

THE MEDIA ROLE IN MARGINALIZING THE MENTALLY ILL: TAKING CORRECTIVE ACTION

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RESUMEN

El entendimiento que tiene el público sobre los problemas sociales está influenciado profundamente por los medios de comunicación. Desafortunadamente, los medios de comunicación en los EEUU no sirven con fidelidad a las personas que sufren de enfermedades psíquicas. Los medios de comunicación refuerzan las imágenes negativas de estas personas. Publican generalmente que son imprevisibles, violentas y peligrosas. Como consecuencia, es importante que los que quieren cambiar estas imágenes negativas comuniquen mensajes contrarrestantes a través de los medios de comunicación. De este modo, se puede construir imágenes públicas mejor informadas y positivas. En los EEUU, profesionales que trabajan en el área de salud mental han formado coaliciones constructivas con periodistas y reporteros de televisión y radio para diseminar mensajes para solucionar algunos de estos problemas. Este trabajo incluye ejemplos de estos tipos de actividades.

ABSTRACT

The public's understanding of people, events and social issues is greatly influenced by the mass media. However, the welfare of persons with mental illnesses is not well-served by the images and messages about mental illness that are typically communicated by the American media. In print and broadcast media alike, the prevailing messages reinforce public stereotypes of the mentally ill as being unpredictable, violent and dangerous. Therefore, it is important that persons interested in communicating accurate information about mental illness engage in public communication activities through the mass media in order to generate more informed and constructive community responses to persons with mental illnesses. Through alliances with print and broadcast journalists, some professional groups and individual mental health practitioners in the U.S.A. are taking action to address this problem. Examples of these productive media activities are described.

PALABRAS CLAVES: EEUU, medios de comunicación, salud mental, estereotipos, periodismo, televisión, radio.

KEY WORDS: The United States, Mass Media, Mental Illness, Stereotypes, Mental Health Professionals, Media Activities

INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF THE MODERN MASS MEDIA

Our understanding of our world today is largely derived from media accounts. Even what we do not hear directly from the media we hear from family members and friends who are most likely recounting what they heard or saw on television or read in the newspaper. (Altheide and Snow, 1991). The influence of the media ranges from the most mundane

aspects of daily life to the most critical social issues.

“...The power of the media influences our sense of what are appropriate expectations for family, partners, children and parents. It creates ideals for love, for lifestyle, for community. It tempers our behavior concerning a sense of safety, a feeling of security, and a level of comfort in different situations. It expands or constrains our dreams for opportunity and self-realization. (Johnston, 2000, p. 9)

The power of the modern mass media is not limited to its ability to communicate information and entertain us but derives primarily from its ability to define situations, thereby enabling it to construct social reality. There can be little doubt any more that social reality is socially constructed and a growing body of literature on mass communications indicates that the mass media play a key role, are perhaps the most influential force, in constructing our understanding of social reality. (Best, 1989; Altheide, 1976; 1995; 2002; Altheide and Snow, 1991)

Put simply, people construct a view of reality that is based on their own experience which is influenced by interactions with primary groups (family and friends); secondary groups (schools, churches and government agencies); and the mass media. The influence of the mass media is greatest when the number and strength of the other sources of influence decrease. The media exercise especially potent influence in modern society, not only because there has been a decline in the influence of other social institutions but also because most major social institutions (governmental, corporate, religious, educational) rely on the media to communicate their messages to the public. (Altheide and Snow, 1991)

Perse (2001) notes that there is no longer debate among mass communication researchers about the impact of the media today. (p. 1) “Most communication scholars would be reluctant to argue that mass media are the sole or most substantial change agent in society, but it is clear that mass communication is an agent or catalyst to a variety of shifts and changes in people and institutions.” (p. ix) Aside from the most obvious intended effects of advertising on consumers and political candidates’ media messages on voters, Perse (2001) gives examples of other intended and unintended impacts of mass communication activities that have been identified by media scholars. These include, for example, the contribution of television and movie violence to aggressive behavior in children and others; the diffusion of new information to the general public and target audiences; reinforcing or challenging stereotypes; and the role of the media in the social construction of reality. Media effects can be cognitive, affective or behavioral, as well as pro-social or anti-social. (Perse, 2001, pp. 1-3).

