

Framing comparative risk

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Background

Shanto Iyengar (1991), among others (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001) has invited us to consider the ways in which the framing of media messages influences the responses of the public to those stories, and the social issues to which they relate. Among the most important influences are those he associates with what he refers to as episodic and thematic frames. We understand the news as stories, and usually these are stories about people. Episodic frames tend focus our attention on events in the lives of individuals. Although stories in the news don't often invite the same degree of identification with the principal characters in the news as we do with those we become familiar with through prime time television series, journalists often attempt to dramatize the plight of victims in ways that at least attract our attention. On occasion, they may also attempt to demonize individuals that they identify as the "bad guys." These are the functions served by episodic frames.

From time to time, journalists also try and call our attention to a more general problem or concern. These are problems that may be illustrated by one or more examples, but these concerns are best represented in statistical terms. Most often, these are summary statistics that are used in an attempt to describe the circumstances that the "average" man or woman is forced to deal with from time to time. These are stories that are explored through thematic frames. However, as Zillman and Brosius (2001) have reminded us, such stories have messages that may be distorted when particular exemplars are used for dramatic effect. In addition to problems associated with unrepresentative exemplars, the use of thematic frames increases the possibility that misinterpretations of frequency and base rate data will lead to erroneous conceptions of risk (Berger, 1998, 2000).

As Iyengar has demonstrated, the framing of stories, even at this most basic level has implications for the ways in which members of the public think about public policies, especially those related to racial inequality. Although Iyengar (1991) worked primarily with television news in the context of an experimental paradigm, he suggested that in the realm of stories about poverty, including stories that associated poverty with race,

episodic framing was more likely to lead viewers to blame the victims, while thematic frames led viewers toward locating blame within society and social institutions.

However, as Entman (1993) and others (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Price & Tewksbury, 1997) have made clear, there is much more to framing than is captured in this basic distinction between thematic and episodic leads. We are concerned with more than the assignment of blame. Indeed, we are concerned about the role that journalists play in shaping the standards that segments of the public use in determining whether some circumstances and conditions should earn a position on the policy agenda.

This study is concerned with the role that journalists and their editors play in shaping our understanding of inequality as a social problem (Gandy & Baron, 1998). This is a study of the ways in which journalists help shape the ways in which we come to understand the distribution of risk as a matter of public concern.

The Press and the Framing of Risk

Risk, as explored by media scholars “refers to the probability of property damage, injury, illness, or death associated with a hazard” (Singer & Endreny, 1993, p. 6). Singer and Endreny explore six of seven types of hazards they believed were likely to be covered in the press. They include natural hazards, and accidents, and a class of materials hazards, such as those related to chemical spills, or from the use of products like alcohol and tobacco. The study of hazard and risk naturally invites attention to the assignment of blame and responsibility, and it explores the distribution of risk indirectly by examining “whose risks are emphasized” and “whose risks are ignored.” Their analysis suggests that: “the media attended disproportionately to the risks of the more affluent, more powerful members of society, thereby potentially contributing to erroneous perceptions of the risks to which different social categories are exposed” (Singer & Endreny, 1993, p. 43).

There is a distinction, however, to be made between stories that merely take note of or refer to victims defined by race, gender or class, and stories that take note of disparities, or differences in the rates of exposure for members of these groups. Stories of this sort are relatively rare. Singer and Endreny (1993, p. 57) report: “Stories about illness, for example, almost never make reference to differential incidence by

socioeconomic status, even though many diseases take a far higher toll of low status groups.” Stories about racial disparities in exposure to hazards are even more rare. The identification of the populations at risk has been shown to influence the estimation of the magnitude and the social nature of the hazard (Irwin, Jones & Mundo, 1996).

Such stories are the focus of this study because the distribution of risk reflects the operation of power and influence. Far too often, these disparities are associated with the actions of individuals that we may choose to label as discrimination. It is often the responsibility of statisticians to demonstrate that empirically determined disparities in exposure to hazards are the product of unwarranted, or illegal discrimination (Baldus & Cole, 1980; DeGroot, Feinberg & Kadane, 1986; Zeisel & Kaye, 1997). Journalists have come to share this responsibility, and in some cases, have taken the lead in identifying examples of widespread misbehavior.

