factorability of nine post article questionnaire items was examined. These items were Likert scale statements that were used to determine the need for individuals affect and cognition when forming an opinion. Several well recognized criteria for the factorability of a correlation were used. Firstly, it was observed that many of the nine items correlated at least .3 with at least one other item, suggesting reasonable factorability. Secondly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .61, above the commonly recommended value of .6. Thirdly, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis was deemed to be suitable with all nine items.

Principal components analysis revealed the presence of three components with eigenvalues exceed 1, indicating that the three factors explained 28%, 18%, and 14% of the variance respectively. Solutions for two and three factors were each examined using varimax and oblimin rotations of the factor-loading matrix. Two factors were retained while the third fact was discounted due to low internal consistency as determined by examining Cronbach's alpha. Items measuring knowledge had a high Cronbach's alpha, $\alpha = .74$, while items measuring a respondents feelings had a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.73$. Ultimately, the two factor solution, which explained 56% of the variance, was preferred because of: (a) its previous theoretical support; (b) the 'leveling off' of eigen values on the scree plot after two factors; and (c) the insufficient number of primary loadings and difficulty of interpreting the third factor.

Composite scores were created for both of the factors, based on the mean scores of the items, which had their primary loadings on each factor. These were recoded into the variables "Affect" and "Cognition." Higher scores indicated a higher level of agreement to the statements.

Data Analysis

As we expected, after conducting a between subjects univariate analysis of variance with the new variables of "affect" and "cognition," we found a main effect regarding the tone of the article and the feelings of respondents towards the public figure ($F(2, 140) = 7.44$, $p = .001$, partial eta squared = .096.) Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD indicated that the mean score for the positive tone and negative tone articles differed significantly from the neutral articles on the public figure. The greatest effect found in the post-test questionnaire was when the respondent had been exposed to negative publicity. Those that had read a negative article were more likely to respond that they strongly disagreed or disagreed that the public figure was relatable, or a good person (M = 2.1; 2.6) whereas those that had read a positive article were neutral. The same was found when looking at whether or not respondents viewed the public figure as a sympathetic figure. Those that had read a positive or neutral article were more likely to be neutral regarding those same measures, as compared to those who read a negative article. These results are shown in Table 2 where scores represent participant responses to a 5-point Likert scale 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Table 1. Tone and Attitudes Towards Public Figure

Item	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Public Figure is Relatable	3.1	3.3	2.5
Public Figure a "Good Person"	2.6	2.9	2.1
Public Figure is Sympathetic	2.1	2.0	1.6

After running a one-way ANOVA, we found a statistically significant difference between tone of the article and the respondents' level of agreement that "publicity is detrimental to a

celebrities reputation" (F (2, 142) = 3.17, p = .04). Those that had read positive articles differed in their responses as compared to those who had read both neutral and negative articles. Those that had read a positive article were neutral towards the idea that publicity is detrimental (M = 3.18, SD = .91), whereas those who had read a neutral article tended to respond that they disagreed that publicity is detrimental (M = 2.82, SD = .91). Those who had previously read a negative article disagreed towards the idea that publicity is detrimental to a celebrity's reputation (M =2.76, SD = .82). However, the actual difference in mean scores between the groups was small. The effect size, calculated using eta squared, was. 04.

We also found that time mattered regarding respondents attitudes towards the public figure being relatable. After conducting a between subjects univariate analysis of variance, we found a main effect regarding the time between reading the article and how well respondents felt they could relate to the public figure, (F(4, 141) = 7.28, p = .001). Our post hoc tests revealed that people who had more time between exposure to the article and the testing were more likely to strongly disagree that the public figure was relatable. As Table 2 indicates, respondents were more likely to agree that the public figure had positive traits after two-days (scores represent participant responses to a 5-point Likert scale 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

Table 2. Opinion on Public Figure & Time Delay

Item	2-Days	2-Weeks
Public Figure is Relatable	2.14	1.6
Public Figure a "Good Person"	3.14	2.86
Public Figure is Sympathetic	2.71	2.3

Perceived Effects of Publicity

This study also offered a unique opportunity to investigate what respondents believe is the effect publicity has on their opinion. While the hypothesis tests did not show any significant effects between two days and two weeks regarding respondent's attitudes towards the public figure, there was an effect found regarding the respondent's attitudes towards publicity. A t-test revealed a statistically significant difference between those who had a two-day delay or a two-week delay regarding respondent's opinions on the affect publicity has on their attitude (T = 2.10, DF = 142, p = .037). We found that respondents believed negative publicity is detrimental to a celebrity's reputation when respondents are surveyed after two days (M = 3.9, SD = .99) as compared to two-weeks.

