

To what extent has sensationalism in the Oregon shooting, the Ebola Crisis, and the missing Malaysian flight avoided genuine problems in print media?

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Introduction

Sensationalism can be defined as subject matter designed to produce startling or thrilling impressions or to excite and please vulgar taste. (Dictionary.com, 2016) The use of sensationalism in media, or other forms of entertainment can be traced back to ancient roman society, where messages would be publically presented. On public message boards, information was considered to be sensationalized as scandalous and thrill-seeking stories were typically presented first, and in the most exciting manner. From that period on, although not officially given a name, the idea of sensationalizing stories became predominant in society. (Czarny, 2016)

It is typical amongst news outlets that stories involving death and crime gain the most attention. Not only do these stories exhibit controversial, graphic, and expressive details, but give news outlets the opportunity to report on high profile cases, that can be followed and updated for days to come, filling up air time. (Czarny, 2016) The idea of sensationalism began after the nineteenth century, due to William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Both publishers worked for high profile media outlets based out of New York City, and developed the idea and name of *Yellow Journalism*. Journalists would uphold the title of a “yellow journalist” as their stories would exaggerate events and conceal accurate details to attract and rouse viewers. (Story, 2016) Although unethical, media outlets saw dramatic increases in the numbers of viewers, and thrived off of the attention they were receiving. From this increase in viewership, tragic stories were becoming graphically exposed and the genuine components of stories were being lost.

Although the fundamentals of journalism have dramatically evolved since the nineteenth century, many similar situations regarding the sensationalizing of stories remain the same. In an article written by staff writer, Robin L. Barton of *The Crime Report* she analyzed a study of the

sensationalism present in media over the past 100 years, conducted by *The Journal of Media Psychology*. Eager to find out whether the level of guilt these journalists expressed in their stories changed throughout the 100 year period, the study revealed that although sensationalized word choice decreased in the headlines of media, the overall message in portraying exaggerative information has remained relatively the same. (Barton, 2011)

In situations deemed as tragic, characterized by extreme sadness, there is frequent competition to report death and violence. (Dictionary.com, 2016) Within this competition, viewers seek to find the source that contains the most details, and most interesting headline. Jacob W. Roberts a researcher of future social impacts of *Southern California International Review* noted that news outlets traditional responsibilities have drastically shifted due to much needed advertising revenue, which puts a major hinder on factual reporting. (Roberts, 2014) Due to the need to sensationalize media, for the purpose of gaining more viewers in turn for monetary exchange the overall reporting for tragedies, and minute details within tragedies that make national headlines, have gotten in the way of old-fashioned reporting for genuine problems in the media.

Although monetary value in news outlets, is an essential component to assist in the efficiency of producing news and have a heavy dependence on advertising, the practice of reporting factual and ethical news should remain as a higher stance than any other money-making factor. The news overall, has a wide impact and influence on most people who watch it. Especially in tragic events, sensationalism has overstepped its boundaries, and has made tragic stories seem as fiction, and continue to report the graphic details, as if it is a contest of who can obtain the most information and viewers within a short time period. Being that sensationalized

media has placed such an emphasis on exaggeration and need for graphic details it has distorted the news and made people sway away from even considering the possibility of obtaining factual data.

Over the past decade, there have been hundreds of stories where sensationalized information has been the prominent source of data in a news story. After faulty reporting and the wrongful expression of information, later information reveals details of sensationalism that actually occurred. In reading dozens of stories where vulgar taste was clearly the prime reason for expressing this information, the tragic stories of Umpqua Community College in Oregon, the Ebola Crisis in the United States, and Malaysia Airlines flight 370, exemplify sensationalism at its core.