Although the news media may report on the occasional case where a charge of discrimination is pursued against an employer, a vendor, or on an occasion, a government agency, the press plays a more important role when a legal claim or a policy proposal is made in response to an investigation into discriminatory practices that some journalist actively pursued. Investigative journalists are considered to be something of a rare breed of specialists (Protess, et al., 1991). These activist reporters have been aided by new technology in their efforts to become more independent of the influence of sources (Garrison, 1998; Houston, 1999; Houston, Bruzzese & Weingerg, 2002; Meyer, 2001). With the aid of statistical packages and special training, investigative reporters have made use of public and private sources of data to highlight what they see as problematic disparities, and on occasion, to associate those disparities with malicious intent.

The impact that these investigative reporters and “precision journalists” have on the character of news is just beginning to be explored (Protess, et al., 1991). Understanding their role is especially important in the current media environment (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; McChesney, 1999). Because these journalists are thought to enjoy greater autonomy than traditional journalists who depend upon interested sources for the raw materials used in their stories (Gandy, 1982; Koch, 1991), they seem likely to influence the determination of issues that are brought before the public. The expectation

is that these journalists and their editors help to set the public agenda more effectively than they have in the past (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cook, 1998).

It will also be important to examine the ways in which those issues are framed for public consumption, as it seems likely that these frames will help to determine how those issues are understood (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). It will be important to consider how the populations at risk understand these hazards. Finally, it will also be important to consider how the general population understands the distribution of risk as a social problem. This paper presents a preliminary assessment of the ways in which investigative reporters have framed a variety of stories about relative, or comparative risk.

The sample

The “stories” that form the basis for the analyses I will present were selected from a database that contains individual articles, or a series of articles, many of which have been submitted by newspaper, magazine, and television stations to an annual competition organized by a professional organization of journalists. Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) maintains this database as a resource for journalists, educators, and scholars interested in ensuring the survival of this branch of journalism.¹

At last count, the database contained 17,000 “stories.” However because there is no category of investigative reporting called “comparative risk,” a strategy for selecting items had to be developed. Each story in the database is described in a brief abstract. A number of search terms were developed that were expected to identify stories about comparative risk. Among the most productive search terms were: redlining, profiling, discrimination, and risk. Because we were interested in database journalism, abstracts that included reference to computers were also examined. In order to include explicit comparisons, the database was also searched for the terms “more likely” or “less likely” in the abstract. Each of the abstracts was read to determine if the story was likely to include articles that included discussion of disparities or relative risk. The stories that were selected were published between 1978 and 2000. Most of the stories were published after 1990, and 22 of them published in the year 2000. It is important to note that each “story” is likely to include more than one article that was published as part of a series on

a particular issue. Several of the stories included more than 20 articles, some of which published over a period of one or more years.

Because the sample is strategic, rather than random, or even systematic, there is no basis for claiming that the frames used in these stories are representative of investigative journalism as an enterprise. Indeed, only one of the stories I selected from those published in 2000 were selected as finalists in the IRE's competitionⁱⁱ. However, the number of stories is large enough to provide a basis for describing the ways in which patterns emerge across and within particular types of stories. QSR NUDIST, a software package for qualitative data analysis was used to prepare a preliminary assessment of 543 articles.ⁱⁱⁱ

These articles fall primarily into five subject areas: Finance, Criminal Justice, Health Care, Education and Employment. The largest number of articles was about criminal justice (N = 251), followed by finance (N = 109), and health care (N = 66).

Analytical Approach

The analytical approach taken for this initial report is limited to an examination of "risk patterns" or references to the distributions of outcomes among groups or populations. This analysis is further restricted to explicit comparisons between groups defined by race, gender, age or class.

Because these stories have been selected on the basis of their focus on the hazards or risks faced by groups, and because precision journalists are likely to rely on statistics to illustrate a disparity, it seemed reasonable to expect that these stories would lead off with thematic, rather than episodic frames. Indeed, more than 85 percent of the lead paragraphs were thematic (86.7%), rather than episodic.

