

The Role of Fear in Agenda Setting by Television News

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The present research explored the implications of fear for the perceived importance of news stories. It was predicted that television news stories subjectively perceived as more fearful would be considered as more important. Participants were put in the role of a television news editor and asked to evaluate a set of promotional news clips for an evening news broadcast. Participants evaluated all of the clips to determine the degree of unpleasantness and impact they associated with the issue in each clip. Results indicated that the issues presented in the news clips selected as more important were perceived as more noxious, and more likely to have a personal impact, than were the clips not selected. In addition, there was no difference in prior familiarity between the issues mentioned in the selected clips versus those mentioned in the clips not selected. Implications of these results for a model of news perception based on evolutionary influences are discussed.

Keywords: television news; agenda-setting; fear; evolution

Throughout the past 30 years, several lines of research have explored the nature of agenda setting—the process by which the media shape the public's perceptions of what news issues are important. Most research has focused on whether the media affect public perceptions of issue importance (e.g., Erbring, Goldenberg, & Miller, 1980; McCombs & Shaw, 1991); few past studies have explored the psychological nature of the agenda-setting process. One notable exception has been the experimental work of Iyengar and Kinder (1987; see also Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1991), who explored the role that cognitive priming and vividness play in attracting attention to news stories and instilling a sense of importance to vividly presented issues. Yet, this cognitive factor has not been explored as part of a theoretical framework that specifies why people are affected by the media's presentation of issues. The present research sought to advance a theoretical framework for understanding such effects by exploring the role that one emotional reaction—fear—plays in the agenda-setting process.

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Among emotional reactions, fear, along with such related constructs as anxiety, is one of the most researched in terms of its consequences for human motivation (cf. Lang, 1985; LeDoux, 1996). Buck (1984) suggests that fear serves as an emotional agent that automatically cues individuals' attention toward potentially threatening stimuli—in the present case, toward news stories that portend some potentially noxious consequences. Various types of stimuli may induce fear, and there is already some evidence of the automatic tendency of fear-inducing stimuli to attract attention. For example, Hansen and Hansen (1988) found that when shown photographs of a crowd of people, research participants were more likely to notice those people in the crowd with angry (and, thus, threatening) expressions than to notice people with happy facial expressions. Lanzetta and Orr (1980) suggest that fearful facial expressions may signal potential danger to the observer. As for media effects, fear has thus far been studied as a potential result of media reports of crime (e.g., Heath, 1984; Williams & Dickinson, 1993), but fear has not been explored as a cause that influences which news stories will be perceived as more important. The present research addressed this sensitivity to fear as one determinant of perceptions of news issue importance.

TWO THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Two theoretical perspectives were synthesized to explore this connection. The first is Darwin's theory of evolution. As first proposed by Darwin (1872/1972; but further elaborated by others since, e.g., Buck, 1984; Watson, 1995), fear is postulated to serve an evolutionarily developed survival function by directing attention toward those elements in the environment that can teach the individual what not to do; that is, by paying attention to the ferocious tiger, our early ancestors learned to avoid such threats to preserve their well-being. Presumably, those early ancestors who were too fearless may have been too uncognizant of these dangerous stimuli and thereby ignored them to their own peril.¹ Thus, as demonstrated by such reactions as "rubber-necking" in traffic, wherein drivers tend to slow down to look at traffic accidents, humans may be hardwired to attend to fear-inducing stimuli precisely because it is perceived (if even at a subconscious level) to be informative and relevant to survival.

Indeed, lest the casual observer presume that he or she is, foremost, a rational creature, Darwin often noted that even though one may know intellectually that a particular stimulus is not going to hurt him or her, one's body will still react as if that danger were imminent, even when the thing that is feared is not really within harm's range. He relates the following story as an example:

I put my face close to the thick glass-plate in front of a puff-adder in the Zoological Gardens, with the firm determination of not starting back if the snake struck at me; but as soon as the blow against the glass was struck, my resolution went for

nothing, and I jumped a yard or two backwards with astonishing rapidity. My will and reason were powerless against the imagination of a danger that had never been experienced. (Darwin, 1872/1972, p. 38)

The second theoretical perspective used in the current study was based on Rogers's (1983) Theory of Protection Motivation, which was originally developed to explain how fear can produce more effective persuasive messages. According to this perspective, a fearful response is dependent on two factors: the perceived magnitude of noxiousness of the threat and the perceived probability of personally being affected by the threat. When evaluations of these two dimensions are high, a greater fearful reaction results, thereby triggering a greater motivation to protect oneself. In the case of news media exposure, fearful stories should be those presented as both more noxious and more likely to have a personal impact, thereby motivating audiences to focus more attention on the feared story as a way of learning what to do to avoid harm.

THE FEARFUL CONTENT OF THE NEWS MEDIA

An ongoing debate both within and outside television news involves the extent to which it unnecessarily emphasizes negative images and issues. Critics charge that television news is filled with scenes of violence and mayhem. News directors have conceded that inasmuch as the news media is a business, fearful news is often used to attract an audience (Iyengar & Reeves, 1997). Numerous communications researchers have observed that the most compelling, vivid images in the news are often "intensely negative," prompting fear in the viewer, although viewers continue to be captivated by these images as if they were an indication of immediate danger (Newhagen & Reeves, 1992).

Perhaps the largest body of research to date exploring the impact of negative images in the media has focused on the links between the amount of news coverage of crime and the level of fear of crime within many communities (Ditton & Farrall, 2000; Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Heath, 1984; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990; Weaver & Fico, 1981; Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986; Williams & Dickinson, 1993). These studies have generally concluded that people's fear of crime is disproportionate to the actual incidence of crime and to their personal likelihood of becoming a crime victim. Such distorted perceptions, it is argued, are likely encouraged by the high percentage of media coverage dedicated to crime (Gans, 1979), especially violent crime, despite the actual per capita rates of criminal activity. Heath (1984) suggests that crime stories are "sensationalized," referring not to a lurid reporting style but rather to the emphasis in the media on crimes that are "non-normative in the sense of being unusual or unexpected, both factors that contribute to the memorability of events" (p. 265). For example, in Chicago during the late 1970s, homicides were actually less than .02% of the

total number of crimes committed, but they accounted for 26.2% of all of the stories about crime covered that year in the city's larger newspaper, *The Chicago Tribune* (Graber, 1984). Ten years later, Liska and Baccaglini (1990) found almost identical results when analyzing trends within the National Crime Survey from 1974 to 1975. As Graber had found previously, their review indicated that in 26 American cities, only .02% of all crimes were homicides, yet a content analysis of news coverage for the year prior to the survey found that homicides accounted for 29.9% of the crime stories reported in all of the largest daily papers that served these 26 cities (Liska & Baccaglini, 1990).