2015 was a major year for gun violence, and there were over 300 reported accidents in this year alone. In October at Umpqua Community College in Oregon there was a mass shooter on campus, prompting many deaths. Even though the police department and students knew this was going to be a story for national television, the police department chief refused to use the name of the shooter, and pleaded for the press to do the same. However, this did not last very long and as soon as the name of the shooter was released, his picture appeared all over local television and news stations. (E., R. 2015)

This instance supported the use of sensationalism in the media, as brutal details of what went on in the community college were being covered on a local and national level. Stories about this day were being picked up, and brutal details were emerging faster and faster. Research done by the *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* confirms the idea that there is a strong relationship between news viewing and trauma-related symptoms especially being within a close

proximity to tragedy and can be a leading cause for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This story was especially sensationalized due to the fact that graphic images and stories were being presented for the sole purpose of being picked up by news channels. In an article written by Dirk Vanderhart, Richard Perez-Pena and Michael S. Schmidt on the events that occurred the day of the Oregon shooting, details were expressed of how the shooter chose to shoot certain students, and the conversation exchanged seconds before lives were taken. (Vanderhart, Perez-Pena, Schmidt, 2015) Based off of the research done by the *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press* in addition to a study operated by *Psychology Today* by Graham C.L. Davey PhD, he expresses the evidence that reading and watching these news ordained clips can cause a severe amount of behavior changes, in addition to psychological effects such as anxiety, sadness, and depression. Although any news report can contain components that actualize these symptoms, the sensationalism present in stories such as these, avoids the problems that are genuine in media; which can bring up anything including gun control to selling weapons to mentally unstable people. (Davey, 2012)

In February of 2015, the “Ebola Crisis” in the United States became a prominent figure in the media. People of the United States were rationalizing the fear of catching the Ebola crisis, and being the next face on the news of Americans who contracted the virus. The headlines of many news stories read “Ebola in America” and “Ebola Virus Outbreak.” (Stevens, 2014) These over-sensationalized headlines put people into extreme panic mode, and the media continually did this as news stations ratings were increasing from people to find out where and when this disease had spread. According to Neal Stevens of RedState, fear sells. He also emphasized the difference of contraction and diagnosis. In the first case of Ebola reported in the United States,

the individual contracted the disease in Liberia, however was not officially diagnosed until returning to the United States. In these moments of panic, viewers of the media were believing whatever was being told to them, yet not understanding the best and most accurate concept of what was occurring. (Stevens, 2014)

In an article published by the Emerson College newspaper, student Casey Dalager emphasises the point that the American media has presented very few solid facts regarding the disease, and the fact that the media is prone to resulting in yellow journalism. Dalager also shows the evolution of CNN's news coverage from the beginning of when the sensationalized Ebola crisis made its way into America. She points out that headlines began saying "Could Ebola go Airborne," but evolved into articles of pure fact of the disease when truth came full circle and people began to understand the sensationalized components of the media. (Dalager, 2014)

Although this disease is extremely deadly and dangerous what is also extremely dangerous is what is being reported. When the supposed "outbreak" in the United States began media outlets had disoriented and false facts that left people thinking about the fact that they could actually get the disease by standing next to an infected person. (Bernhardt, 2014) Of the crisis the media but America into, there were only eight reported cases and people only contracted these diseases from Liberia, Sierra Leone, or having contact with the initial person who brought this disease over from Liberia. (Dalager, 2014)

Correspondents from CNN Saeed Ahmed and Dorrine Mendoza referred to the outbreak of the crisis as "Fear-bola," expressing that the way media has sensationalized this story has been extremely dangerous. These correspondents ensured Americans that there was little to worry about and if Americans wanted to worry about something- than to worry about getting a flu shot.

