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The Rhetoric of Crisis: How We Talk About the Vulnerability of Youth

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How We Talk About the Vulnerability of Youth

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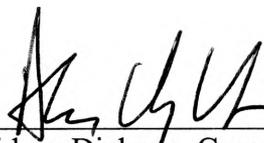
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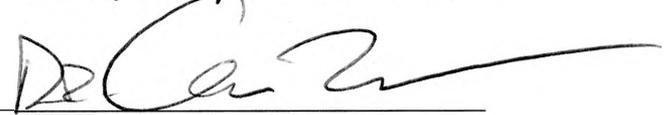
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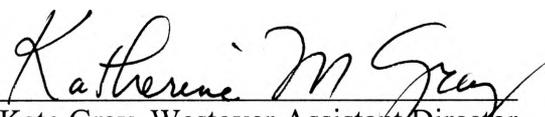
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Introduction

   The classical definition of rhetoric is generally understood to be the art of persuasion. Originating in ancient Greece, rhetoric was one of the three original liberal arts. It focused on effective use of language, most often in the arena of politics and public discourse (Brummett, 35). By mastering persuasive language, politicians were able to shape and sway public opinion in their favor. Conversely, by understanding the mechanics of rhetoric, citizens were able to recognize and interpret speech that was purposefully constructed. The prevalence of rhetoric in political speech made it an integral part of a democratic society – politicians needed to know how to use it, and citizens needed to know how to understand it.

   While some of the theories of strategic communication from antiquity are still relevant, changes in social organization and media have precipitated new understandings and practices of rhetoric. While rhetoric used to apply only to the realm of political speeches it now encompasses a multitude of social actions and situations including public relations, journalism, advertising, and popular culture. The significance of rhetoric and the encoded meaning it carries has been scrutinized by intellectuals from all academic fields. However, one thing remains certain – understanding rhetoric is a requirement to be a responsible citizen in a democratic society. Social theorist Barry Brummett argues that rhetoric is abundant in today's society – specifically in popular culture. Brummett acknowledges that rhetoric is present in political speeches, television commercials, and other obvious persuasive medias, but believes it is also present in other, more subtle, forms of popular culture like fashion, music, and movies. Most people assume that the choices they make regarding taste in music, hairstyle, or clothing are based on aesthetics

or personal preference. Brummett, however, believes that many, if not all, of the everyday decisions we make are affected by rhetoric. For Brummet, people are subjects (audiences/consumers) of the rhetoric that circulates in popular culture more than they are subjects of political rhetoric. This means that rhetoric in popular culture deserves as much, if not more attention from academia.

So, what it means to study rhetoric and its impact on the formation of an informed and active citizenry has changed from antiquity to the present. While before, citizens needed to understand how to make and decode *enthymemes* (Aristotle's description of probable arguments), now it means decoding the media's representation of "reality" (in all aspects) and resisting our own (media shaped) habits of simplifying complex issues into metonyms. The process of metonymy, Brummett says, is "to personalize large and complex issues in ways that make them understandable, without distorting those issues so much that good decisions cannot be made" (Brummett, 63). In essence, Brummett says that we simplify complex problems in order to make them easier to cope with and understand. Brummett refers to this process of personal appraisal of meaning as metonymy. For example, terrorism is a complex term that we personalize through specific examples to better understand. Rather than probing the source of the problem – the social conditions that produce and support terrorism – the situation is framed by the technocracy to support a melodramatic interpretation. The coverage emphasizes individual violent acts in order to define what a terrorist is and is not. This process serves both to simply the problem into terms we can understand and to reinforce social groups and boundaries. By defining terrorists as, for example, Muslim extremists with unbridled hatred for America, we make them easy to identify and target, but more importantly, we

separate ourselves by making clear distinctions between "terrorists" and "normal" people (Brummett, 58).

However, rhetoric can be dangerous when the representations it circulates reinforce—without calling attention to—an ideology. Ideology refers to both the result and the process by which a particular social group's interests are expressed through and supported by a way of looking at the world and naming what exists and what is valuable (Best, 1999). Joel Best, in his book *Random Violence*, addresses the omnipresence of ideology-forming agents in everyday life Essentially Best is saying that it is impossible to name or label things without some sort of value assessment. The language we choose to use to describe ourselves is indicative of how we think. This thesis seeks to explain how the media's presentation of crisis shapes, identifies, and confirms values of distinct viewing groups.