Media messages and effects in the area of mental illness have been predominantly anti-social, as we will illustrate in the next section of this paper. Steps need to be taken by professionals and other advocacy groups to engage in activities with the mass media that will result in more pro-social messages. Examples of these activities will be described later in the paper.

MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE MEDIA

Wahl (1995) notes that “depictions of mental illness can be found in almost any public media one might select” (p. 11). Therefore, it is no surprise that “Americans themselves identify mass media as the source from which they get most of their knowledge of mental illness” (p. 3). Unfortunately, the way mental illness is portrayed in the media is problematic, with serious consequences for the rights of persons with mental illnesses (Backer, 1984; Wahl and Lefkowitz, 1989).

A systematic analysis of daytime serials on television found that half of them included a character who was mentally ill; 75 percent of the characters who were ill were women; 75 percent were involved in criminal activity of one type or another; and those male characters who were mentally ill were portrayed as being dangerous (Fruth and Padderud, 1985). As found in numerous other studies of prime time TV, (for example, Signorielli, 1989; Gerbner, 1985) depictions of mentally ill characters reinforce the inherent ‘evilness’ of mentally ill people by associating mental illness with criminal behavior (p. 387).

“It is not simply that the image of people with mental illnesses as violent and criminal appears so often and in so many different sources that troubles mental health advocates, however. It is that this image is characteristic of media portrayals. The role of violent, dangerous villain is the one most commonly assigned to mentally ill characters in the mass media. When one sees or reads about a person with a mental illness in the media, it is more likely that that person will be shown as criminal or dangerous than in any other way” (Wahl, 1985, p. 65).

For example, Signorielli’s (1989) report of a seventeen-year sample of television content revealed that more than 70 percent of mentally ill characters in prime time drama were depicted as violent and over 20 percent of them killed someone. In addition to problematic portrayals in the broadcast media, the majority of newspaper stories of mental illness in North America associate psychiatric illness with violence, crime, danger and unpredictability (Shain and Phillips, 1991; Day and Page, 1986).

Besides portraying mentally ill characters as dangerous, media depictions imply that they are not amenable to treatment and that the main hope for protecting the public is their removal, through confinement or more drastic solutions. As Wahl (1995) notes, the most common outcome for mentally ill villains in media (fiction) is death” (p. 76), accidental, by their own hand or by other means.

THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF MEDIA PORTRAYALS

In contrast to these media portrayals, there is very little correlation between violent crime and mental illness and, indeed, there is little correspondence in general between media depictions and the realities of mental illness. The consequences of these grossly inaccurate media portrayals are serious for people who have mental illnesses, in terms not only of the direct harm that it causes them to see how they are depicted but also because of the actions of others towards them that have serious consequences for their legal and other rights. The most obvious examples of these negative consequences are where the

freedom of mentally ill people is unnecessarily curtailed.

“...Stereotypes of the dangerous mental patient may contribute to the unavailability of needed resources for recovery by fueling opposition to the presence of individuals with mental disorders in the community. The citizens standing up at a group home placement hearing to voice their concerns about being attacked by the former mental patients to be housed near them are expressing quite reasonable fears based upon the media images of dangerous insanity with which they have been inundated” (Wahl, 1995, p. 94).