Jaehnig, Weaver, and Fico (1981) discovered similar (although less extreme) results in a study conducted in three cities of differing sizes—Indianapolis, Indiana (population: 714,878); Evanston, Illinois (population: 76,665); and Lebanon, New Hampshire (population: 11,300). They added data on fear of crime to a comparison between actual per capita crime rates and the percentage of newspaper stories on crime. They measured the percentage of people surveyed from these three areas who felt “at all concerned” about crime. Whereas the actual incidence of crimes per capita were, respectively, .05, .07, and .03, and newspaper coverage of crime was 14.5%, 12.1%, and 6.7%, respectively, the percentages of participants at all concerned about crime were 60%, 47%, and 36%, respectively.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Although the above studies compellingly demonstrate the impact of the media on distorted perceptions related to fear of crime, the present study explored the role of fear as a determinant of the relative importance of different issues, specifically, those news items presented on an evening news program. It was predicted that those television news stories that elicited the most fear in viewers would be perceived to have the highest level of issue importance. Participants were asked to evaluate a series of television news clips in two ways: as a decision that they thought a professional editor might make when deciding what to include on an evening news broadcast and as a personal decision. The rationale for this procedure was to enable a distinction to be made between participants' own personal responses to the stories and their responses when explicitly taking into account their “media savvy” (or awareness of how the media tends to emphasize news stories). That is, we hoped to be able to identify the extent to which selections of news clips reflect the perceived decision-making tendency of the media and the extent to which these selections reflect one's personal judgment.

METHOD

DEVELOPMENT OF VIDEO STIMULUS MATERIALS

A pilot study ($n = 25$) was initially conducted to identify the most suitable video news clips. Because of concerns regarding the “noise” involved in presenting extended news reports from evening programs (e.g., viewer preferences for specific reporters, etc.), the present study employed promotional news clips. In this way, we were able to more easily edit out potentially confounding influences on viewers’ preferences, such as station and reporter identity, while still using local news coverage.

Participants viewed a videotape containing 23 television news teasers assembled from several local news programs in the New York City area presented during the winter of 2000 and answered several questions for each teaser. Some of these questions were related to the hypothesis (e.g., How unpleasant is the event depicted in this news clip?) and other questions related to technical questions about the presentation (e.g., clarity of the visual image, sound quality). Extensive debriefing interviews also were used to assess reactions to the clips. The primary selection criteria for the 10 clips to be used in the main study focused on news clips that reflected a wide range of scores on the familiarity of the news issue, the perceived unpleasantness of the issue, and the perceived probability of personal impact, as well as selecting those clips that elicited the most favorable evaluations of technical presentation. The final set of news clips that was included on the stimulus videotape is listed in the appendix.

PARTICIPANTS

Thirty six undergraduate students from Hunter College (8 men and 28 women) were recruited to participate in a study called “TV News Analysis.” Participants received research participation credit for an introductory psychology course. Because of the extraordinary diversity of the student body at Hunter College, including many students whose primary language is not English, and because of concerns about participants’ ability to follow the research procedure, participation was limited to those persons whose first language was English. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 47, with a mean age of 22.6 years. Participants’ primary ethnic identification was as follows: 14 White, 8 Black, 3 Hispanic, 4 Latino, 4 Puerto Rican, 2 Asian, and 3 identified as Other.² On average, participants indicated they watched some form of TV news 4 days a week ($M = 3.86$ days, $SD = 1.77$), with no discernible preference for any station’s or network’s news program.

APPARATUS

The videotape was viewed on a 24-inch color monitor. The videotape was played on a VCR that had a tape counter to enable the participant to rewind the

tape to review news clips if desired as well as a remote control to adjust sound volume and to play and rewind the videotape. Participants were encouraged to replay the clips as often as necessary to ensure that they were familiar with all of them. They had access to these clips throughout the completion of all of the written materials.

MATERIALS

Stimulus videotape. Participants watched a 4-minute videotape containing 10 television news clips that were selected on the basis of the pilot study described above. To counterbalance possible order effects, two versions of the videotape were created in which the order of presentation of each was the reverse of the other. Each tape began with 30 sec of blank screen followed by two practice clips, which were used by the research assistant to demonstrate the procedure to each participant.³ All clips were separated by 5 sec of blank screen.

Written materials. The written materials were used to evaluate participants' reactions to the 10 news teasers in three different tasks. In the first task (the news editor task), each participant was asked to imagine being a TV news editor "responsible for deciding what teasers will be aired to get people to watch tonight's evening news broadcast." Participants were asked to view all 10 news clips and then to select and rank-order those four clips "to be used as coming attractions for this evening's news." To clarify the criteria used to select the clips (e.g., perceived importance vs. other forms of attraction to the clips), participants were asked to briefly explain why they chose the clips they did and why they put them in the order selected.⁴

In the second task (the personal choice task), respondents once again rank-ordered the clips, although this time (a) they were instructed to evaluate them "in order of importance to you personally" and (b) they were asked to rank-order all 10 clips instead of just a subset of the clips. This second task was included to determine if there were key differences in the criteria used to select issues in the first two tasks.

For the final task (the evaluation task), respondents were asked to evaluate all 10 news clips on seven dimensions, including how familiar participants already were with the issue depicted in the news clip; how important the issue was "to you personally"; how important this issue was to "your community"; how dangerous, threatening, or unpleasant the issue seemed; the perceived probability that the issue "will affect you personally in the near future"; the perceived probability that the issue "will affect you in the undetermined future"; and the extent to which the issue "has already affected your life." All evaluations were completed on 7-point Likert-type scales anchored by 7 (*very or very likely*) and 1 (*not at all or not at all likely*).

