

La Crosse, the River, Denial:

A College Town Struggles to Frame Responsibility for River Drowning Deaths

Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D APR

California Polytechnic State University
Department of Journalism, Building 26
San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, USA

805-756-6705

e-mail dswanson@calpoly.edu

Paper prepared for the Mass Communication and Society Division,
(Effects of Mass Communication), AEJMC Mid-Winter Conference,
Reno, Nevada, February 23, 2007

An earlier version of this research was presented in the Criminal Justice and Criminology
section, Western Social Science Association convention,
April 20, 2006, Phoenix, Arizona, USA.

Running head: RIVER DROWNING DEATHS

La Crosse, the River, Denial:
A College Town Struggles to Frame Responsibility for River Drowning Deaths

Abstract

Twenty-four college-aged men have drowned in the Mississippi River near La Crosse, Wisconsin, since 1974. Six of the deaths occurred between 1997 and 2004; the most recent death was in 2006. Some community members contend the deaths are tragic and unrelated. Others argue the collective set of circumstances points to a series of murders committed by a mysterious “River Killer” that local authorities are unable or unwilling to bring to justice. This research, conducted within the theoretical perspective of media framing, involves a content analysis of local news newspaper narratives referencing the 2004 drowning and/ or earlier deaths. The analysis of newspaper editorials, commentaries, news stories and letters to the editor published within a 90-day period after the 2004 drowning illustrates the establishment of two mediated frames, each interpreting the series of deaths in a vastly different way. The contradictory frames frustrate the efforts of community leaders who mishandled a key opportunity on live television to build a consensus of opinion that could have moved the community toward much-needed resolutions.

Background

On April 15, 2004, the body of college student Jared Dion, 21, was pulled from the Mississippi River in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The discovery ended a five-day search for the student, who had disappeared from a crowd of his University of Wisconsin-La Crosse peers while waiting for a bus outside a tavern. At the time of his death, Dion was the sixth young man and the fourth college student to have drowned in this stretch of the Mississippi River since 1997. Dion's death re-energized community debate that had been simmering for years over allegations that a "River Killer" loose in the community was preying on young men.

With a population of 51,000, La Crosse is the 228th largest metropolitan area in the U.S. and the 12th largest community in Wisconsin. In 2004, the city had more than 130 licensed taverns – one of the highest proportions of licensed liquor establishments per capita in the state, according to local experts (Pappe, 2004). The city has three institutions of higher education that enroll more than 16,000 college students. All three campuses are within a one-mile radius of the riverside downtown district where many of the city's largest taverns feature 'all you can drink' specials for as little as \$4 per person.

Excessive alcohol consumption is a problem in many college towns, but it seems especially intransigent in La Crosse (Swanson, Zwaska, & Zegers, 2004), in part because a large majority of college students self-identify as binge drinkers (Vanvoorhis & Sullivan, 2000). The alcohol problem is exacerbated by what a former chair of the UW-La Crosse Psychology Department has characterized as "generational support for large levels of

drinking” (Morgan, 2002) that impedes the efforts of local government authorities to build a consensus with citizens, address the issue and mitigate its community impact.

The drowning deaths have had a powerful impact on the La Crosse community, and there is much sorrow over the loss of so many young lives. At the same time, La Crosse residents are divided over who should be blamed for the deaths, what the community’s responsibility (if any) should be, and how the police department and other local authorities should interact with the community to prevent future drownings.

This research makes an effort to contribute to the discussion in two ways. It provides a content analysis of newspaper narratives to illustrate the two differing perspectives that divide the community in regard to responsibility for the deaths and potential resolution efforts. It provides an examination of narratives from an April, 2004 televised Town Hall meeting called by local officials in part to refute the “River Killer” hypothesis and solicit community feedback. The examination of the narrative discourse from this televised meeting shows that local officials failed to take advantage of the opportunity to discredit irrational speculative theories, re-frame the issue, build public consensus, and move the community toward solutions that could reunite a divided citizenry.