How a social issue is framed will greatly influence the public discourse that is likely to occur and affect community action in response to that issue (Best, 1989). For example, framing drug abuse as a public health problem will provoke a different public discourse and community response than if it is framed as a criminal justice issue. Similarly, mental illness can be framed as a private individual or family concern, a health care issue, a public safety problem, or in a variety of other ways, each with its own set of social policy implications. Altheide (2002), along with other media scholars, describes the prevalence of the “problem frame” and “the discourse of fear” that pervades American mass communications and popular culture today. He attributes this to the deliberate marketing of fear by the media in both news and entertainment formats and the increasingly blurred distinction between these two formerly separate formats. While claiming to be simply providing information and entertainment the public needs and wants, the media inundate audiences constantly with sensational, problem-oriented, and violent reports and programs. This creates a belief on the part of the public that danger pervades their daily lives. Fear is no longer limited to specific objects or events; it is experienced as a constant presence that specific acts or events simply illustrate and reinforce. When fear dominates the framing of public discourse on specific social issues, in Altheide’s (2002) view, it drives out alternative frames, promotes distrust, and favors social control responses. It may be good business for the media corporations that profit from it and good politics for those public officials and law enforcement authorities who exploit the public’s fearfulness for their own political and fiscal advantage, but it generally results in bad social policy.

There can be little doubt that public misconceptions, fueled by distorted media messages, have caused the unnecessary hospitalization of significant numbers of mentally ill people and that others have been added to the growing homeless population nationwide because of a lack of suitable community residences and treatment facilities. The stigmatizing effect of mental illness, which is exacerbated by media images, also results in discrimination in access to employment, housing, public accommodations, health insurance and life insurance (Melton and Garrison, 1987).

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the mass media are totally or even primarily responsible for the stigma and discrimination experienced by people who are mentally ill. However, there is abundant evidence to suggest that they do reinforce and perpetuate long-standing negative and inaccurate public beliefs about mental illnesses and persons who are or have been mentally ill.

“Furthermore, the consistent portrayals of individuals with psychiatric disorders in

the mass media undermine the self-esteem and recovery of those who so often encounter these damning representations of themselves. For people with mental illnesses many of whom are our neighbors, our friends, our loved ones the images of mental illness that media currently present have very important, very personal and very painful consequences” (Wahl, 1995, pp. 108-109)

CAN THE MEDIA HELP RATHER THAN HURT?

The preceding discussion of the problems created by the mass media for persons with mental illnesses and for informed public discussion of their needs and rights can cause doubts about the potential of working with the media to present more accurate information. Whether or not the mass media can perform public service and public health functions is a matter of some debate among media scholars. Broadcasting and newspaper publishing are primarily business enterprises in the United States (and, increasingly, worldwide) and, it has been argued, must inevitably place corporate interest before public interest (Bennett, 1992; Johnston, 2000). As a consequence, certain images and messages will predominate—those that will attract audiences and readers for advertisers, thereby generating profits, and those that legitimize existing social, economic and political arrangements. Messages or images that threaten these goals will be ignored, trivialized or muted. As Gitlin (1983) notes, “network executives internalize the desires of advertisers as a whole” (p. 253) which “results in the avoidance of controversy or any topic that might contaminate the fertile environment in which corporations seek to advertise their products” (Wallack, 1990b, p. 47).

In essence, the bulk of the messages that public health and other public service advocates wish to communicate are “ultimately in the business of social change” while the most influential segments of the media are “in the business of preserving existing social arrangements” (Wallack, 1990b, p. 48). Similarly, “while public health (and, indeed, most social) problems are, to a large extent, socially generated, the mass media reinforce individual-level explanations. This focus deflects attention away from causes and social conditions, highlighting instead symptoms and personal failures” (Wallack, 1990b, p. 42). However, despite these limitations, the mass media do provide opportunities for the communication of messages that can make valuable contributions to public policy goals and these opportunities should not be overlooked.

For example, the media generally espouse a commitment to public service and, indeed, this is a legal requirement of broadcasters when they receive their licenses to use the public airwaves. Besides, most broadcasters have found that an avowed and demonstrable commitment to the communities they serve is simply good business practice. Likewise, newspaper publishers and editors “generally feel a sense of responsibility to fill a public service role, to participate in the affairs of the community as good citizens.... (They) are opinion leaders and take their responsibility as agenda-setters very seriously” (Wallack, 1990a, p. 154). Many national and local media outlets have taken up issues such as homelessness, drunken-driving, domestic violence and the like and have given these issues sustained and well-informed treatment.

