Audience Reactions to Local TV News

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A survey measuring audience reactions to local television news was administered to middle school/high school students, college students, and senior citizens. The majority in each population reported watching the news to learn about the world. They agreed that news is mostly about violent events and that such news causes them to worry and to feel that the world is not a safe place. Significant sex differences were found indicating that women were more likely to report turning the news off and worrying about news content, whereas college men were more likely to watch to see coverage of violent events. The possibility of modifying news content was raised.

Keywords: TV news; effects; audience reactions; anxiety

A number of studies have examined the impact of television news coverage of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In both children (e.g., Schuster et al., 2001) and adults (e.g., Saylor et al., 2002), greater television news consumption was correlated with higher stress levels. Such findings add to previous research, which has suggested that viewers may be adversely affected by negative television news content. The term “negative news” is broad and incorporates a range of topics, which may vary widely in intensity, imagery, and story line. Certainly the events of 9/11 were an extreme example of negative content. However, for almost two decades, issues have been raised about what has been referred to as the bad news–good news dichotomy (e.g., Stone & Grusin, 1984). “Bad” news was defined early on as that which is negative or downbeat (e.g., Stone, Hartung, & Jensen, 1987), and content analysis demonstrated that television news consists largely of bad news, in which stories focus on violence, disaster, economic turmoil, and tragedy (e.g., Carroll, 1989; Stempel, 1988).

Bad news may affect the viewer both in terms of news comprehension and emotional reaction. Research using news video considered potentially upsetting to viewers has resulted in sex differences in news comprehension (e.g., Gunter &
Furnham, 1986). News with milder negative content has resulted in a reduced ability to learn subsequent nonnegative stories (Mundorf & Zillmann, 1991). Television news also has been shown to portray minorities as violent and to overrepresent minorities as criminals, relative to actual police statistics (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000). Dixon and Linz have suggested that such portrayals may help to reinforce stereotypes.

A small body of research has demonstrated that when bad news is reported about a community in which viewers reside, it is correlated with the development of negative images about both the community and the news station delivering the information (e.g., Gallician & Vestre, 1987). In addition, surveys conducted with television news directors report that news personnel believe bad news depresses and desensitizes viewers (Gallician & Pasternack, 1986), scares the audience, and creates resentment in viewers (Driscol & Splichal, 1998).

Some researchers have noted that with an emphasis on breaking news, certain subsets of bad news, such as sudden violent events (e.g., a plane crash), are reported on a more frequent basis than less dramatic but more deadly risks, such as the dangers of smoking (Greenberg, Sachsman, Sandman, & Salomone, 1989). The media itself will, on occasion, recognize this discrepancy. One recent newspaper article pointed out the relatively overblown concern over West Nile virus and child abductions compared with less dramatic issues that affect more people, such as sun exposure, pharmaceutical errors, and lack of exercise (Kolchik, 2002).

Bad news prevails over good news because it is more profitable. As Stone et al. (1987) note, “Bad news has made money and hyped audience attention at least since the penny press days, suggesting ‘bad’ news may be journalists’ good news” (p. 37). However, recent studies suggest that audience enthusiasm for bad news may be on the decline, especially when such news is reported without a proper context (e.g., Rosenstiel, Gottlieb, & Brady, 2000). Rosensteil et al. have documented a continuing decline in local television news audiences and, as a result, they suggest that changes in news content may be forthcoming.

How do viewers feel about television news? Relatively few studies in the published literature survey viewers. Not much is known about the extent to which viewers prefer “bad” or “good” television news, or how viewers perceive the effects of such news. Gallician (1986), surveying local news viewers in Arizona, determined that the majority of participants reported that bad news has an undesirable effect on viewers, that television news does not present a fair balance of good and bad stories, that television news makes things appear worse than they really are, and that television news should have more stories that are positive and bright. Although there were few sex differences reported, women were significantly more likely than men to report that they would prefer television news to have an increased number of bright and positive stories.