A final sheet was then distributed to collect demographic information, including age, sex, ethnicity, frequency of watching TV news, "how much do you enjoy following current events?" and "how much do you keep up with current events?" (the latter two items measured on 5-point Likert-type scales anchored from 5 = *very much* to 1 = *not at all*).

PROCEDURE

The study was administered by two research assistants in facilities located in the Psychology Department at Hunter College. All participants were run individually in separate rooms (although in some cases two participants were run concurrently). Each experimental room was set up with a TV monitor, a VCR, remote controls for the TV and the VCR, one version of the stimulus videotape, a desk, and a chair. After arriving, participants were seated in an experimental room and asked to read and sign the consent form. It was explained that one way that news programs attempt to lure people to watch their programs was with the use of advance promotional spots that convey some of the news to be reported. Their task, they were told, was to view several such news clips and then to evaluate them in a number of ways. Participants were told that the study was investigating their perceptions of the news. They were reassured that we were not interested in how much they had followed the news in the past but instead that we were only interested in their "gut reactions" to the news clips they were about to be presented.

The research assistant then began the videotape to show two practice clips to help familiarize participants with the procedure as well as to demonstrate the operation of the remote controls. Participants were then given the first task to complete on their own and the researcher left the room. Participants were advised that they should notify the researcher after completing each task so that they could be given the next set of materials. They were given as much time as needed to complete each task. When all three primary tasks were completed, the demographic measure was administered. Finally, all participants were debriefed and dismissed.

RESULTS

An initial inspection of those issues that were judged to be most important was made by comparing those issues selected for the news editor task and the personal choice task. As seen in Table 1, a comparison of the news clips selected as the four most important in each task suggested that similar criteria were being used regardless of whether participants were identifying news stories as a news savvy TV editor or on the basis of personal preferences.

The remaining analyses were designed to examine the components of participants' reactions that were associated with perceived issue importance. The

TABLE 1: Comparison of Frequency of Issues Selected as Most Important in the "News Editor" Task and the "Personal Choice" Task

<i>Issue</i>	<i>News Editor</i>	<i>Personal Choice</i>
Celebrity divorce	3	0
Snow storm	15	19
Zoo celebration	3	2
Racism in military	26	29
Dolphins help kids	12	13
Car crash tests	23	19
Girl chokes on lunch	22	26
Mariah gets no Grammy	3	2
Skydiving grannies	6	3
Weekend rape sentence	31	31

NOTE: Frequencies reflect the number of people (out of 36) who ranked each issue either first, second, third, or fourth in each task.

amount of fear elicited from each news clip was expected to predict its level of perceived importance. In fact, two formulations of fear were examined: imminent fear and distal fear. Because some researchers (e.g., Apter, 1982, 1989) have drawn a distinction between immediate fearful events (e.g., an impending snow storm), which, in turn, may produce short-term perceptions of issue importance and potentially long-term, indeterminate threats (e.g., global warming), analyses were conducted to determine if perceived issue importance was differentially determined by each type of fearful reaction. Adapting Rogers's (1983) conceptualization of fear, proximal fear was calculated as the sum of the perceived unpleasantness of the issue depicted in each news clip and the perceived probability of being affected by that issue in the near future. Similarly, distal fear was calculated as the sum of the perceived unpleasantness of an issue and the perceived probability of being affected by that issue in the undetermined future. For both of these fear indices, scores could range from 2 (*low fear*) to 14 (*high fear*).

Initially, within-subject analyses were conducted on participants' selection of issues in the news editor task; comparisons were made between the evaluations of those four issues that each participant selected for this task as important with the evaluations for the six issues that were not selected. For each dimension on which issues were evaluated, the mean reaction score of the four news clips chosen was calculated and compared with the mean reaction score for the remaining six news clips not chosen. As seen in Table 2, evaluations of the four chosen news clips in the news editor task differed reliably from evaluations of the six clips not chosen, with the exception of familiarity. No difference was observed in perceived familiarity between the four chosen and the six unchosen clips, suggesting that issue novelty was not a major criterion for determining issue importance. To verify that the criteria used to select the clips in the news editor task did, indeed, involve the explicit assessment of issue importance, the

TABLE 2: News Editor Task: Comparison of Mean Evaluations of the Four Chosen Versus the Six Unchosen News Clips

<i>Type of Evaluation</i>	<i>Mean for Four Chosen Clips</i>	<i>Mean for Six Unchosen Clips</i>	<i>t Value (df = 35)</i>	<i>Significance</i>
Familiarity	3.42 (1.17)	3.36 (1.19)	0.30	> .05
Personal importance	4.71 (1.44)	2.60 (0.90)	7.93	< .001
Community importance	4.72 (1.44)	2.84 (1.09)	7.94	< .001
Perceived unpleasantness	4.82 (1.26)	2.39 (0.70)	9.59	< .001
Perceived imminent impact	3.15 (1.29)	1.84 (0.77)	6.01	< .001
Perceived future impact	3.67 (1.33)	2.07 (0.73)	6.69	< .001
Past impact	2.74 (1.28)	1.71 (0.59)	5.25	< .001
Proximal fear	7.90 (2.16)	4.29 (1.26)	9.00	< .001
Distal fear	8.41 (2.35)	4.51 (1.21)	8.86	< .001

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Scores for all variables range from 1 (low) to 7 (high), except for the fear variables, which range from 2 (low) to 14 (high).

chosen clips were found to have higher means for perceived personal importance and community importance than were the unchosen clips. In addition, compared with the unchosen clips, the issues presented in the chosen news clips were perceived to be more unpleasant, to have a greater perceived probability of both imminent and future impact, and to have had more of a past impact on research participants. Using the formulation of fear described above, it also appears that participants responded with a greater degree of proximal and distal fear to the chosen, as compared to the unchosen, clips. Thus, overall, those issues selected as important in the news editor task were perceived as having more personal consequences, whether past, present, or future, as well as having more unpleasant implications, compared with the unchosen clips.