A related factor contributing strongly to the availability of opportunities to communicate pro-social messages through the media is the great interest shown by the public in health,

mental health, drug abuse, crime and related issues. The press and broadcast industries are well aware of this interest and are eager to capitalize on it. (Wallack, 1990a, p. 154). Finally, the media have recently been under increasing internal and external pressure to review their standards and practices and to be more responsible in reporting and analyzing important issues and events (Patterson, 1994; Montgomery, 1989).

These developments can provide new opportunities for productive relationships between journalism and persons interested in social issues and social justice. By including the latter among their sources of information, journalists can increase their understanding and improve their coverage of social issues, and enhance their credibility with the public, public interest groups, regulatory bodies, and policy makers. In more instances than not, those of us who initiate media activities with an informed, but open mind, encounter cooperative and professional print and broadcast journalists who can become valuable allies in our efforts to communicate important messages to the public. Wahl (1995) reports the following positive results from the contacts he and his colleagues had with broadcast journalists:

(We) "...found in our survey of Washington D.C., television news staff that most expressed very favorable attitudes about mental illness—views comparable to those of mental health professionals at a local mental health center. In addition, news staff were very critical of their own work covering mental health topics, stating that television news does an inadequate job of reporting on mental illness and agreeing that their news stories tended to stereotype people with mental illnesses as dangerous and unpredictable. Moreover, they did not use identified limitations inherent in broadcast news (for example, limited preparation and presentation time) to justify their coverage and indicated that improvements were possible despite such limitations. Overall, the study results suggested that there is much common ground between mental health advocates and media professionals such as news broadcasters on which to build cooperative efforts to change media images of mental illness" (p. 156).

Likewise, a panel of representatives from the entertainment media provided the following reasons why it is in their interest to have expert input from mental health professionals in their program production processes: "to avoid being sued; to avoid making big mistakes that cost money in the production process; for purposes of accuracy and social responsibility; to have sufficiently accurate understanding of mental illness to provide creative direction for writers, actors, directors, and so forth; and to avoid embarrassment among one's professional peers, sponsors, and the public" (Wahl, 1995, p. 156).

In reality, despite the systemic problems discussed earlier, most print and broadcast journalists are professionally and socially responsible and want to contribute to the betterment of their communities. They should be given our help and encouragement in doing so. Given the media-infused society that we live in today, we really do not have any choice about whether or not to deal with the media. The media are too important to ignore or avoid. Where we find they are failing to serve the public interest, we need to take steps to hold them to appropriate standards. Related to that, "there is the larger issue of the role of the mass media in a democratic society. Clearly, this role is to contribute

to the development of knowledgeable people who are empowered and not disabled by the information they receive” (Wallack, 1990b, p. 50).

TAKING CORRECTIVE ACTION

Encouraged by the evidence of what can be achieved or simply in response to the pressing need that they perceive, increasing numbers of professional groups and individual practitioners are beginning to recognize and exploit the possibilities that exist in most communities to work with the media to address mental health issues. Many are moving beyond the idea that media communications are peripheral to their main concerns and activities and are taking steps to develop partnerships with the mass media that will promote, support, strengthen and extend programs and services for people who are mentally ill.

“...The media remain a relatively untapped and latently very powerful means of informing and promoting public discussion about the impact of social, economic, and environmental (as well as life-style) issues on health, about tackling inequalities and fostering community participation. Given the penetration and influence of the media in all our daily lives, the building of an alliance with journalists, editors and program-makers is a priority” (Griffiths and Adams, 1991, p. 227).

Those who seek to do so are finding there are abundant opportunities to engage in valuable public information, community education and prevention activities through the print and broadcast media. Only a few examples of these organizational and individual efforts can be provided here.