The present study reports survey data collected from three different populations: middle school and high school students, college students, and senior citi-
zens. The data were collected over a period of 6 years and have been separately reported elsewhere (Klein & Cox, 1992; Klein, Cox, & Di Padova, 1996; Klein, Cox, Russell, & Smith, 1990). Data were collected first in college students, then in middle school/high school students, and finally in senior citizens. Each survey reports viewer behavior and reactions to a number of variables, including motives for watching the news, perception of content, perceived effects of watching, reactions to the good news–bad news balance, and whether the news is perceived as providing an accurate portrayal of the world.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Middle school and high school. The study included a convenience sample of 268 students in grades 7 through 12 who were attending two Pittsburgh-area public schools. Six students were dropped from the analysis because they did not indicate their sex. Of the remaining 262 students, there were 146 women and 116 men. In 7th grade, there were 35 participants (14 men, 21 women); in 8th grade, 64 participants (29 men, 35 women); in 9th grade, 35 participants (16 men, 19 women); in 10th grade, 43 participants (22 men, 21 women); in 11th grade, 46 participants (19 men, 27 women); and in 12th grade, 39 participants (16 men, 23 women). A total of 8 students were dropped because they indicated that they never watched the news (2 at 7th grade, 4 at 8th grade, 1 at 11th grade, and 1 at 12th grade). Sixty-seven percent of students were Caucasian, 31% African American, and a total of 2% were Hispanic, Asian, or Other.

College. The study consisted of a convenience sample of 457 students at one university (332 participants) and one college (125 participants), both located outside of the Pittsburgh area. Twenty-two participants were dropped because they did not indicate their sex. Forty-seven percent of the students were female, 53% male. Four students were dropped from the analysis because they reported never watching the news. The mean age of the respondents was 23.5 years, the median age 20 years. Ninety-one percent of the sample was Caucasian and 6% was African American. A total of 3% were identified as Asian, Hispanic, or Other.

Senior citizens. The convenience sample consisted of 271 senior citizens (identified as being 60 years of age and older) from the Pittsburgh area. Of the 132 surveys returned, 39 were dropped from the analysis because they were incomplete (15), were completed by participants younger than age 60 (9), reported not watching the news (8), or did not indicate their sex (7).
remaining 93 surveys included 43 women and 50 men. The mean age was 74.5 years, the median 73 years, with a range of 60 to 90 years. Of the 43 women, the age range was 64 to 90, with a mean of 76.5 years, and of the 50 men, the age range was 60 to 90, with a mean of 72.1 years. All participants were Caucasian.

MATERIALS

A 31-item survey was designed for use by college students (Klein et al., 1990) and was subsequently used by the other populations. Participants indicated frequency of news-watching behavior (from never to every day). Ten yes/no questions examined motives for watching television news (e.g., “I watch to see violent and tragic events,” “I watch to see good things that have happened in the world,” “I watch because the news is enjoyable,” “I watch because nothing else is on at the time”).

Sixteen questions used a 4-point Likert-type scale with options given from strongly agree to strongly disagree (e.g., “TV news stories often make me worry,” “I turn off TV news because the stories are too violent, tragic, or disaster-related,” “TV news makes me feel that the world is a safe place in which to live,” “There is an appropriate balance between good and bad news on TV,” “TV news presents an accurate picture of the real world,” “TV news presents an accurate picture of my personal world,” “TV news is violent because that’s what’s really happening”).

Definitions. There were four questions in which the terms “good” news and “bad” news appeared. Participants were not instructed as to how to define the terms. Other questions, which explored traditional “bad” news concepts, referred specifically to violence, disaster, and/or tragedy.

Administration of the survey. All students were given 20 min during class time in which to respond to the survey items. The surveys for senior citizens were distributed at four locations serving seniors and were retrieved 1 week later. The surveys were administered by staff serving the centers and senior citizens were given more than 20 min or physical assistance in filling out the survey if they so requested. All participants were reminded to confine their responses to local newscasts.

Data analysis. The categories of strongly agree and agree were collapsed into one category, as were the categories strongly disagree and disagree. Chi-square tests for contingency tables were performed for each population surveyed. However, in the middle school/high school population, the tests were performed separately at each grade level (7-12).
RESULTS

FREQUENCY AND MOTIVES FOR VIEWING

Almost half of the sample of college students (46%) reported watching local news 4 or more days per week. Fifty-three percent reported watching 1 to 3 days per week. Men reported watching significantly more often than did women, $\chi^2 = 20.63, df = 4, p < .01$.