Although this research offers a study of a specific situation, the conclusions it offers could be applied in any number of situations where communities are sharply divided and elected officials need to propose solutions that can reunite differing factions and restore harmony. In short, what we can most readily learn from the river drowning deaths in La Crosse, Wisconsin, is how other communities faced with similar tragic circumstances can come together, reach consensus on key concerns, and move forward.

Literature Review

This research has been conducted within the theoretical perspective of media framing. Within the perspective of framing, it examines local news newspaper narratives – editorials, commentaries, news stories and letters to the editor – that reference the 2004 drowning of Jared Dion as well as other past incidents.

As used by a writer or speaker with the intent of getting an audience to identify with people and situations (Hybels & Weaver, 1989), the narrative provides “succinct, irrefutable evidence for an issue” (Rottenberg, 1997, p. 342). The study of narratives is a valid and reasonable method for reaching conclusions about communication (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991) because it “leads to critique, to a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” (Fisher, 1987, p. 90).

As a communication strategy, framing allows those who would hope to control dialogue to define their leadership (Bensimon, 1987) by highlighting narratives and issues that are salient for public discussion from those that are not (Tankard, 1997). By effectively using the framing power at their disposal, news media reporters and editors can build on collective memory – the sharing of a common past – to select story topics, structure story focus, and build the information on which news stories are based (Edy & Daradanova, 2006). As a result, the framing of stories in the media allows reporters and editors to engage in “selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of experience or ideas over others” (Andsager & Smiley, 1997. p. 2).

It has been argued that members of the public are receptive to framed narratives because the public seeks out order or “organization of experience” that framed narratives provide (Jah-Nambiar, 2002, Abstract). In other words, the public can be expected to look for and then support frames in which reporters and editors present social experience in ways that people can logically and emotionally identify with (Tucker, 1998). Thus, a mediated frame serves as a means for organizing narrated information from a variety of sources so that the community can adopt particular beliefs.

Methodology

This paper examines local news media narratives published by the La Crosse Tribune within a 90-day time period beginning on April 15, 2004, the date law enforcement officers discovered the body of Jared Dion, and ending on July 15, 2004. The Tribune is the only daily newspaper in La Crosse County and is considered the dominant print news medium. It reports a daily circulation of 31,941 and a Sunday circulation of 41,415 (Lee Newspapers, 2007).

An examination was made of all newspaper stories, editorials, columns, and letters to the editor published in print or in electronic form on the Tribune web site during this time period and making any reference to the Dion case or earlier drowning deaths of college-aged men. In all, 17 newspaper stories, 10 editorials and columns, and 24 letters to the editor were included in the study.

In addition, a narrative examination was made of the videotape and audio transcription of a live, prime time broadcast Town Hall meeting. This April 22, 2004 meeting was called by the city police department and was televised on La Crosse

television station WKBT-TV. The stated goals of the meeting were to disseminate factual information about the drowning cases, refute the “River Killer” hypothesis, and solicit community feedback on the drowning deaths and possible resolutions (Paape, 2004).

Findings

The newspaper narratives

Taken as a whole, the newspaper editorials, commentaries, and news stories overwhelmingly frame the drowning incidents – both individually and collectively – as tragic accidents, occurring by coincidence, fueled by alcohol consumption, involving irresponsible youth, and taking place in a binge drinking culture in which individuals are culpable for their actions. This mediated frame suggests increased personal responsibility is the solution to preventing future tragedies.

On the other hand, the letters to the editor of the newspaper frame the deaths as mysterious murders, occurring with some measure of conspiratorial circumstances, involving alcohol consumption, victimizing innocent youth, in a culture where binge drinking is a norm, in which authorities are shirking their responsibility to protect citizens from dangers. This mediated frame identifies increased community protection as the solution.