Critical Theory

Social critics who work in the interdisciplinary field of critical theory attempt to understand the subtle ways in which the base material organization of society is reflected in and shapes the superstructure (or dominant values, narratives and images) of that society. The terms "base" and "superstructure" come from Karl Marx, who is often identified as the first ideological critic (or critical theorist). Marx was interested in the hierarchy of relationships in capitalist societies – that ordinary workers seemed not to understand how they were being exploited by a system that turned their labors into wealth for a very few managers and captains of industry

Marx's most acclaimed work, *The Communist Manifesto*, opens with the famous line, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx, 3). In making this opening statement, Marx lays the foundation for his argument that the state of a society is dictated by the relationships and interactions of varying groups of people. For Marx, most of our behavior stems from our relationship to labor – to economics. He noted that throughout history, the ruling class of people – despite being the minority – made the pivotal decisions regarding the well-being of society. Marx attributes this to the power associated with the means of production in a society. Marx says that because the ruling class controls the means of production, it also controls the legal, political, and religious institutions that support the society. He asserts that economy is the crux of power in any capitalist society. Controlling the means of production, the ruling class essentially buys and sells the labor, time, and resulting product of the working class. This enables the ruling class to impose its personal ideology on the masses by making it seem to be in the interest of everyone (Elster, 63). Since the working class relies on the means of production for sustenance, the ideology of the ruling class is usually adopted and propagated until it is the norm. Essentially, those who own the means of production also own the mental means of production.

Critics of Marx say that he gives too much credence to the economic factors that influence a society. However, Marx's work has inspired research on ideology in diverse fields – including areas such as rhetoric and media criticism – and still remains a point of reference in academic and political circles. Marx's thoughts have been interpreted and expanded upon from decade to decade. His definition of ideology in the social sense has been fervently debated and contested. The most common criticism of Marx is that he

focuses too much on the labor of man and the economy. He overlooks the subtleties that make a society so complex. Relationships between people go far beyond the economic or financial level. Emotion, philosophy, and race are all examples of relationships that connect, as well as isolate, people on different levels. Each of these areas of society has the potential to impact the spread of ideology. Defenders of Marx will argue that the theory is not an exercise in economic determinism, but rather a dialectical theory. Though while being econocentric, the theory posits that there are reciprocal relationships between the economy and other facets of society. This means that there is a mutual dependence between the various facets of society. Each and every part of society is integrated and, as a result, has the ability to affect or be affected by the other parts. Critics and defenders of Marx can both agree that ideology-forming agents are circulated throughout society in more ways than one.

Rhetorical Criticism

Like the application of rhetoric, ideology has evolved with the technological advances of man. Broadened networks for communication have allowed ideology to permeate various aspects of society more thoroughly. The French philosopher Louis Althusser observed this trait prior to the advent of mass media in the 20th century. Althusser, a disciple of Marxist thought, wrote that the influence of ideology extended beyond the realm of labor. Rather than diverging from Marx's original thoughts about ideology, he took them and applied them to other areas of society, such as religion, schools, law, family, literature, art, and even sports. He did not see the distinction between ideology in the public vs. private sense or repressive vs. non-repressive (Payne,

37). Rather, Althusser argued that "all ideology is in some sense repressive, and all state apparatuses are in some sense ideological" (Payne, 33). It is repressive because people are shaped into particular subjects without their conscious awareness. While Marx was only concerned with workers who were alienated from their labors by industrialized work, Althusser saw the whole range of cultural production (how we learn to eat, walk, dress, experience pleasures, write, dance, etc.) as ideological. Althusser was a visionary in the sense that he was aware that ideology-forming influences were present in virtually every facet of life.

If rhetoric is the study of people doing things with language, then contemporary rhetoric must include how our "doing things" includes more than making speeches and arguing about legal issues. It also includes navigating the vast web of codes and meanings that attach us to institutions and networks of power. That's a bit more complicated than what Aristotle was contending with, but that's the modern world.