For example, noting that “stereotypes about psychiatrists and myths about mental illness can be corrected by working with the media, the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1987) has produced a media handbook intended to encourage psychiatrists to consider “working with both the local and national media and becoming visible in local communities” (p. 13). They also give evidence of the success of a number of pioneering psychiatrists who have used radio and television talk shows to reach large listening and viewing audiences with important mental health messages. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) provides guidelines to media professionals who are preparing materials on mental illness, as do other mental health associations; for example, those of Northern Virginia and Northern California (Wahl, 1995, pp. 138-152). NAMI and some of its state charters also operate “Stigma Clearinghouse” or “Media Watch” groups that stand ready to identify and respond to inaccurate and unfair portrayals of mental illness (Wahl, 1995, pp. 144-151). The work of the Rosalyn Carter Center at Emory University, in using the prestige of former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalyn, to reach and influence leaders in the entertainment media to promote more accurate depictions of mental illness, is also noteworthy (Wahl, 1995, p. 138).

The Rosalyn Carter Center is only one example of a large and growing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have emerged in the United States in recent years that concern themselves with whether or not the media are acting in the public interest. These organizations are supported by grants and donations from private sources, including

foundations, and, in some instances, they receive funds from government agencies to carry out specific research projects on the media (Johnston, 2000, p. 185). Another example is Mediascope, a "...California-based institution that was founded in 1992 to promote constructive depictions of health and social issues in the media, particularly as they relate to children and adolescents. It publishes the results of its findings for the entertainment industry, policy-makers, and the general public." (Johnston, 2000, p. 185)

Over the years there have always been a few American social workers who have been active and effective advocates for public action on specific social problems, and some of them have used the print and broadcast media to educate the public and policy-makers about the nature of a particular problem and the type of action needed to remedy it. In other words, they have used the reach and impact of the media to convince the public and the responsible public officials that there is a serious social issue that needs an appropriate societal response. This type of activity has a long history in the United States, going back to the early twentieth-century Progressive Era when social reformers, including social workers, allied themselves with so-called "muck-raking" journalists and enlightened public officials to bring about necessary social legislation concerning child labor, sanitary housing conditions, worker safety, and a wide range of public health issues (Filler, 1976). This traditional commitment to social advocacy continues today.

In response to strong membership support for expanded public information activities designed to interpret social workers, their work, their clients, and important social issues to the public, a number of major media projects have recently been initiated by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States. These have included the production and distribution of a series of news releases and television and radio public service announcements providing important information to the public about such issues as homelessness, AIDS, child welfare, aging, and mental health (Dworak-Peck and Battle, 1989). A large number of members of the profession have been recruited to staff (on a voluntary basis) the NASW Communications Network (NCN) which serves as a permanent resource panel, members of which can be contacted by media representatives on a wide range of social issues, including mental health and mental illness. In addition, an advisory committee comprised of television, film and entertainment industry executives and other professionals have been formed to help NASW open up communication channels with major segments of the entertainment media so that social workers, their clients, and important social issues will be accurately depicted ("NCN Project in Building Relationship with Media", 1989).

Psychologists have been in the forefront of the movement among the helping professions seeking to capitalize on the public communication opportunities available through the media. As far back as the late 1960s, when the then-president of the American Psychological Association urged his colleagues to "give psychology away," psychologists have made increasing use of the media to interpret their profession, share their research and practice-based insight with the public, and influence public policy-making (McCall, Gregory and Lonnborg, 1985; Woodhead, 1988). Many have taken this admonition quite seriously and, along with other social scientists involved in research on human development, have sought to forge partnerships with the media in order to see their work having a bigger

impact on policies affecting human well-being (Rubinstein and Brown, 1985).