At 7th grade, 42% reported watching the news 4 or more days per week and 54% 1 to 3 days per week. There were no significant sex differences. At 8th grade, 39% reported watching news 4 or more days per week, and 58% watched 1 to 3 days per week. Eighth grade women were significantly more likely to report watching the news, $\chi^2 = 11.95, df = 4, p < .01$. At 9th grade, 68% reported watching the news 4 or more days per week, and 26% watched 1 to 3 days per week. There were no significant sex differences. At 10th grade, 98% reported watching the news 4 or more days per week. There were no significant sex differences. At 11th grade, 30% reported watching 4 or more days per week, and 52% between 1 and 3 days per week. There were no sex differences. At 12th grade, 72% reported watching the news 4 or more days per week, and 21% between 1 and 3 days per week. There were no significant sex differences.

Almost three quarters (74.1%) of senior citizens reported watching local news every day and 17% at least 4 times per week. There were no significant sex differences.

As seen in Table 1, the motive for watching the news selected most frequently across all populations was to “learn about the world.” At least 85% of each population selected “yes” to this item. (Note that percentage data reported for middle school and high school students show the range across the six grades.) There were no significant sex differences.

The second most frequently reported motive for watching the news, for each population, was “to see good things that have happened.” Between 60% and 83% of each population identified this as a motive. The third most frequently selected motive for the college and senior citizen population was to be able to “talk to others” about world events. “Talking to others” was the fourth motive selected by the middle/high school population. There were no significant sex differences in any population for these items.

“Seeing violent and tragic events that have happened” was the third most common motive for watching news among the middle school and high school children. More than 58% of the children selected this item. Watching violent and tragic events ranked as the fourth selected motive among both the college and senior citizen populations, with 45% and 33%, respectively, of these populations selecting this item. Significantly more men than women answered “yes” to this item in the college population, $\chi^2 = 4.17, df = 1, p < .04$.

One third of the college population reported watching the news because it is entertaining, and 30% reported it as enjoyable. Significantly more men than
women selected “yes” to each of these questions, respectively, $\chi^2 = 15.50$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = 6.07$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$. Middle school/high school students had a similar range of responses to each of these items (entertaining, 20% to 37%; enjoyable, 20% to 34%), whereas 30% of the senior citizen population selected entertaining and 27% selected enjoyable as motives for watching.

Although 11th graders did report watching television news because “nothing else is on” (23%) or because “the TV is on” (32%), none of the other grades or populations selected these items at a rate higher than 19%. However, significantly more women than men at the college level, $\chi^2 = 9.96$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = 9.30$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; were likely to answer “yes” to each of these items.

**NEWS EFFECTS**

As seen in Table 2, fewer than 30% of participants in each population agreed that “TV news makes me feel that the world is safe.” More than half of the respondents in each population (51% to 77%) agreed that they would be “happy” if television news had more “good” stories. This response was significantly more likely in women than men, in both the college population, $\chi^2 = 4.60$, $df = 1$, $p < .03$, and among women in eighth and ninth grades, $\chi^2 = 4.35$, $df = 1$, $p < .03$; $\chi^2 = 6.21$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$.

In contrast, among 7th, 8th, 9th, and 11th graders, significantly more men than women report that they would “switch to another station if the one they typically watched had mostly good news,” $\chi^2 = 3.61$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$; $\chi^2 = 7.14$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = 6.92$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2 = 7.53$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$, respectively.