There was also a statistically significant difference between two days and two weeks regarding respondent's belief that publicity represents the character of a celebrity (T = 2.57, DF = 144, p = .011). Those who had a two- day delay between publicity and measurement indicated they were neutral to the idea that publicity/coverage of the celebrity represents character (M =

3.06, SD = .92); whereas those with a two-week delay believed that publicity does not represent the character of a celebrity (M = 2.6 , DS = .81). Interestingly, the tone of the article was also found to be significance regarding whether publicity represents the character of a celebrity. We found a statistically significant difference between those who read a positive article and those that read a negative one, F (2, 142) = 3.17, p = .045. Those that received a positive article were neutral to the idea that publicity represents the character of the celebrity (M = 3.18, SD = .91), whereas those that received a negative article disagreed that it did (M = 2.76, SD = .82).

The relationship between respondent's belief that publicity is detrimental to a celebrity's reputation and publicity representing the character of the celebrity was investigated using Person Correlation Coefficient. Respondents who believed negative publicity is detrimental to a celebrity's reputation, also believed the publicity coverage represented the character of the public figure. There was a small, positive correlation between the two variables (r = .186, n = 144, p = .026).

Additionally, there was a small positive correlation between finding the public figure relatable and publicity reflecting character (r = .188, n = 146, p = .023), where those who thought publicity represented the public figures' character were also more likely to score higher on the Likert scale regarding how much they related to her.

Analysis of Open Ended Question

A free recall section was analyzed to gauge the content and tone of what participants remembered from the publicity of the public figure. Two coders analyzed each open-ended response. To ensure encoder reliability, each investigator rated free recall sections into the following categories: not a good person, was famous, could not recall anything about her, personal issues, bad publicity, career issues. The reliability for this study was calculated in terms of percentage of perfect agreement. A reliability coefficient of 0.885 for this study was calculated. The figure is above the standard acceptable rate of 0.80 (Holsti, 1969).

These categories were then classified as negative, positive or neutral. Participants more frequently recalled information classified under the positive connotation. Out of sixty-eight positive responses, 30% identified that the public figure achieved success, was an American icon, and had a successful career. Forty-one responses classified under a negative connotation. Most of these responses indicated that the participant believed the public figure had significant personal issues affecting her credibility. Overall, the free recall section highlighted that participants depended on the sources given in the study to form an impression.

DISCUSSION

The effect regarding the respondent's attitudes towards publicity was interesting. Respondents believed negative publicity was detrimental to a celebrity's reputation when surveyed after two days as compared to two-weeks. We also found that a two-day delay between publicity and measurement shows that respondents were still neutral to the idea that publicity/coverage of the celebrity is representative of the character of the public figure, while

those with a two-week delay believed that publicity does not represent the character of a public figure.

Our findings also showed that some respondents believed negative publicity is detrimental to a celebrity's reputation overall. Those respondents that did believe this, also believed the news story they read represented the character of the public figure. Respondents also believed that the public figure was more or less relatable based on the framing of the news story. That is, if the story was positive, and they believed the story did indeed reflect the character of the public figure, they were more likely to agree that the public figure was relatable.

Taken together, these findings reaffirm the idea that negative publicity has more of an impact then positive, but that the effects are not lasting. This fits well within the Cultivation Theory, which in parts, posits that heavy media coverage creates a lasting impression. However, for our purposes in this study—where we wanted to see the impact one story has on opinion—this finding is important. It tells us that regarding public figures, people tend to forgive or forget transgressions if they happen once. This is an important distinction as many businesses today find their CEO's or Presidents in the news cycle for transgressions. What was not examined in this study, however, was what the impact of stories in multiple sources—even for a short time—would have on the reputation of a public figure. More research should be done to investigate this phenomenon, specifically investigating if the type of transgression matters as compared to the reaming of the story.

The present study has shortcomings in regards to demographic representation. Participants in the study were enrolled in courses in which professors agreed to conduct the study. Due to the method of sample selection, our sample lacked heterogeneity in gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. Previous research has shown that gender of the participant in a study can affect the outcomes of results. Gentry and Haley (1984) found that different types of information processing generated significance between gender identity and recall.

Overall, this study can assist a communication director in understanding how to explain the power of the media and publicity to their CEO or President. This study shows how people relate to a news item and how they recall the information disseminated after two-days and two-weeks. As the findings show little difference between the two time periods, one can be reassured that one story will not make or break a reputation. However, this study cannot be taken out of content. If the organization receives multiple stories, or one story in multiple sources, the findings of this preliminary study are not valid. Additional information and studies are available on handling media backlash, or how to deal with crisis situations.

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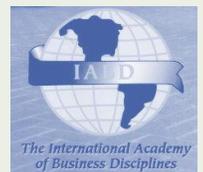Lukeman, G. (1991), Analysis shows new way to think about TV recall scores, *Marketing News*, *25*(8), 24.

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