The stories, editorials and columns, letters, and narrative comments from the televised broadcast provide two alternate “stories of living” (See Fischer, 1987, p. 58). These alternate perspectives are shown here in table form as Frame A and Frame B:

<u>Frame A</u>	<u>Frame B</u>
Tragic accidents	Mysterious murders
Coincidence	Conspiracy
Alcohol fueled	Alcohol involved
Irresponsible youth	Innocent youth
Binge drinking culture	Binge drinking norm
Individuals as responsible	Authorities as responsible
Solution: Personal responsibility	Solution: Community protection

The newspaper editorials, columns and news stories overwhelmingly support Frame A, that the deaths were tragic accidents. This is the position taken by the police department and the newspaper’s editorial staff. In this mediated frame, the deaths are shown as accidents, precipitated by a number of different pre-existing conditions such as the fact that each victim was intoxicated at the time of his death, the prevalence of binge drinking in the community, and the number of bars in the downtown area.

“The real killer in La Crosse is alcohol abuse. It has been the killer for decades.”
[Editorial, April 21]

“La Crosse has a binge drinking problem and a dangerous river nearby.”
[Column, April 25]

“Is there a serial killer? Police don’t have any evidence to indicate it. Medical officials and school officials believe the real issue is the amount of alcohol consumption. We don’t think there’s a serial killer either.” [Editorial, May 14]

The letters to the editor, on the other hand, support an opposing framed narrative – that the deaths are mysterious murders, and that the police department and other authorities are responsible and should be blamed for not addressing the incidents as such. The letters express a variety of opinions about the competency of the local authorities.

Most of the narratives in this mediated frame suggest the authorities are unwilling or unable to examine all facts.

“I would like to know why it is so far out of the realm of possibility for the La Crosse Police Department, the media, and anyone else who had a say over how this tragedy was presented to the public, to acknowledge that we have had a very odd series of events take place and that these deaths could very well be linked in some way.” [Letter, April 19]

“We are in a college town and we need to offer a certain amount of security and safety for the college students who are part of our city.” [Letter, April 19]

“[I]t would be easy to coerce an intoxicated individual to the river throw him/her into the river without any visible trauma or signs of struggle. [sic]” [Letter, April 26]

“Maybe an experienced psychic should be brought into the investigation.” [Letter to the editor, April 26]

“Where are the police officers on horses at these times?” [Letter, May 14]

“Not only were all males and college age, there was a reason they went to the river.” [Letter, May 20]

The Town Hall meeting

The two hour Town Hall meeting was moderated by the Tribune publisher and emceed by the La Crosse Police Chief Ed Kondracki. The meeting opened with a rambling, 417-word introduction by the chief and proceeded to a PowerPoint presentation that plodded through two dozen slides filled with photos of the downtown area, statistics relating to the drowning deaths, and information about the department’s investigation of the cases. While never using the term “River Killer” (commonly used by those in La Crosse who believe there is a conspiratorial element behind the deaths) Kondracki made it clear from the outset that he rejects the “River Killer” hypothesis.

“These rumors go on and on and on. Simple fact though, is there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that any crime has been committed.” [Police Chief Ed Kondracki]

The chief paused the presentation to read a commentary from one of the local student newspapers about “a night of drinking” from a student’s perspective. The author, never identified, claimed to have fallen into the river after a night of drinking.

Without making a linkage from the article to any goal of the televised meeting, the chief then resumed his PowerPoint presentation, only to stop again as the panel of experts was introduced. The panel included a representative of the Wisconsin Department of Criminal Investigation, several experts on alcohol and other drug abuse, two university student services representatives, an alcohol prevention specialist, and the county’s medical examiner.

At this point, before the panel members could make any statements, the meeting was opened for questions from the audience in attendance. Audience members were instructed to address their questions to members of the panel. In most cases, questions could not be answered by panel members before panel members were shouted down or subjected to catcalls from the audience.

For example, the county medical examiner was describing how he witnessed drunk Oktoberfest goers in 2003 skinnydipping from a houseboat at the downtown levee in 42 degree water. As the medical examiner tried to make a point about the alcohol-fueled behavior being irresponsible, he was shouted down by members of the audience.