The primary racial comparisons in these articles were between Whites and Blacks. String searches for the terms "whites" and "blacks" produced 886 paragraphs with references to Blacks, and 664 paragraphs with references to Whites, and 411 in which both Blacks and Whites were referred to. There were 314 references to Hispanics, while references to Asians were relatively rare (53 paragraphs). Blacks and Hispanics tended to be treated as a couplet, in that they were both included in 139 paragraphs. There were

also 56 stories that focused its comparisons on groups other than Blacks and Whites. Another 49 articles included comparisons that referred to “minorities,” and 13 referred to minority communities when making comparisons.

We believe that ways in which these comparisons are made helps to determine the ways in which media audiences will evaluate the disparities that are reported using these frames (Wänke, Schwarz & Noelle-Neumann, 1995). Cognitive theory suggests that the target, or subject of a comparison triggers, or activates a stereotype that includes the most salient attributes of the subject. These attributes are then used in making sense of a comparison. Thus, it matters whether African Americans are the target, or the referent of a comparison because of the particular stereotypes that have been associated with Black people over time (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gandy, 1998). This is especially relevant with regard to risk comparisons where the activation of a stereotype is likely to invite both a minimization of the disparity, and an assignment of causal responsibility to the victims (Irwin, Jones & Mundo, 1996, p. 4).

The choice, or expressed preference for a policy option, or a strategy of intervention is understood to reflect the extent to which victims are held in high regard. Researchers have noted an exception to the otherwise powerful reversals in the preference for risky interventions that occur when threats are framed in terms of certain loss, rather than uncertain gain (Khaneman and Tversky, 1984). For example, Levin and Chapman observed that when the “victims” were “less desirable,” the usual reversal does not occur (Levin & Chapman, 1990). This suggests that the use of African Americans as the targets of comparisons between victims is likely to have an impact on the extent of the public’s support for policies that would be designed to reduce the disparity in risk exposure (Vaughan & Seifert, 1992).

One example of a comparison in which African Americans were the target or focus of the comparison is the following: “Blacks with the same resources buying the same value homes were denied loans as much as three times as often as whites.” An example of a comparison where Whites were the targets of the comparison is as follows: “In fact, the analysis showed a white applicant earning less than \$10,000 a year had nearly the same chance to get a mortgage as a black person making more than \$75,000 a year.” In most cases, but not always, the target appears first in a direct comparison.

Black people were most frequently the targets of comparisons ($n = 517$), and White people were a distant second ($n = 148$). Although there was an equivalent number of stories in which Black communities and White communities were the focus of direct comparisons ($n = 21$ and 22 , respectively), there were twice as many comparisons in which White communities were the target, as there were comparisons in which Black communities were the target ($n = 62$ and 31 respectively).

Women were three times more likely than men to be the targets of comparison (24 v 7). And, although comparisons along class lines were relatively rare, the poor were the targets of comparisons ($n = 18$) more often than were the wealthy ($n = 2$).

Framing relative risk

Three different frames were identified as important for shaping our understanding of relative risk: 1) a **probabilistic frame**, in which Blacks or Whites were said to be more or less likely to win or to lose; 2) a **statistical frame**, in which statistics, primarily percentages, rates, proportions, or ratios were used as the basis for comparison, and 3) a **qualitative frame**, in which one group was characterized as being better or worse off than other. For the purposes of this preliminary analysis, only comparisons between Whites and Blacks are presented.

Within the probability frame, four options were coded: 1) Blacks are more likely to lose, 2) Blacks are less likely to win, 3) Whites are more likely to win, and 4) Whites are less likely to lose. Clearly, this framework assumed the existence of journalistic standards that would feature articles about Black loss and White gain. Given that assumption, what remained to be determined was the specific way in which these differential outcomes would be set forth. As expected, the negative frame for Blacks appeared most often. There were 100 comparisons within 57 articles (10%) that suggested that Blacks were more likely to lose than Whites. Only 19 comparisons in 16 articles suggested that Blacks were less likely to win. Only 22 comparisons in 11 articles suggested that Whites were more likely to win, and none suggested that Whites were less likely to lose.

More articles used descriptive statistics, rather than references to probability or likelihood to frame racial disparities. A similar strategy was used in coding the

comparisons that used statistics as was used in the analysis of probability claims. For example, in one of several articles about disparity in the granting of mortgages, the report noted that: “First Union, the second largest bank in Florida, denied loans to 47.5 percent of black applicants and 21.4 percent of non-Hispanic white applicants.” This would be coded an example of greater Black risk, because the proportion of African Americans who received denials is higher. This particular frame was used in 205 paragraphs in 95 articles.