With this, it shows the power of media and the way people are influenced to believe something as true just because they see it on a headline. The use of sensationalism in the Ebola crisis; yet any crisis has proved to be extremely dangerous and is continually portraying the wrong information to the general public. (Ahmed and Mendoza, 2014)

Amongst the countless examples of recent sensationalized media a prime example that sent Americans into a major frenzy was Malaysian Flight MH370. When news broke of this missing plane, immediately news outlets began reporting facts that had no bit of evidence to be backed up. Speculation amongst individual news outlets reports began, and facts relating to stolen passports, purposeful veering off course, and the number of people on board began to emerge. (Roberts, 2014)

Douglas Kellner from University of California Los Angeles emphasizes the fact that especially in broadcast media, journalism has developed the structural model of a business rather than a place for news. The use of sensationalism as a way to retain viewers as a form of entertainment has become even larger, and the marginal idea of earning a profit has become the prime purpose of news. Kellner argues that the public is learning less and less about key issues and has produced a less informed general public. (Kellner, 2013)

In the case of the Malaysian airline flight, reporters got away with sensationalizing media by reporting the very few amount of facts they knew and then turned to plausible theories as a way of presenting news. People watching were frequently intrigued and captivated by the theories being presented. In this over sensationalized media example, it is not only concerning that this is the information being presented but legitimately dangerous. The common person is completely unaware of groundbreaking news stories and lacks the knowledge of what should be

known. Over the past decade specifically, this problem of over sensationalizing stories for the sole purpose of viewers and a profit has gotten dramatically worse. The actual stories of these tragedies are not being portrayed in the right manner and people are often looking over the details of what is deemed and should be made aware as important. Michael Wolff, of *The Guardian* emphasizes the idea that the missing airline is all data, no real facts, and endless theories. (Wolff, 2014)

Although there has been research conducted on this topic before, there has been little to no research that clearly identifies the way sensationalism is affecting the general public and the detrimental effects that are occurring due to the misinformation that is being presented based off of sensationalism.

Methods

A suitable approach that identifies how sensationalism has avoided genuine problems in the media is by conducting a content analysis. A content analysis clearly identifies the detailed and systematic examination of particular text and examines the patterns and overall themes through looking at direct human interaction or pieces of text such as newspaper articles. When exploring the possible methods that could be used to research this topic, it could essentially be determined that a content analysis is the best method to be used.

Not only does the components of a content analysis relate directly to my paper, but the typical steps used to conduct this research were the vital steps I took to complete the duration of the paper. The research process of identifying sensationalism in tragedies is one of great extent. With this pulling a sample of the articles based upon the Oregon shooting, the Ebola Crisis, and the Malaysia Flight MH370 allowed prompt research to be conducted and ensured that articles

using sensationalism were properly evaluated. Although there were articles pulled that reported straight fact, it was confirmed that these articles were not published until more information of the tragedy was released.

A paper published by Julie B. Arthur used a content analysis to explain the national and regional U.S. newspaper coverage on child neglect. Using a content analysis allowed the researcher to explain the types, factors, and significance of Arthur's findings. By using a content analysis Arthur was able to fill the gap of how child neglect is portrayed in the media. (Arthur, 2012)

When analyzing these articles and the variety of sources identified the prime components that were examined were headlines and the use of sensationalistic language or tabloid speak. These specific components and examples allow my methods to be more concise and aid in defining the research presented. Part of using a content analysis allows the researcher to conduct and look for the information needed. The information presented in my research is considered objective. Observing headlines and bodies of text enables me, as the researcher, to draw accurate and concise conclusions.

When researching the different research methods that could be deemed effective for my particular study, a content analysis provided the most accurate information for my study. As opposed to other methodologies, the content analysis allowed me to discuss a description of the articles and general information I studied, the overall definitions such as what sensationalism or yellow journalism is, and the patterns observed as my research process went along.

Even though a content analysis fit the requirements of my research accurately, there were limitations of what could actually be done. Some limitations of this methodology included the

fact that it primarily uses the method of describing and analyzing rather than figuring out where these so-called answers began. This often prevents researchers from being able to trace back the information and the underlying components of research, as the specific information such as the article in hand is the only piece of evidence being analyzed.

Even with these limits, the steps of a content analysis have been ultimately effective as it combines research with observation to finalize conclusions. When observing articles and noting trends that are occurring with sensationalized media the process of using a content analysis was a major strength for acquiring credibility and reliability, which was essential in the process of my paper.