More than 60% of the participants in each population agreed that “TV news makes me worry.” This response was significantly more likely in women than in men at the college level, $\chi^2 = 19.46$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$, in eighth and ninth grade, $\chi^2 = 4.35$, $df = 1$, $p < .03$; $\chi^2 = 6.21$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$, and among senior citizens, $\chi^2 = 8.4$,
df = 1, p < .01. Relatively few college students report turning off the television as a result of story (11%) or picture (8%) violence. However, significantly more college women than men report turning off the news for these reasons, χ² = 7.22, df = 1, p < .007; χ² = 6.88, df = 1, p < .008. The reported range in middle school/high school was 9% to 39% for story violence and 3% to 33% for picture violence. At the high school level, 11th-grade women were significantly more likely than men to report turning off due to story or picture violence, χ² = 4.44, df = 1, p < .03; χ² = 4.16, df = 1, p < .04. A large overall percentage of senior citizens report turning off the news because of story (43%) or picture (40%) violence. Significantly more of those who turn it off are women, χ² = 5.56, df = 1, p < .01; χ² = 7.68, df = 1, p < .01.

NEWS BALANCE

Only 45% of the college population agrees that there is an appropriate balance between “good” news and “bad,” although a majority of respondents in middle school/high school population (51% to 91%) and the senior citizen population (60%) agreed. There were no significant sex differences. However, a slightly different question asked if television news shows “too much violence,

TABLE 2: Percentage “Agree” to Selected Survey Items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Middle/High School</th>
<th>Senior Citizens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel world is safe</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5-30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switch if good</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>14-33*M</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes me worry</td>
<td>65*F</td>
<td>60-69*F</td>
<td>66**F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy if good</td>
<td>53*F</td>
<td>60-77*F</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn off story violence</td>
<td>11*F</td>
<td>9-39*F</td>
<td>43**F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn off picture violence</td>
<td>8*F</td>
<td>3-33*F</td>
<td>40***F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate good/bad</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51-91</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much violence</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26-45*F</td>
<td>71**F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way world is</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>85-97</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects own world</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33-61</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence is what’s really happening</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>74-88</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About good things</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7-25</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About violence</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>60-90</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People want to see violent events</td>
<td>57*M</td>
<td>14-41*M</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: M = males more likely to agree; F = females more likely to agree. The ordering of columns is based on when the data were collected, from oldest (college) to most recent (senior citizens). The middle school/high school data are a range in Grades 7-12, with an asterisk representing significance in at least one grade.

*Indicates significant sex differences, with p < .05. **p < .03. ***p < .001.
disaster and tragedy.” Almost three quarters (71%) of the senior citizen population agreed, half the college population agreed, and the range among middle school/high school students was 25% to 45%. Significantly more women agreed in both the senior citizen group, $\chi^2 = 10.70, df = 1, p < .01$, and in 10th grade, $\chi^2 = 6.77, df = 1, p < .01$.

**NEWS REALITY**

Similar percentages of people in college (70%) and among senior citizens (68%) agreed that local television news “shows us the way the world really is.” Similarly, large numbers of college students (63%), middle/high school students (74% to 88%), and senior citizens (75%) agreed that television news “shows as much violent news as it does because that’s what’s really happening in the world.” The range for agreement on this item was 85% to 97% for middle school/high school students. There were no significant sex differences. However, when asked if television news “accurately reflects their own personal world,” far fewer college students (28%), middle school/high school students (33% to 61%), and senior citizens agreed (40%). The higher percentage range in middle school/high school reflected three grades—seventh, ninth, and eleventh—where 51%, 57%, and 61% of students agreed that the news reflects their personal world, respectively.

**NEWS CONTENT**

A majority of respondents in each population (college, 83%; middle school/high school, 60% to 90%; senior citizens, 79%) agreed that television news is primarily about “violence, disaster and tragedy.” There were no significant sex differences. When asked if television news shows violence because “that’s what people want to see,” 57% of college students agreed, between 14% and 41% of middle school/high school students agreed, and 53% of senior citizens agreed. Significantly more college men and men at seventh grade agreed with this item, $\chi^2 = 5.18, df = 1, p < .02; \chi^2 = 7.20, df = 1, p < .01$. Very small numbers of viewers agreed that television news was mostly about good things happening to people (college, 8%; middle school/high school 7% to 25%; senior citizens, 7%). There were no significant sex differences.