Only 18 articles used statistics to suggest that Blacks enjoyed less success than Whites, while considerably more (30) articles used numbers in this way to present evidence of greater White success, or less frequent White failure (17 articles).

For those racial comparisons that did not rely on statistics or talk about likelihood, we still observe a remarkably similar pattern. Blacks were disadvantaged in comparison with Whites in 85 articles that framed the disparity with references of this sort: “I suspect that white jurors are simply not as sensitive to the deaths of blacks as they are to fellow whites, said Smith, the Tulane sociologist. They think its' wrong but they don't develop the same sense of outrage.”

More complicated frameworks were also encountered, as we see in a health related story: “Black women get more of the scarring kind of hysterectomy operation than white women, and fewer of the less-invasive type than white women. Blacks with diabetes and circulatory problems get more leg amputations, but fewer leg-saving operations than whites.”^{iv}

Whites were characterized as being better off than Blacks in 25 articles. And in those few comparisons in which everyone was characterized as suffering, Whites were presented as being less severely burdened than Blacks in three cases. Such was the case, for example in an article about drug sentencing, in which an observer noted: “the drug of choice for whites doesn't carry as severe a sentence as the drug of choice for blacks.”

Understanding disparity

A relatively small number of articles explicitly raised the spectre of racism as an explanation for observed disparities. The exact term was used in only 51 articles (73 different paragraphs). Articles that included reference to racism were more likely to be

concerned with problems within the criminal justice system (N = 24) than with health care, or finance. Although there were more articles about finance than about health care, the **number** of articles making reference to racism was nearly equal (5 and 6 respectively).

Somewhat more articles (78) included explicit reference (in 164 paragraphs) to discrimination. As in previous analyses (Gandy, 1996), articles about financial disparity were more likely to include references to discrimination (29.4%) than articles about criminal justice (11.9%). Such references were extremely rare in health-related articles, appearing in only 7 paragraphs in two articles (3%).

When we examine the relationship between particular disparity frames and overall themes, we find that comparisons reported in terms of the probability of Black loss are more likely in articles about finance (20.1%) than in articles about health care (13.6%) or criminal justice (8.3%). However, when the framing of comparisons relies on ratios and percentages, there is almost no difference between finance (25.6%) and health articles (25.7%), although both story types rely on statistics more than articles about criminal justice (16.7%).

Indeed, articles about criminal justice are even less likely to make qualitative comparisons involving Blacks (13%) than are articles about finance (14.6%), or health care (24%).

Perhaps in response to the burden of objectivity, journalists tend to rely upon others to express the opinions or reflect the perspectives that they believe are important or relevant. Although there are many ways in which we might identify quotes or attributions, the use of “says” or “said” appears to be a useful way to select examples within a database. In this preliminary analysis, 367 articles (67.5%) included at least one such attribution (n = 2,537). By searching for attributions in articles with particular themes, we observed a notable difference in the ways in which journalists chose to present those issues. Slightly more than half (53.2%) of the financial articles included attributions, while more than two-thirds of the criminal justice (69.3%) articles do. An even greater share, approximately 80 percent of the health related articles, included attributions (81.8%).

Sources are quoted about a broad range of issues, but they are rarely associated with explicit racial comparisons. For example, attributions are associated with only eight (8.0%) of the references to the high probability of Black loss, and thirteen (6.3%) of the statistical comparisons indicating Black loss. They were linked, however with 26 (15.4%) of the qualitative assessments of Black loss.

Preliminary conclusions and recommendations

This preliminary analysis suggests that journalists and their editors share a common framework for talking about disparity and relative risk. This is especially true when the stories are about racial disparity. These discursive patterns seem to reflect the operation of both professional and ideological constraints. The overwhelming tendency in those stories that involve comparisons between Whites and Blacks is to emphasize the hardships faced by Blacks, rather than the advantages enjoyed by Whites.

There were, for example, three times as many comparisons using percentages that were phrased in such a way as to emphasize Black loss, than were framed to emphasize White success. There were five times as many comparisons that framed the disparity in terms of probability or risk to Blacks, rather than in terms of advantages that Whites were likely to enjoy.