Rhetoric of Crisis

Most broadly, this thesis concerns the rhetoric of crisis--how the news media represent disasters or dangers in contemporary U.S. society. More particularly, it aims to discover how the coverage of crisis does ideological (or identity-forming, value-confirming) work. This thesis will begin with a summary of Joel Best's book *Random Violence*. Best, an ideological critic, argues that the media – without necessarily intending to – follows scripts to explain violence, sex, and other dilemmas. These scripts serve as cultural resources, meaning they actually serve a purpose beyond the referential or informative. Best believes many scripts about imminent dangers facing youth

downplay the underlying social problems in favor of melodrama. These types of scripts serve as resources for the way we interpret the world. We use these recognizable, established images and ideas to interpret current social trends or problems. In constructing new crimes, we draw upon familiar cultural resources such as conspiracy, melodrama, and novelty. This thesis intends to use Best's concepts to examine recent North American media coverage of dangers facing youths in 2005 in order to understand the ways in which rhetoric shapes our interpretation of the social climate.

Crisis is a staple of news and social commentary, especially in newspaper journalism. For example, as long as there have been newspapers, there has been a "crisis with youth." Troublesome youths, or gangs have been considered an urban crime problem in the U.S. since the 1840s over which periodic "waves of concern" or "cycles of rage" were reflected in the public (Best, 73). Every thirty years or so another cycle of violence emerged and the public would respond with distress. However, these periods of intense concern never lasted long because there is not enough violence to fuel that kind of hype for a long period of time. So, public concern subsides until another crime or atrocity appalls it and sparks another wave of panic. Best finds that in reality, there is very little differentiation in the statistical occurrence of crimes committed during these periods of crisis than in "normal" times. In fact, most criminologists agree that most "crime sprees" are actually a product of increased media coverage, rather than an actual increase in crime (Best, 34). Similarly, our perception of the world is slightly skewed because of the fact that our "experiences" are forever a synthesis of the real and imaginary. This perceived danger propagated by the media comes from various cultural resources and scripts, often borrowed from Hollywood.

Cultural resources are a constantly evolving association of current events/crimes with older, more familiar images. They are drawn upon to establish identity and confirm the values of individuals and of communities. "Who we think we are shapes the cultural resources we choose, and those choices in turn affect how we look at ourselves" (Best, 185). Best draws attention to the ideology-forming capacity of these resources and points out the potential consequences they have on social discourse. One of the most significant cultural resources used in the media is melodrama. Suspense and climactic endings are both staples of Hollywood entertainment. The dramatic and bizarre is always more alluring than the complex and subtle. The notion of "random violence" has gained popularity in media coverage because of its dramatic and bizarre qualities.

"Random violence" is a phrase that has entered into the realms of both popular and serious discourse about crime. It is a catch-all that refers to violent crimes that appear to be motiveless or arbitrary. When asked to define random violence, people generally respond with an example – usually an extreme example – of unsystematic violence (Best, 10). Best acknowledges that, while there are violent crimes in which a victim happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, these instances are rare. Most crimes, he contends, can be explained logically and often are reflective of an underlying societal problem. The notion of random violence is perpetuated by the simplification of crimes into villain vs. victim. Best points out that these examples are often highly melodramatic: "there is an "ideal" victim – usually a respectable person engaged in some innocent activity – who suffers a sudden, unexpected, unprovoked, violent attack by an assailant with no connection to the victim, no good reason to hurt this person in this way" (Best, 7). Within this script, anyone is a potential victim, as well as a

potential villain. These scripts serve to individualize crime – or more often medicalize crime – and thereby undermine the structural attributes that inform social debate.

News coverage of violent crimes, then, relies on scripts that are borrowed or adapted from other areas of society. These scripts are used to help explain crimes. They draw upon an available repertoire of imagery that is immediately recognizable to the general public. Painting characters in a particular news story as stereotypes simplifies the depth of their personalities and/or motives, and shifts focus to the action of the story. The reader doesn't need to know that the assailant was a veteran of the Vietnam War who suffered extensive mental deterioration and, after suffering years of neglect and abuse, had recently lost his job; they need only know that he ruthlessly killed three women with his bare hands. Framing the crime as a random act of brutality intrigues the reader. Why would this man suddenly snap and attack innocent women? The "monster script," Best says, is a common narrative used to interpret random crime.