“How many of them were by themselves?” [Audience member]

“How many of them drowned?” [Audience member, followed by shouts and laughter]

Though all of the experts on the panel characterized the deaths as tragic accidents, the vast majority of the Town Hall audience indicated disbelief in this framing of the incidents. As the program continued, a succession of speakers came forward to challenge the position of the experts on the cases – often through argumentative speculation, or questioning of investigating officers’ competence or authority to make judgments. Speakers were frequently interrupted with applause, and occasionally with shouts and cheers from the audience.

“Some of us who do believe that maybe somebody they got a uniform of a police officer or some type of security guard who’s pulling these kids away without causing a big distraction.” [Applause] “And that’s how they’re sneaking away, and the killer is getting away with it. That’s how I feel. I feel somebody is dressing up like them, he or she is doing this, a security guard, anything that has some form of a badge.” [Audience member]

“And there is someone who is very sophisticated who may be indeed involved in transactions with these people that eventually lead to their death.” [Audience member, followed by cheers and applause]

Although no eye witness account of any of the deaths had been reported to police, several members of the Town Hall audience claimed to have knowledge to the contrary.

For example:

“That one guy was afraid of the water. The guy at Oktoberfest, people actually seen a uniformed officer run him in.” [Audience member]

Despite promises by the police chief that the Town Hall meeting would provide an opportunity for community members to offer plausible recommendations for preventing additional drowning deaths, the meeting ended without this taking place.

What suggestions were offered by the public seemed questionable from a practicality standpoint.

“Install laser lighting or motion detector systems all along the boardwalk that would light up the whole park if someone gets too far off the shoreline, and then

possibly sets up a detection system back to 9-1-1. This would . . .light up the whole park and possibly wake up the person that's gone too far." [Audience member]

"Put infrared cameras. . . in the bars so that we can see who's serving the drinks, and the bartenders will be held responsible, and the owners." [Audience member]

But even these suggestions of specific ways to make the river area safer brought criticism from a speaker at the Town Hall meeting – who alluded back to the mysterious circumstances seen by many in association with these drowning deaths.

"You talked about cameras being a solution. You should have never mentioned it. Because now if there is somebody who's doing this, now they know that the cameras are going to be there, and they're going to move down river or to a different town." [Audience member]

Discussion

Mediated frames offer the opportunity for news media narratives to be clarified, focused, enhanced, and distinguished from other competing ideas. Unfortunately, this process also lends itself to the creation of a situation where those who support particular framed narratives see increasingly less reason to look outside those frames for answers they might not have previously considered. The potential for this would seem especially great when no community leadership steps forward to lead powerfully in consensus-building.

This study of news media narratives regarding the river drowning deaths in La Crosse, Wisconsin, suggests members of the community were strongly supportive of what is called in this research Frame B – the perspective that the drowning deaths represent mysterious murders, occurring with some measure of conspiratorial circumstances, in a community in which authorities are shirking their responsibility to protect citizens from dangers. Because the televised Town Hall meeting was ineffectively

managed by the police chief, and because the chief and other officials failed to demonstrate their authority and move to re-frame the issues, nothing that happened at the Town Hall meeting was sufficient to diminish the community's embrace of Frame B.

The Town Hall appeared poorly organized from the outset. The police chief's rambling introduction and 25-slide PowerPoint presentation was ineffective in person – and much less so as live television. The experts on the panel seemed unprepared for the speculative and emotionally-charged audience questioning that resulted. Even the technical setup of the meeting was awkward, as several of the panel members had to share a microphone and could not be heard well at times during the broadcast.

Throughout the meeting, the chief made repeated promises that the Town Hall would end with “some sort of positive plan” – a promise that was clearly impossible from the start, given the large crowd, high level of emotion, and two-hour format of the televised broadcast. When the program had ended and the chief's continued promises of problem-solving never came about, it was no wonder that “half of the audience got up and walked out” [Letter, April 27].

The Town Hall meeting was called by the chief. He, and the panel of experts in the Town Hall meeting, had the facts on their side. All the evidence, applied logically, points to the perspective identified here as Frame A. Had the experts in the Town Hall quickly, authoritatively, and decisively dismissed the speculative questions and inflammatory comments from audience members, there might have been an opportunity for the city officials, law enforcement officers, and other experts to ratify their position of authority and build the consensus needed to unite the community to prevent another tragic drowning. Despite their support for what is identified here as Frame B, members of

the audience clearly indicated through their comments that they wanted the authorities to take charge, to accept responsibility, and commit to additional protection of the community to prevent more drowning deaths.