Results and Discussion

After analyzing the three tragedies including the Oregon shooting, the Ebola crisis, and the disappearance of the Malaysian flight MH370 it has been proved that these events were dramatically over sensationalized. What is often overlooked is the effect that this sensationalized media is having on individuals and the world. Specifically regarding the Oregon shooting copycat crimes of this nature began to take off. According to an article published by BBC news and written by Taylor Kate Brown killers involved in current crimes are often obsessed and know minute details of prior crimes. The way these killers are exposed are through the publishing of data through the media. In the Oregon shooting and prior shootings, victim's families often beg the press to not use the name of the killer, after psychological studies have shown that people with the ideas and intentions of completing these crimes are infatuated with killers. (Brown, 2015)

Based off the research presented, mass shooters are more likely to act when recent events regarding mass shootings have just taken place. According to Sherry Towers, a researcher at Arizona State University, the likelihood of a mass shooting to occur after one just happened, is extremely high risk for the following 13 days. With the Oregon shooting, the Ebola crisis, and the missing Malaysian flight the over-publicity of these events are causing more problems than people see. (Brown, 2015)

After observing the information professional researchers have concluded the results are startling and require immediate change. Results show, that sensationalism in media has prompted the media to enhance their decisions in covering only what is considered interesting, taking dangerous risks for the sole purpose of obtaining viewers, and starting “trends” for negative aspects of media. Even though media outlets thrive off the idea of having missing pieces of stories as it allows journalists to use their imagination when proposing possible theories of what occurred and engage the audience to follow their segments, the dangers are overlooked.

These results enhance the idea that media is being manipulated to control the general public and gain overall attention. This idea is known as media manipulation and is used to influence viewers.

Conclusion

The use of sensationalism within the tragedies of the Oregon school shooting, the Ebola crisis, and the missing Malaysian airline flight have had detrimental effects on people involved in these tragedies in addition to viewers of news sources. These detrimental effects have included influencing others behavior and attitude, and psychological disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) over a period of time for people involved in these tragedies or

bystanders. Sensationalism in media primarily includes reporting ambiguous facts that the general public should not need to be aware of. (Holcomb and Mitchell, 2015)

Joseph Grenny, author of four *New York Times* best selling novels indicated that these ambiguous details influenced negative action to take place following the event of a tragedy due to a variety of news reports. Grenny listed the following attributes of a news story to cause repeated actions by other individuals. In the news coverage media outlets released the name of the shooter, the characteristics of the shooter, the details of the crime, details of the victims, and compared the shooter to prior mass murderers. (Grenny, 2012)

Completely eliminating sensationalism in media will never occur. The concept of sensationalism is used extremely frequently and eliminating it altogether could never be plausible. Instead focusing on ethical standards rather than participating in what makes the most money is a prime contingency of this change. According to an article published by HG.org, which publishes legal affiliated articles, censorship is implemented when content is considered dangerous to the overall public. The use of sensationalism is often viewed as just a way to make money and add to the overall entertainment scheme. However, there are negative psychological issues regarding the use of sensationalism that are not being recognized. By implementing stricter censorship laws regarding the use of what information is published in the media these problems can be avoided. (What Are Common American Censorship Laws, 2014) When media outlets are reporting stories, fact should be the only component; not theories of what may or may not have happened.

With the use of strict censorship this problem can be decreased. The idea of enforcing stricter laws regarding censorship is extremely broad, and could take years to officially be

enforced. By making the general public aware of the dangers sensationalism is causing and the interference on the objective media they should be reporting, it is the overall intention that viewers will realize this as a problem and not support these media outlets. The tragedies of the Oregon shooting, the Ebola Crisis, and the missing Malaysia Airline flight are all prime examples of the negative ways in which media sensationalism has affected the way people perceive, understand, and expect news.

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