In the classical sense, a monster was an abnormally shaped human, though not necessarily evil. Social critic Edward J. Ingebretsen claims that the media has skewed the image and use of the traditional monster saying "what had once been an omen of awe became a trigger of fear – a civic fright monitor that was, in addition, profitable as well" (Ingebretsen, 12). The fear-producing script of the monster is useful in that it enables us to quickly identify and explain a violent crime. For example, Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs* murdered and ate people simply because he wanted to. He was an evil man, with no motive or predetermined victim. However, while it is comforting to be able to explain complex crimes, it is also frightening because the world is characterized as a dangerous and violent place in which monsters roam free among us. The term "monster"

and "psychopath" have been used to label people in the news such as Ted Bundy, Susan Smith, Eric Harris and Dylan Kliebold and even Bill Clinton. The same script is applied to each of these individuals resulting in a similar reception and narrative shape, despite the uniqueness suggested by the charge of their monstrosity. As a consequence, focus is placed on the criminal rather than the crime. Best warns that "focusing on 'random violence' distorts our understanding of our society's crime problems, and that this distortion makes it harder for us to address those problems" (Best, 1). In essence, the language used to describe violent crimes circumvents any discussion of serious social issues by relying on melodrama to occupy the audience.

Joel Best builds a theoretical framework from which to analyze news media – more specifically, the rhetoric of crisis. He examines the ways in which the language of news shapes our ideology. This thesis uses Best's theory as a lens through which to analyze recent media coverage of crisis – more specifically school shootings. Using various text media sources, including, but not restricted to, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, it will establish a clear pattern of language pertaining to crisis. The purpose of this research is two-fold: to identify patterns, or scripts, in the coverage and then to speculate about why such explanations are useful, why the fears generated along with these scripts appeal to groups of media consumers. The primary documents examined in this thesis were selected purposefully to show a diversity of sources. The idea is that if rhetoric-laden scripts are present in a range of societal institutions, then they should be visible in the various media sources that represent those institutions as well. Each source is an example of media that is produced on a daily basis for audiences of varying size.

Christian Science Monitor **published October 4, 2006**

The headline of the story, "A Pattern in Rural School Shootings: Girls as Targets" catches the reader's attention with the claim of girls being targets of random violence. The word choice of the journalist is indicative of the melodramatic scripts in the media. The shooter is portrayed as an unstable sexual deviant, with a weak or non-existent motive, who terrorizes a peaceful Amish community. Pertaining to the school shooting in Nickel Mines, PA, this article uses strategic language to shape the reader's impression of both the shooter and the girls.

> The scene Monday at the buff-colored, one-room schoolhouse in the gentle heart of Amish country was wrenching, but also distressingly familiar. One of four fatal school shootings to beset rural America in just over a month, the rampage that killed five young girls raises anew a host of old concerns – about campus security in countryside settings, access to guns by unstable individuals, and "copycat" violence advanced by media attention.

The scene is set by describing the environment as "gentle" and characterizing the "young girls" as innocent victims. The shooter, on the other hand, is described with words like, "unstable," and later, "an armed drifter." The article, lacking concrete evidence, was quick to suggest sexual deviancy as a likely motive.

> Law-enforcement officials, working to unearth Roberts' motive, said Tuesday that sexual assault seemed the most likely one. In a suicide note, they said, Roberts recalled an incident 20 years ago when he, a pre-teen at the time, molested younger children. The note indicated he had been haunted by dreams about molesting young girls, police said.

The article offers only one potential motive that is based largely on speculation. No one, except Roberts, could accurately describe his dreams. Also, there is no testimony from his wife, someone who knew the man intimately and could have perhaps offered valuable insight into his disposition. The article also quotes a sociologist who

claims "the predominant pattern of school shootings is girls as victims." By citing examples from a school shooting in Bailey Colorado and one in Canada, the article subtly suggests that girls are in more danger than boys. This is an example of scripts using extreme examples of violence and portraying them as part of a growing trend, or evidence of a budding crisis. With little fact to back up these assertions, aside from testimony from so-called experts, this article is a melodramatic script based loosely around a group of relevant facts.

South China Morning Post, published October 7, 2006

The headline, "Slaughter of the Innocents" is far less subtle than the previous article. The article follows former headmaster Bill Bond, an apparent school-shooting expert, as he offers advice to schools across the nation. As the previous article it makes references to a number of recent school shootings. There is a clear distinction between victim and villain made evident by the language used to describe them.