**DISCUSSION**

Some major similarities were observed across three different populations of local television news viewers. The vast majority of viewers of all ages and both sexes indicated that they watch the news to learn about world events. The majority of respondents reported watching the news at least 3 days per week, and senior
citizens were the largest consumers of local news. Respondents across all populations agreed that local news consists largely of violence, tragedy, and disaster. The majority agreed that such news accurately portrays the real world and makes them feel unsafe. The majority also concur that violence is reported as frequently as it is because that is what is really happening in the world.

Of interest, far smaller percentages of viewers in each population reported that the news accurately portrays their personal world. This raises the possibility that some news viewers perceive their immediate environment as safe but perceive a far more “dangerous” world existing “somewhere out there.” Such a conclusion has potentially serious implications. It suggests that television news may help to create a society of individuals who perceive considerable danger in the world.

Some of our younger respondents, however, reported that local news also accurately reflects their personal world. The majority of students in grades 7, 9, and 11 agreed with that statement. Such agreement may reflect the fact that some personal worlds are more dangerous than others. More than one third of our younger student population was African American, and minority neighborhoods are often associated with higher levels of violence (e.g., Farver, Ghosh, & Garcia, 2000).

Although a majority of viewers reported tuning in to see good news, they reported not finding much good news and instead report that the news makes them worry and makes them feel as though the world is not a safe place in which to live. By combining these findings with those of researchers demonstrating that local news portrays minorities in a biased way, by overrepresenting them as criminals (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000), one might hypothesize that local television news contributes to the development of prejudice.

Interesting sex differences also emerged from these surveys. In general, women were significantly more likely than men to report being negatively affected by television news content. Women of all ages were significantly more likely than men to report that television news makes them worry and that they turned off the news because of either violent story or picture content. Women in the college population and the middle school/high school population were significantly more likely than men to report that there is too much violent content in local news.

Men in the college population were significantly more likely than women to report watching the news to see events with violent, disastrous, or tragic content and to report that the news is entertaining and enjoyable. Because news consists largely of stories that describe violence, disaster, and tragedy, college men are possibly indicating that they find such stories enjoyable and entertaining. Men in the college population and the middle school/high school population were significantly more likely than women to agree that news has so much violent
content because that is what people want to see. In addition, men in 7th through 9th grades, as well as 11th grade, were significantly more likely than women to report that they would switch to another news station if the one they currently watched had mostly good news. One possible conclusion is that men seek out news with story content related to violent events, disaster, and tragedy and at younger ages report a willingness to change stations to find such news.

In general, senior citizens were less likely than those in the other populations to report watching the news to see stories with violent content and more likely to report turning off the news because of violent content. At least 40% of all senior citizens surveyed report turning off the news because of such content. This is an astonishingly large number of viewers who report taking action. It would appear that professional broadcasters would want to take this into consideration given the large numbers of senior citizens who report regularly watching the news.

Three quarters of all senior citizens agreed that the news reports so many stories with violent content because that is what is really happening in the world, but almost as many agreed that the news has too many stories with violent content. More than three quarters of the senior citizen population report watching the news for the purpose of talking with others. It appears that senior citizens are faced with a dilemma. They wish to use news as a vehicle for conversation but at the same time report frequently turning off the news because of violent content.

In summary, the present study indicates that the news is perceived as largely about violent and tragic events, that these events are considered an accurate portrayal of the real world, and that viewers report feeling unsafe after watching the news. Women of all ages report being more adversely affected by news content than are men, whereas men of college age seem more likely to seek out and report enjoying news with violent content. Senior citizens are more likely to watch the news than other age groups and to want to share the news with others. But, they are also the ones most likely to turn off the news because of violent content.

An increasing number of reports suggest lower audience ratings for local news (e.g., Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2002; Rosenstiel et al., 2000). Perhaps it is time for those in charge of news programming to seriously consider a change in content. Because news directors report that their newscasts scare viewers (e.g., Driscol & Splichal, 1998) and viewers in our surveys appear to agree, it is conceivable that down the road a combination of factors might precipitate a change in news content. Based on our research, such changes might be most appealing to senior citizens and women of all ages and least appealing to young men. Local television news content, it has been argued, is determined largely by advertising forces and by White men who control news stations (Heider, 2000). It remains to be seen if the current findings are of interest to those in charge.
REFERENCES

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