To more sensitively examine the correspondence of each type of evaluation with the level of perceived issue importance, linear trend analyses were conducted. These analyses used the idiographic ratings of personal issue importance from the personal choice task. Use of the personal choice rankings enabled a more sensitive examination of the relationship between fear and importance because this task asked participants to rank-order all 10 issues instead of identifying only the four, as was done for the news editor task. Each level of ranking (i.e., first most important issue, second most important, third most important . . . ninth most important, least important issue) thus involved different news clips for different participants, allowing them to define for themselves which issues were personally more or less important. Thus, for example, for the linear trend analysis of familiarity, 10 within-subject familiarity scores, representing the perceived familiarity of each participant's first most important issue, his or her second most important issue, and so forth, were compared to assess whether a consistent linear function described the pattern of scores. As seen in Table 3 and Figures 1 through 7, with the exception of familiarity, all evaluations

showed a general decreasing linear trend as issue importance decreased. Table 3 shows the means for each variable across all 10 levels of issue importance. Multivariate linear trend analyses yielded significant results for all variables (all t s > 7.70 , $p < .001$), with the exception of familiarity ($t < 1.0$, ns). In summary, when treating the issues as functionally similar on the basis of their accorded level of issue importance, evaluations of these issues in terms of their unpleasantness, impact, and fear show statistically significant linear trends as a function of perceived importance.

These results appear to be consistent with the abundance of past research on the influence of vested interest on attitudes (cf. Crano, 1995, 1997a, 1997b; but see Sears, 1997), suggesting that the greater personal material impact of an issue enhances its cognitive salience and, in turn, its perceived importance (see also Young, Borgida, Sullivan, & Aldrich, 1987). To determine whether the consideration of unpleasantness, as well as the current formulations of fear, provides any additional predictive power (over and above perceived impact) to determining issue importance, a series of stepwise regressions was conducted. For this analysis, parallel analyses were conducted on the evaluations made of each news clip. Each regression equation examined the relative influence of familiarity, unpleasantness, and past, imminent, and future impact, as well as proximal fear and distal fear, on the perceived issue importance for each of the 10 news clips presented. These equations enabled an examination of the relative contribution of fear versus vested interest, across a variety of issues, on perceived importance. The criterion variable for these analyses was the 7-point item in the evaluation task that asked participants to indicate the level of each issue's "importance to you personally."

A summary of descriptive statistics relevant to the regression analyses are provided in Table 4, including means and standard deviations for the evaluative variables for each news clip. In addition, for each issue, the zero-order correlations between each evaluative factor and the level of perceived importance are provided. It is quite apparent that different issues elicited very different reactions. In particular, the mean perceived importance (column a of Table 4) for five of the news clips—an impending snow storm (clip 2), a racist murder in the military (4), car crash test results (6), a girl's choking at school (7), and a rapist sentenced only to a weekend jail term (10)—was above the midpoint of the 7-point scale. By contrast, the mean level of perceived importance for the remaining five issues was substantially less than this midpoint.

Inspection of the zero-order correlations in Table 4 indicates that for most of the issues, personal impact—whether imminent, future, or past—was a good predictor of perceived importance (as seen in columns d, e, and f). For the unpleasantness and fear variables (columns c, g, and h), however, the magnitude of correlations appears to be moderated by the amount of perceived importance. For the five news clips that elicited perceptions of greater issue importance (clips 2, 4, 6, 7, and 10), the unpleasantness of the issue appears to be a strong predictor of that importance (mean $r = .55$), whereas for most of the remaining

TABLE 3: Mean Evaluation Scores by Issue Importance

<i>Type of Evaluation</i>	<i>Level of Issue Importance</i>									
	<i>Least 1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10 Most</i>
Personal importance	5.86 (1.40)	4.89 (1.86)	4.67 (2.01)	4.50 (1.83)	3.97 (2.17)	3.28 (1.97)	2.58 (1.46)	1.83 (1.23)	1.58 (1.20)	1.29 (0.62)
Community importance	5.89 (1.47)	4.83 (1.89)	4.53 (2.13)	4.11 (2.24)	3.94 (1.90)	3.69 (2.16)	3.17 (2.20)	2.17 (1.40)	1.81 (1.37)	1.78 (1.33)
Familiarity	3.64 (2.46)	3.72 (3.72)	3.61 (2.63)	3.31 (2.11)	3.42 (2.22)	3.08 (2.36)	2.53 (2.08)	3.06 (2.38)	4.19 (2.24)	3.25 (2.43)
Perceived unpleasantness	6.17 (1.11)	5.53 (1.99)	4.83 (2.40)	3.78 (2.31)	3.00 (2.31)	2.75 (2.08)	2.44 (2.13)	1.81 (1.62)	1.75 (1.61)	1.58 (1.32)
Imminent impact	3.75 (1.83)	3.42 (2.18)	3.33 (2.22)	3.08 (2.16)	2.50 (2.12)	2.50 (1.96)	1.42 (0.77)	1.31 (0.95)	1.28 (0.78)	1.06 (0.23)
Future impact	4.44 (1.87)	3.58 (1.99)	3.58 (2.25)	3.36 (2.13)	3.19 (2.10)	2.72 (2.02)	1.61 (1.25)	1.72 (1.43)	1.67 (1.43)	1.22 (0.76)
Past impact	3.56 (2.29)	2.94 (1.99)	2.50 (1.86)	2.69 (1.95)	2.39 (1.95)	2.06 (1.72)	1.50 (1.30)	1.19 (0.53)	1.28 (0.85)	1.08 (0.28)
Proximal fear	9.64 (2.79)	8.83 (3.21)	8.36 (3.96)	6.97 (3.75)	5.31 (3.71)	5.14 (3.28)	3.86 (2.67)	3.25 (2.33)	3.31 (2.65)	2.64 (1.42)
Distal fear	10.33 (2.96)	8.97 (3.19)	8.61 (3.99)	7.25 (3.60)	6.00 (3.90)	5.33 (3.32)	4.06 (2.99)	3.67 (2.50)	3.69 (3.14)	2.81 (1.53)

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Scores for all variables range from 1 (low) to 7 (high), except for the fear variables, which range from 2 (low) to 14 (high).