> The Wisconsin rampage fits the all-too-familiar profile of US school shootings – a picked on young male who raids a relative's gun cabinet to settle some scores. "The student felt the world had persecuted him, so he brought a shotgun and pistol to school and said, 'I'm going to kill someone,'" Mr. Bond said. Like other incidents, it's also a tale of heroicism by courageous staff. Weston school principal John Klang overpowered and disarmed Eric Hainstock, despite sustaining wounds from which he later died, almost certainly averting further death. But the Colorado and Pennsylvania incidents represent an unsettling new turn for the phenomenon.

> Duane Morrison, 53, took six female students hostage at Platte Canyon secondary school in Bailey, Colorado, sexually assaulted them, before the siege's deadly denouement. In Pennsylvania, Roberts singled out female students and it has emerged that he told his wife he'd molested two young relatives decades earlier and was plagued by fantasies of molesting again.

The characters are presented as black and white. The monster script can be seen in use here as the two killers are characterized as sexual deviants who prey on young girls. Conversely, the school administrators are portrayed as heroic. The article even hints at martyrdom as it implies that one principal sacrificed his life for his students. The aura of panic is also evident. Phrases like "an upsetting new turn for the phenomenon" and later "no US school is safe" dramatize the issue. It also implies that school shootings are a current topic of concern that deserves our immediate attention. The article concludes with a slew of theories to explain the shootings as well as new measures that have been implemented in schools to prevent shootings. Bill Bond attributed the shootings to everything from revenge in rural communities, US surplus of guns, and copycats of Columbine. The article creates a dramatic hype at the end by citing numerous recent examples of schools locking down or assigning police officers to the halls in fear of a possible school shooting.

Fort Worth Star-Telegram, published October 5, 2006

The melodrama script applied to this particular article surrounding the implications of school shootings takes the fear factor up another notch. This article poses the question "should school shootings be classified as domestic terrorism?" Though the article insinuates that these incidents are "random crimes perpetrated by troubled individuals," it increases the melodrama with the weight of the word terrorism. Since the attacks of September 11, the word terrorism has carried a connotation of extreme violence and malevolence. This article makes use of these negative connotations to elicit a response from the reader. The article is so bold to claim that "there is a fine line

between school shootings and terrorism." Another equally audacious claim is that the

Columbine shooters were "motivated by infamy." A quote from a professor of sociology

and criminology at Northeastern University compares the two boys to Al-Qaeda

operatives interested in gaining infamy by terrorizing the US.

> Absolutely, these people have a cause, and that cause is personal gain," Levin
> said. "Look closely at Columbine. There's no question that the two students,
> (Eric) Harris and (Dylan) Kliebold, were motivated by infamy. Their plan was to
> attack and terrorize students at school and become famous. How is that any
> different from Al-Qaeda getting revenge against the U.S. by terrorizing citizens of
> New York?

This melodramatic script of school shootings not only increases our fear, but

diverges far from any relevant social discourse. Characterizing the Columbine shooters

as terrorists interested only in infamy is a gross oversimplification of the problem. It

ignores any aspect of the school system, and barely touches on the boys personal motives

-- infamy is a weak motive, especially when it lacks any factual evidence. The article

continues and suggests that serious measures will be taken in response to this terrorist

threat.

> President Bush has called for a school violence summit next week involving
> representatives of law enforcement and education to determine federal action to
> help communities prevent school shootings and deal with the ramifications.

The article attempts to legitimize the fear surrounding school shootings by citing

as many possible fatal school shootings as it can. It also proposes some theories – none

of which are remotely fleshed out – as to possible reasons for this sudden surge in

shootings. The article, like the two previous, also suggested that media coverage may

likely spurn copycat shooters, also seeking infamy.

Salon.com **October 4, 2006**

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The final article is more objective in its discussion about the shootings and the criminal. It gives the relevant facts – setting, girls age, and how they were shot – without using overdramatic vernacular.

> At a one-room schoolhouse in Pennsylvania Monday, Amish schoolgirls, ages 6 to 13, were lined up at the chalkboard, and shot execution-style in the back of the head, before the gunman killed himself. So far, five girls ages, 7, 7, 8, 12 and 13, including two sisters, have died, while five more remain hospitalized.