Negative assessments like these tend generally to be focused on groups that are assumed by journalists to be relatively powerless. This group clearly includes Blacks, women, and the poor. It is especially important to note that members of these groups also appear to believe that they are subject to more risks in the environment, at least in comparison to White males who tend to feel less vulnerable to a range of everyday hazards (Flynn, Slovic & Mertz, 1994). However, the impact of these comparisons may vary in relation to the common stereotypes, or social constructions of these less powerful groups.

The overwhelming tendency for comparative risk frames to use African Americans as the targets of comparison raises important questions for scholars of communication, as well as for those concerned with the ways in which media frames shape public orientations towards risk. The stereotypes of African Americans that are activated among Whites (Entman & Rojecki, 2000) when Black people are used as the

targets of comparisons means that Whites are likely to minimize the importance of the risks at the same time that they are likely to attribute responsibility to the victims. This means that well-intentioned investigative reporters seeking to raise public consciousness and concern about the Black victimization may ironically contribute to a mounting backlash against race-targeted public policies. There are other concerns.

African American consumers of investigative news series designed to mobilize White public opinion are an unintended “accidental audience.” Although the evidence is quite limited, there is some basis for assuming that observers who identify with the victims will respond differently to comparative frames than those who do not share a sense of “linked fate” (Gandy, 2001). It will be important for media scholars to explore the ways in which social identities help to explain the ways in which comparative frames shape an individual’s estimation of their own risk, as well as the risks they imagine that members of their reference groups are subject to.

We have observed that articles about discrimination that use statistics tend to be about institutions rather than individual actors. Institutions enjoy different levels of trust within society. These differences are reflected in the difficulty with which those institutions, rather than individual bad actors can be associated with questionable, or even illegal activities in the press.

Institutional racism is a serious charge, and it is a difficult one to make in print. Journalists and their editors seem to demand more substantial empirical evidence before they, or their sources are allowed to suggest the possibility that racial discrimination can explain the disparities that are observed.

There is less reluctance to talk about discrimination in relation to financial institutions. It is far easier for journalists, or their sources to charge banks and other financial institutions with racial bias. It is apparently more difficult for journalists and their editors to justify charges of institutional racism against the criminal justice system. It has only been around the issue of racial profiling that the concerns about policing and racial discrimination are readily discussed. Thirty of articles about the criminal justice system (11.9%) included reference to profiling.

Yet, it seems that there is an exceptionally long way to go before disparities in health related outcomes will be discussed in terms of discrimination, racial, or otherwise.

Doctors and other health care professionals are apparently held in too high a regard for journalists and their editors to risk challenging this dominant image. Although there were a substantial number of articles about the health care system in which African Americans appear to be victims (Smedley, Stith & Nelson, 2002), the media, and the general society still tend to blame the victim rather than the system. It is not at all clear that mounting political pressure to reduce the long-standing disparity in health outcomes between Whites and African Americans will actually be reflected in increased attention to these concerns in the press (Brawley & Freeman, 1999).

What we have done in this preliminary analysis is to describe patterns in the use of particular frames to present disparity. A different approach will be needed if we are to identify the factors that determine which topics will attract the attention of journalists and win the support of their editors. Story selection and framing reflect a complex of influences that include the characteristics of the markets in which media are distributed (Gandy, 1999). It is already clear that investigative journalism represents only a small part of the institutional process that determines what sorts of content fills the space between the front and back pages of our newspapers. We are just beginning to explore the nature of the constraints that govern the selection of particular frames. It will be especially important to determine the extent to which story selection and framing patterns vary as a function of the characteristics of the primary audience being sought by the publishers, their sponsors, or their sources.

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ⁱ www.ire.org/resourcecenter

ⁱⁱ Judy Thomas' story, "AIDS in the priesthood" was published by the Kansas City Star. Her analysis was based primarily on an examination of thousands of death certificates. See: Jamie Manfuso (Ed.). 2001. The IRE Collection: Winning Investigations.

ⁱⁱⁱ A research assistant, Li Zhan, coded each of the articles after training.

^{iv} When the comparison was complex, or included more than one, the first comparison was used to characterize the paragraph.