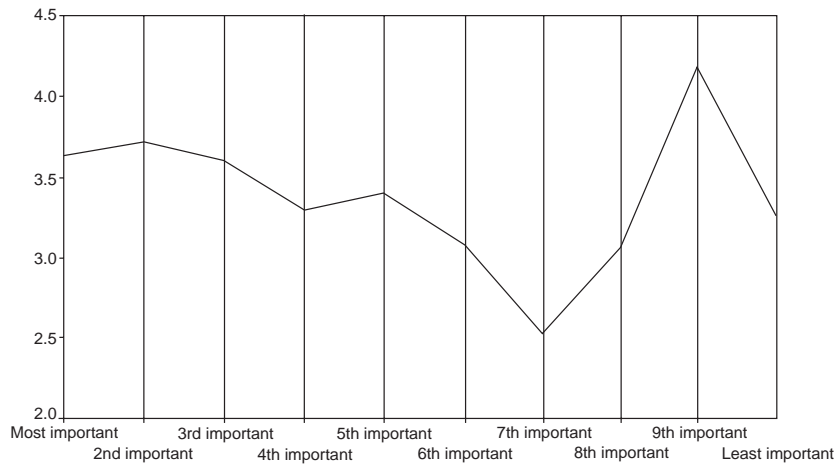


Figure 1: Linear Trend of Mean Familiarity Scores as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

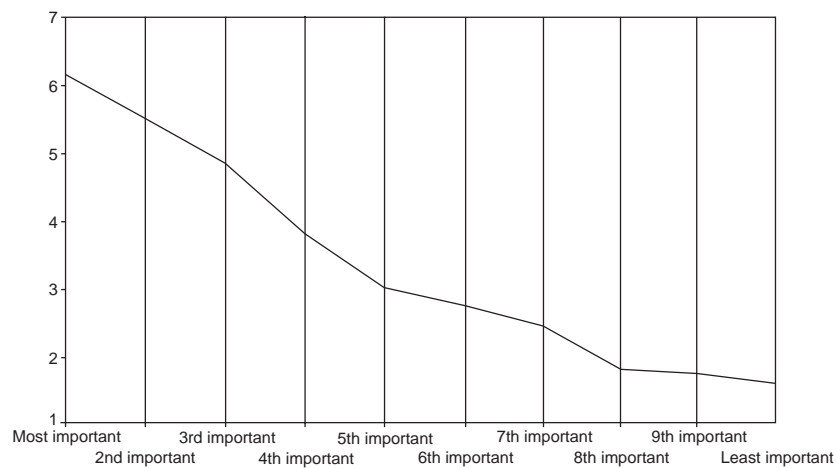


Figure 2: Linear Trend of Mean Unpleasantness Scores as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

five clips, unpleasantness appears to be weakly correlated with perceived importance (mean $r = .08$). In addition, the five clips accorded greater perceived importance also show substantially stronger correlations between level of perceived importance and both proximal fear (mean $r = .63$) and distal fear (mean $r = .62$) compared with the same correlations for remaining five news clips (mean

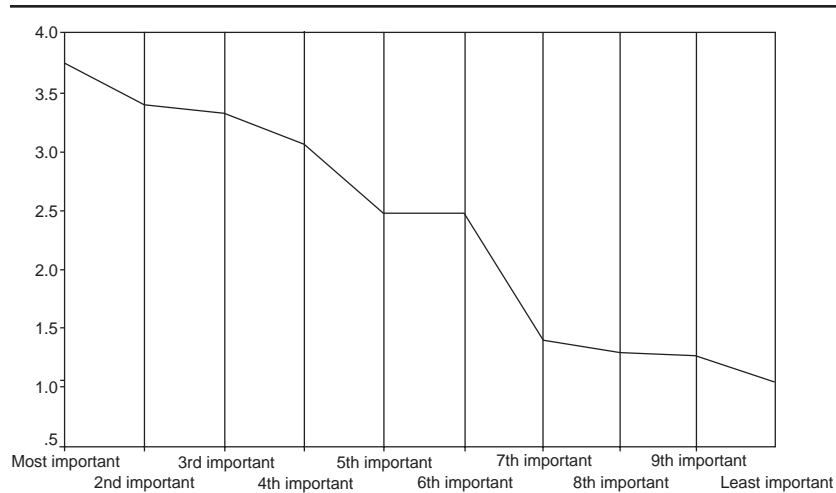


Figure 3: Linear Trend of Mean Scores for Perceived Imminent Impact as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

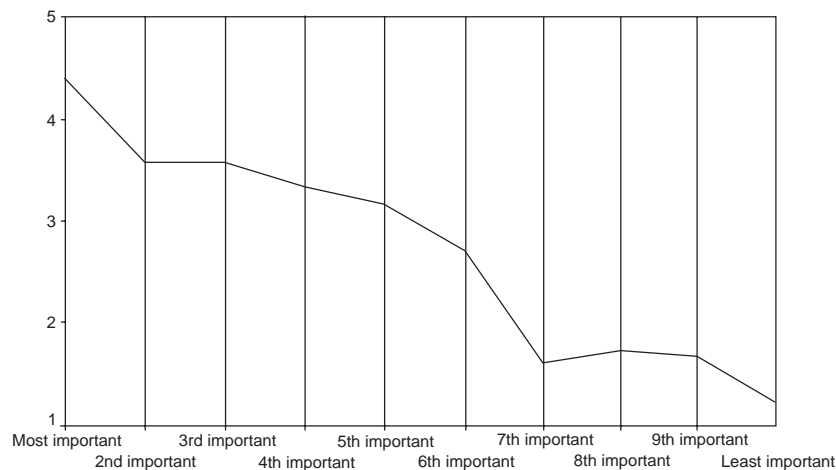


Figure 4: Linear Trend of Mean Scores for Perceived Future Impact as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

$r_s = .23$ and $.22$, respectively). Thus, although a vested interest influence on issue importance appears to work consistently well across all 10 news clips, the impact of unpleasantness and fear appears to be moderated by the mean level of issue importance. Put another way, personal impact appears to be a more elastic, and therefore more sensitive, predictor of importance, whereas unpleasantness