The authorities in the Town Hall meeting should have accepted that challenge. They should have taken responsibility, offered new means of protection – and as the same time, re-framed the dissenting perspective (Simons, Morreale, & Gronbeck, 2001) to fall in line with what is offered here as Frame A. This approach has been called the creation of “cultures that transform destructive conflict into constructive contention” (D’Andrea, 2005, para. 10).

Taking this strong action would have been in line with contemporary thinking in public relations, and would have allowed the officials to focus on areas of agreement mutual to all parties so as to move everyone forward together (Knight, 1999). In effect, the inability of the police chief and other authorities to do this added more fuel to the opponents’ fire.

In the weeks that followed the Town Hall, the Tribune’s letters to the editor, though they varied in topic and focus, continued to be mostly aligned with Frame B – still holding to the idea of a mysterious conspiracy and demanding better protection from local authorities. The police chief offered no follow-up to the Town Hall meeting.

Then, eighteen months later, another college student drowned in the Mississippi River. The speculation about a “River Killer” resumed in the local and national news media.

References

- Andsager, J., & Smiley, L. (1997). Evaluating the public information function: How media agents framed the silicon breast implant controversy. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Baltimore, MD, July 30-August 2.
- Bensimon, E. M. (1987). The meaning of good presidential leadership: A frame analysis. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Baltimore, MD, November 21-24. (ERIC document ED 292 416)
- D'Andrea, R. (2005, April 15). Harnessing conflict. Washington, DC: GovExec.com Business News Daily. Retrieved February 3, 2007, from www.govexec.com/features/0405-15/0405-15advp.htm.
- Edy, J. A., & Daradanova, M. (2006, May). Reporting through the lens of the past. Journalism, pp. 131-151.
- Fisher, W. R. (1987). Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press.
- Hybels, S. & Weaver, R. L. (1989). Communicating effectively (2 Ed.). New York: Random House.
- Jah-Nambiar, S. (2002). Reframing frame analysis: Gaps and opportunities in existing research. Paper presented to the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Miami Beach, FL, Aug. 7-10.
- Knight, M. G. (1999, Fall). Getting past the impasse: Framing as a tool for public relations. Public Relations Review, 25, 3, pp. 381-399.

- Lee Newspapers (2007). Daily and Sunday newspaper circulation. Davenport, IA: Lee Enterprises. Retrieved January 5, 2007, from www.lee.net/newspapers.
- Morgan, B. L. (2002, February 7). Personal communication.
- Paape, A. (Executive Producer). (2004, April 22). Town Hall Meeting [Television broadcast]. La Crosse, WI: WKBT / Queen B Television.
- Rottenberg, A. T. (1997). The structure of argument (2 Ed.) Boston: Bedford Books.
- Rybacki, K. C., & Rybacki, D. (1991). Communication criticism: Approaches and genres. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Simons, H. W., Morreale, J., & Gronbeck, B. E. (2001). Persuasion in society. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swanson, D. J., Zwaska, A. A., & Zegers, K. M. (2004). Implementing a Social Norms approach to reduce alcohol abuse on campus: Lessons learned in the shadow of 'The World's Largest Six-Pack.' The Social Science Journal, 41, 621-635.
- Tankard, J. W. (1997). PR goes to war: The effects of public relations campaigns on media framing of the Kuwaiti and Bosnian crises. Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Baltimore, MD, July 30-August 2.
- Tucker, L. R. (1998). The framing of Calvin Klein: A frame analysis of media discourse about the August 1995 Calvin Klein jeans advertising campaign. Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 15(2), 141-157.
- Vanvoorhis, C. R. W., & Sullivan, S. M. (2000, April). Preliminary summary of UW-La Crosse alcohol task force data collection. Unpublished document, University of Wisconsin- La Crosse.