Some individual helping professionals and academics write regularly for the print media. For example, John Rosemond, a family psychologist in private practice in North Carolina, writes a weekly column with the title, "Family Matters" in which he not only gives useful perspectives on parenting and family relationships, but also addresses a broad range of mental health issues (Rosemond, 1992, p. E8). Sally Hoover, a certified addictions counselor and director of a drug and alcohol intervention program in Pennsylvania, writes a regular column on substance abuse issues (Hoover, 1990, p. C-2). Jan Shirreffs, a professor of gerontology in Arizona, writes a regular newspaper column that addresses the health and mental health issues faced by older people (Shirreffs, 1999, p. 12). Other social workers are intermittent contributors of letters, articles and interviews to the print media and some of their contributions are reported in a new column in the American social work profession's monthly newsletter ("Social Work in the Public Eye" 1999, p. 13).

Each of the above persons is providing what Gandy (1982) has termed "information subsidies" to the media. These are the public information materials and products that individuals and organizations supply to the media that are designed to achieve some degree of control over the information that the media communicates to the public. They include information provided by expert sources to journalists, news conferences, press briefings, news releases, opinion-editorial articles, feature stories, public service announcements, and the like. They are called "information subsidies" since they represent cost-free news and public interest information for the media (Brown, 1985, p. 226) in that media outlets are relieved of the time, effort and cost of going out and finding this information for themselves. In this sense, public information activities can capitalize on the business orientation of the media rather than seeing it as a barrier to their efforts to reach the public through the media.

Other helping professionals and academics are taking their message to the airwaves through appearances on radio and television talk shows ("TV News: Where the Expertise Meets the Airways," 1998, p. 16). Some have hosted their own programs (Ruben, 1986; Rubenstein, 1981) and others have produced their own programs ("Social Workers Create TV Show," 1983; "AARP's 'Prime Time Radio' Focuses on Aging Issues," 1994; Whitney, 2002).

"One social worker is using the entire gamut of communication venues to reach clients. Pamela Brewer has hosted a twice-weekly live, call-in radio program for four years in the Washington, D.C. area. The program can be heard online at www.wpfw.org. For the last two years, Brewer has also been an online columnist with America OnLine's 'OnLine Psych,' where she provides monthly commentary and an interactive chat once a month. In addition, she has made monthly appearances during the past year on News Channel 8 as well as appearances on other radio and television programs" ("Social Work in the Public Eye," 1999, p. 13).

These examples are necessarily limited by available space and merely provide a glimpse of what is being done with the media by some of our more creative colleagues. Additional examples, as well as theoretical and practical guidelines for undertaking mass media communications, can be found in more extended works (for example, Brawley, 1995).

CONCLUSION

Johnston (2000) has observed that the modern mass media in the United States function as “the megaphone for announcing what is reality in our culture, and for suggesting how to interpret it” (p. 191).

“It terrifies people about crime, perpetuates stereotypes about people and places. It tells people that democracy does not require participation, but only requires attention to the latest scandal and the newest cynicism. It tells Americans that no one outside the country matters—no, no one virtually exists. It hypnotizes billions into believing that the only matter of importance is the latest adventure of a Hollywood star or a sports figure.” (Johnston, 2000, p. 191)

However, the media have enormous potential for being a positive rather than a negative force in people’s lives. This requires mental health professionals, including social workers, to actively monitor the media, hold them accountable for serving the public interest, and seek opportunities to deliver pro-social messages to the public and policy-makers through the available print and broadcast media outlets.

For individuals, groups, and organizations that are interested in addressing issues of social inclusion at the local, state, or national level, there are clearly many opportunities to engage in productive public communication activities through newspapers, radio and television. Certainly more of us need to develop greater awareness of the opportunities for this type of activity that exist in our own communities, and take advantage of these opportunities on behalf of marginalized groups, including people who are mentally ill. Public understanding of social justice issues can be significantly enhanced by the appropriate use of the media. Indeed, without the access to the public that only the mass media can provide, we are unlikely to have much impact on the public’s understanding of community problems, appropriate and inappropriate responses to these problems, and the need for changed public policies or social programs.

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