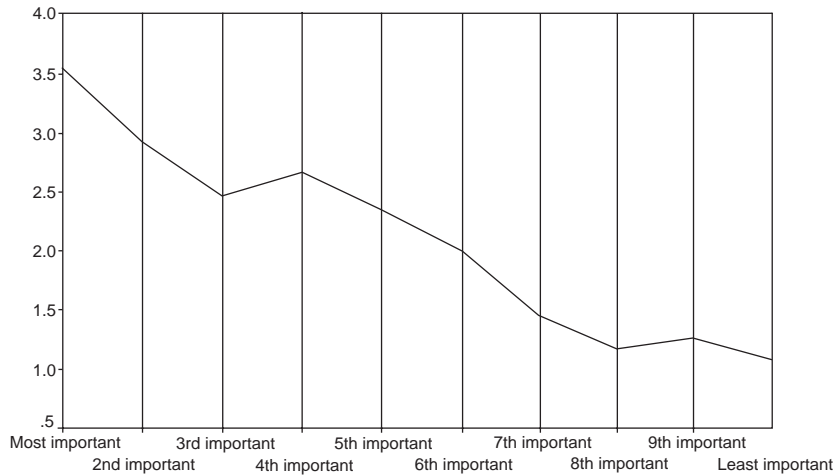


Figure 5: Linear Trend of Scores for Past Issue Impact as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

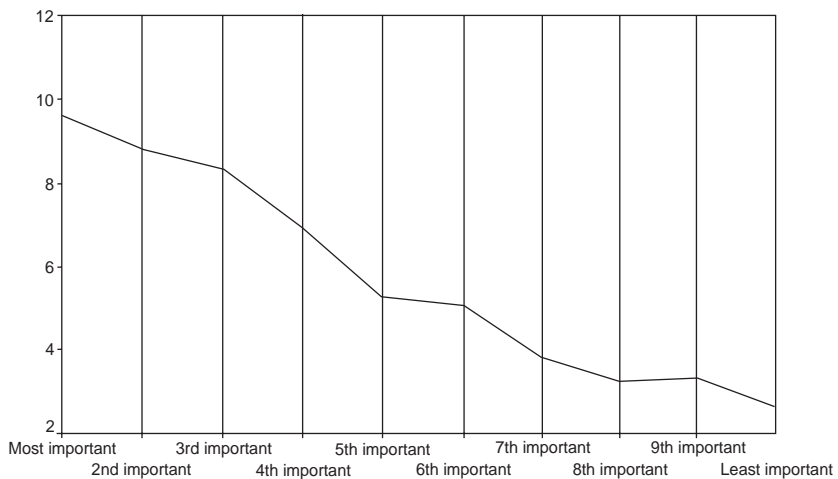


Figure 6: Linear Trend of Scores for Proximal Fear as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

and fear appear to require a “threshold of pain” to be crossed before they contribute to perceived issue importance. This latter point is borne out by the notably higher means for unpleasantness for those news clips showing stronger unpleasantness and fear correlations.⁵

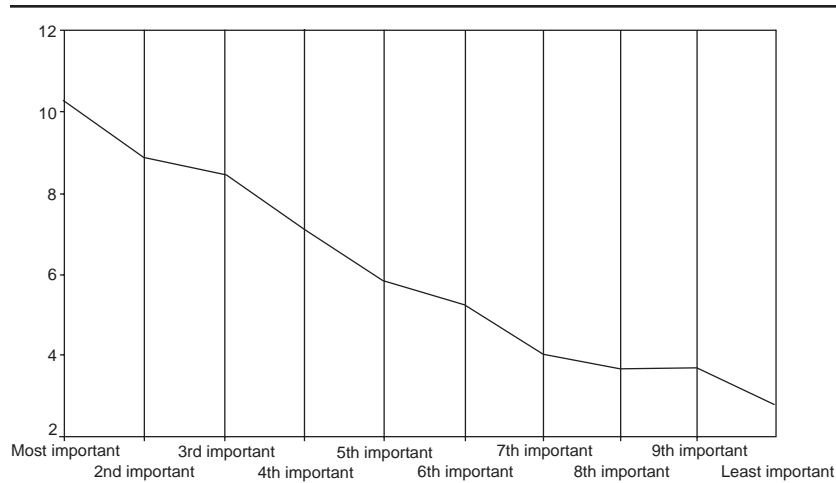


Figure 7: Linear Trend of Scores for Distal Fear as a Function of Level of Issue Importance

To examine the relative contributions of these evaluative factors to issue importance, Table 5 presents the results of the regression analyses. As suggested in the review of the zero-order correlations above, there is much variability across the news clips in terms of which evaluative factors most strongly predict issue importance. What is most striking about the regression results is that the equations for the same five “high importance” news clips identified above—numbers 2, 4, 6, 7, and 10—all include either unpleasantness, proximal fear, or distal fear as predictors of issue importance, whereas none of the regression equations for the remaining five news clips do. Yet, of these five clips, it appears that fear—whether imminent or distal—is a strong predictor of perceived importance for only three of them, suggesting, as mentioned above, that the predictive role of this formulation of fear is moderated by other factors.

DISCUSSION

Generally, a pattern emerged suggesting that fear was, indeed, associated with perceptions of greater issue importance. Results also indicated, however, that its relative contribution to predicting issue importance is contingent on the mean level of issue importance associated with each news clip. The present formulation of fear followed Rogers’s (1983) suggestion of combining perceptions of unpleasantness and personal impact associated with the issue. Yet, in the current study, whereas there was much variability in the perceptions of personal impact of the news clips, evaluations of the unpleasantness elicited by these news clips appeared to be skewed (in the direction of “not at all unpleasant”) for

TABLE 4: Means and Zero-Order Correlations Between Personal Importance and Evaluative Variables, by Each News Clip Presented

<i>News Clip</i>	<i>(a) Personal Importance</i>	<i>(b) Familiar</i>	<i>(c) Unpleasant</i>	<i>(d) Imminent Impact</i>	<i>(e) Future Impact</i>	<i>(f) Past Impact</i>	<i>(g) Proximal Fear</i>	<i>(h) Distal Fear</i>
1. <i>M</i>	1.19	5.17	1.44	1.06	1.19	1.06	2.78	2.92
<i>SD</i>	0.53	2.06	1.23	0.23	0.75	0.23	2.09	2.23
<i>r</i>		.21	.44*	.61*	.26	.14	.28*	.28*
2. <i>M</i>	4.81	5.50	4.50	3.94	3.83	4.11	8.31	8.19
<i>SD</i>	1.93	1.92	1.94	2.27	2.32	1.97	3.45	3.43
<i>r</i>		.59*	.53*	.47*	.45*	.72*	.58*	.58*
3. <i>M</i>	2.64	2.28	1.00	1.47	1.50	1.50	2.47	2.50
<i>SD</i>	1.69	1.80	0.00	1.08	1.13	1.25	1.08	1.13
<i>r</i>		.59*	—	.46*	.35*	.51*	.46*	.35*
4. <i>M</i>	4.47	3.44	5.75	2.86	3.25	2.94	8.72	9.11
<i>SD</i>	1.92	2.26	1.48	1.94	2.01	2.25	3.01	3.15
<i>r</i>		.42*	.55*	.55*	.61*	.65*	.63*	.65*
5. <i>M</i>	3.83	2.44	1.31	1.86	2.39	1.69	3.36	3.89
<i>SD</i>	1.96	1.96	0.92	1.57	1.73	1.19	2.13	2.21
<i>r</i>		.37*	-.03	.46*	.47*	.48*	.33*	.36*
6. <i>M</i>	4.75	3.97	5.00	4.31	4.81	2.72	9.11	9.61
<i>SD</i>	1.89	1.99	1.87	1.95	1.83	1.77	3.42	3.30
<i>r</i>		.50*	.49*	.66*	.51*	.30*	.66*	.59*

7. <i>M</i>	4.00	3.78	5.53	2.69	3.53	2.25	8.11	8.94
<i>SD</i>	2.08	2.53	1.48	2.01	2.05	1.92	2.82	2.87
<i>r</i>		.36*	.48*	.62*	.55*	.35*	.66*	.60*
8. <i>M</i>	1.50	2.94	1.14	1.06	1.08	1.08	2.19	2.22
<i>SD</i>	0.97	2.12	0.59	0.23	0.37	0.37	0.71	0.76
<i>r</i>		.25	-.03	.00	-.04	-.04	-.02	-.04
9. <i>M</i>	1.91	2.31	2.11	1.17	1.60	1.34	3.43	3.86
<i>SD</i>	1.44	1.98	1.91	0.45	0.95	1.03	2.36	2.26
<i>r</i>		.05	.06	.56*	.34*	.68*	.12	.15
10. <i>M</i>	5.36	2.00	5.89	3.22	3.83	2.50	8.86	9.42
<i>SD</i>	1.82	1.74	1.62	1.87	1.94	1.98	3.19	3.38
<i>r</i>		.19	.71*	.52*	.64*	.41*	.63*	.67*

NOTE: Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Scores for all variables range from 1 (low) to 7 (high), except for the fear variables, which range from 2 (low) to 14 (high). Zero-order correlations reflect association between each evaluative reaction and the level of personal importance for that issue. An asterisk (*) indicates that *r* is significant at $p < .05$. All $ns = 36$.

TABLE 5: Regression Coefficients for Analysis of Relative Influence of Evaluative Variables on Issue Importance

<i>News Clip</i>	<i>Adjusted R²</i>	<i>Variable(s) Included</i>	<i>b</i>	β	<i>Constant</i>
1.	.36	Imminent impact	1.38 (0.31)	.61	−0.26 (0.33)
2.	.64	Past impact	0.39 (0.13)	.40	−0.27 (0.71)
		Familiarity	0.36 (0.12)	.36	
		Unpleasantness	0.33 (0.11)	.33	
3.	.42	Familiarity	0.48 (0.13)	.51	0.78 (0.42)
		Imminent impact	0.52 (0.21)	.33	
4.	.53	Distal fear	0.26 (0.08)	.43	1.01 (0.68)
		Past impact	0.36 (0.12)	.42	
5.	.29	Past impact	0.73 (0.24)	.44	1.83 (0.57)
		Familiarity	0.31 (0.14)	.31	
6.	.51	Proximal fear	0.31 (0.07)	.56	0.66 (0.69)
		Familiarity	0.31 (0.11)	.33	
7.	.42	Proximal fear	0.49 (0.10)	.66	0.05 (0.82)
8.		No variables met criteria			
9.	.57	Past impact	0.78 (0.17)	.55	−0.59 (0.46)
		Imminent impact	1.24 (0.38)	.39	
10.	.56	Unpleasant	0.58 (0.15)	.51	0.70 (0.77)
		Future impact	0.33 (0.13)	.35	

NOTE: The stepwise criteria retained those variables significant at $p < .05$; variables were dropped from the equation when their significance increased above $p > .10$. Standard errors are in parentheses.

those news clips with a lower mean of issue importance. Further research will need to discern if this pattern reflects the peculiarities of the issues selected for the present study or if the impact of fear requires some minimum threshold before affecting perceptions.

Nevertheless, as the zero-order correlations generally attest, one clear conclusion of this study's results is that increased unpleasantness and fear beget increased attention, as well as an increased perception of importance. Given that fear would seem to be an unpleasant emotional experience that people seek to avoid, what explains the public's continued fascination with a news media that often subscribes to the "if it bleeds, it leads" philosophy of news programming (Gans, 1979)? One answer may be suggested by Apter's (1989) reversal theory, which suggests that fear and excitement are frequently experienced in tandem to produce a mutually dependent but alternating state of sensation-seeking and sensation-avoiding. Apter's theory proposes that we are often in an "arousal-seeking" state that triggers a desire to seek out fearful stimuli, provided that these stimuli are not too life-threatening—and some stories in the media may proffer enough of this vicarious excitement that people are automatically attracted to them. It is only once the fearful event becomes too life-threatening that it triggers what Apter (1989) calls an "arousal-avoiding state"—the experience of increased arousal as unpleasant and aversive.

Thus, a paradox arises. Cultural and political observers note, with some weariness, the deleterious effects of negative reporting. For example, Iyengar (1991) and Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) have chronicled the role that negative political reporting and political attack ads have played in rendering an electorate that is increasingly cynical and apolitical. Numerous public calls have been made by national and local legislators for a toning down of the negativity and violence emphasized by the media. Yet, the response by the television viewing public has sent a decidedly mixed signal. Various national polls (e.g., Roper Poll, 1994) have indicated that the public holds negative attitudes toward the portrayal of violence and political mudslinging in news programming. Yet, the ratings of programs that focus on such content appear to be sizable, as evidenced by the increasing number of tabloid television programs in recent years.

In fact, an *in vivo* experiment on the relative interest-value of "less negative" news was conducted beginning in January 1994 by several television news programs. Led by WCCO-TV, a station in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and in response to numerous focus groups in which audience members indicated dissatisfaction with the high level of violence presented in local news programs, 10 TV stations around the United States elected to offer "family sensitive" newscasts, during which efforts were made "to minimize, and in some cases eliminate, unnecessarily graphic video of crime and other violent images" (WCCO News Release, 1994). Yet, by late 1994, the audience response to these broadcasts indicated that 8 of the 10 stations adopting this policy saw their viewer ratings decrease, compared with their ratings a year earlier (Lafayette, 1995).⁶ Thus, despite proclaimed desires, viewer behavior generally did not reflect acceptance of less sensational, less fear-eliciting newscasts.

Altheide's (1997, 2002) research on television news programs indicates that news editors use a "problem frame" to make issues generally appear more problematic than they really are, thus creating fear within the audience and enticing them to attend to such programs. Altheide suggests that the reason the news media use the problem frame in their newscasts reflects a transformation in recent years in which they have shifted from being seen as conduits of information to being viewed as sources of entertainment. The problem frame is seen as an effective means of increasing viewers in this new culture of entertainment news in that it makes real-world problems seem as dramatic, frightening, and, thus, interesting as possible (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). In addition, because of the increasing levels of fear in the news, "Americans think they are subjected to more risk today than their parents were twenty years ago" (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999, p. 481). By treating issues as fearful and dangerous, the problem frame may cause an awareness and expectation that danger and risk are very frequent characteristics of the environment.

Ultimately, further investigation may lead to an added understanding of the role of fear in agenda setting from two sides: What psychological decision rules do news editors *and* news media audiences rely on to help them decide what issues to focus on? In turn, an evolutionary psychology perspective on the role of

fear may have some intriguing implications for media issues currently confronting public policy makers, such as the question that although many people condemn violence on television, psychological factors often appear to predispose large audiences to prefer to watch such programming. As Lyall Watson sums up in *Dark Nature* (1995), his treatise on the “origins of evil behavior,”

[The history of homo sapiens], though it occupies but 0.01 percent of life’s whole, has been remarkable. There is no truly objective basis on which to elevate one species above another, but it has become obvious that ours is qualitatively different in at least one way. We have the power to defy the genes. We have questioned their authority, rebelled against chemical control and, even before we knew who or what they were, set in train a movement which represents a real alternative to their tyranny. We have invented cultural evolution which, compared to the biological process, happens at the speed of light. . . . We may be in charge now, but we have lost control of the old checks and balances, the essential inhibitors and disinhibitors, which make for easy equilibrium. . . . The break with organic evolution and genetic control has all happened so fast that there hasn’t been time to put appropriate cultural controls in their place.

Thus, like kids in a candy store, we show an unwavering attraction to negative, fear-inducing information because it likely had survival value in the past. Current technology, however, has made the provision of such threatening information much more readily accessible to the public in much greater quantities and varieties than ever before. The challenge will come from deciding what types of controls on such information the public—at a political, cultural, and moral level—is willing to tolerate. Clearly, one gateway toward developing some form of control will come from the news media itself. Balancing the concern for corporate profits and newsroom prestige with compassion for potentially adverse audience effects will prove to be the lynchpin of any tenable solution.

APPENDIX

News Clips Used as Stimuli in the Present Study

<i>News Clip</i>	<i>Number Topic</i>
1.	Rumors concerning divorce of Mayor Rudolph Guiliani
2.	“The snowiest winter ever” predicted (local weather forecast)
3.	Polar bear birthday—Free local zoo admission for celebration
4.	Racially motivated homicides in the U.S. Army
5.	Dolphins that help developmentally disabled children
6.	Federal crash tests show some car models to be unsafe
7.	Local schoolgirl is hospitalized after choking on lunch
8.	Singer Mariah Carey receives no Grammy Award nominations
9.	Grandmothers who skydive
10.	Local man serving a weekend-only prison sentence for raping a teenage model

NOTES

1. Some theorists have noted that some degree of fearlessness also may have survival value in that it enables one to sometimes make advances by temporarily ignoring standards of caution (Watson, 1995). This poses a possible boundary condition of the effects examined in the present study to be explored in future research.
2. With only 36 participants, by no means is this sample intended to be representative of the full range of demographic characteristics of the population. However, the power of this within-subject design nevertheless provides a highly sensitive test of the psychological factors of interest.
3. Participants were not asked to provide reactions to these two "practice" news clips. The topics of the two practice clips were (a) problems with service on America Online and (b) a vigil held in Miami for a pilot of a private plane shot down near Cuba.
4. Because not all participants responded in a clear fashion, systematic analyses were not done on these open-ended responses. An informal review of them, however, indicated that most responses included some variation of the comment "seems most important." Such responses are not surprising, although we were curious if respondents, who generally indicated that they watched TV news with some regularity, would explicitly respond more on the basis of an expressed sense of being "media savvy," perhaps mentioning the inclusion of a news clip because "this is what the news typically show," and so forth.
5. Essentially, these lower means, and the resultant lower correlations, likely reflect problems with restriction of range.
6. As of June 1997, WCCO no longer had an official "family-sensitive newscast" policy.

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