After pointedly describing the particular event, the article shifts gears and focuses on what precautions can be taken to make schools safer without transforming them into lockdowns. The article systematically identifies potential weaknesses of school security or policy by using examples of past violence. Next the article poses a series of questions such as "What should we learn about the vulnerability of schools from these shootings in the past week?" and "How could schools be made safer without making them fortresses?" These are appropriate questions to ask. They are relevant to the greater societal problem and attempt to direct focus away from the melodramatic. However, in answering these questions the article sides with the extreme. It also uses the term terrorism to describe school shootings and goes even further saying terrorists target children because they can "achieve a higher level of terror and demoralization of society." The article continues in a deliberate discussion about the nature of school shootings and how to treat them in the future. Though the article is dramatic in its recommendations, it is progressive. Rather than focus on the single dramatic shooting, it uses that as a springboard into more serious social and political discussion. Focusing attention to prevention of similar tragedies in the future is more constructive than dramatizing what has already happened.

Patterns

Upon reading and analyzing various media representations of crisis, there are some clear patterns that occur in almost every article. The first, and most obvious, pattern is the vilification of the criminal and the victimization of the injured party. Guilt is not a question in these articles – it is well established that these people did in fact bring a gun into a school building and shoot someone. Things that are in question are the motive, background of the criminal, and context of the crime. Rather than examine these questions, the articles focus on the criminal and the victim. The melodramatic script of monster vs. innocent victim requires instant recognition of each member of the script. This is why the term innocent is associated with the victim in nearly every article. In the particular cases I examined girls were primarily the victims. The articles play off this and insinuate that girls are more vulnerable, innocent, and harmless than young boys or adults. This serves to make the crime appear more monstrous. It forces the reader to ask the question, what kind of person could do such a thing to helpless little girls? This draws attention away from the motive for the crime and simplifies things into criminal vs. victim. Once the criminal is characterized as a monster, it doesn't really matter why he committed a crime. It is enough to know that he is evil, heartless, and not like you and me. However, there is a motive that is associated with the criminal in at least two of the articles – sexual deviancy.

Sexual deviancy has long been linked to violent crimes, whether with valid reason or not. It is the general assumption that if these people are twisted enough to commit such violent crimes, they must be deviant in other aspects of life as well. Sex, a controversial and powerful subject in popular culture, is a logical way to defame

somebody. Even by merely suggesting someone is a child molester or rapist, the text evokes certain feelings and ideas that are associated with those labels. The articles about school shooting found a way to incorporate sexual deviancy into their character portrayal of the criminals. One article used a suicide note that apparently had a vague reference to pedophilia in the shooter's past – though the article didn't cite any specific lines from the note – to suggest sexual deviancy as a motive. Another article used hearsay testimony from a young boy who wasn't even in the classroom. Both articles grasped the smallest tidbit of fact about the sexual nature of the criminal and turned it into a motive – or at least used it to shape impressions of his character.

Another common script in the articles was the idea that these crimes were just a taste of what is yet to come. All but one of the articles used testimony from school officials or self-proclaimed experts on school shootings to imply that this was a crime pattern, not just a random incident. One of the most popular methods for doing this is the copycat theory. Many of the articles cited fears about copycat shooters who would see media coverage of the crimes and commit similar crimes in other schools. This is a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. The media implies that media coverage of an event will spur more like it, yet rather than tone down their articles in order to prevent such a thing, they ramp up their coverage of violent crimes. This would lead one to believe that the media is not only distorting the facts, but propagating violence. However, the copycat theory is a speculative theory that is founded in little factual information. It is more a tool of fear than it is a productive discussion about violent crimes. The copycat theory suggests that any kid in any state who watches television or reads a paper might be persuaded to shoot up his/her school. Like the vilification of the criminals, this is a fear-based script – used

to sensationalize the news and boost ratings. In the end, the tendency toward sensationalizing the news or melodrama can be supported by Marx's theories about the commodification of social life. Everything in society, including non-material things like emotion, religion and ideology, can be bought and sold. Under this philosophy, crime, or crisis, is merely another form of entertainment that is bought and sold for financial gain.

Receptivity and Value

The average American citizen is exposed to hundreds, if not thousands of scripts every day. Composed of culture resources and familiar ideologies, there are scripts for discourse about everything in society – not just crisis. Since mass media has allowed for messages to permeate virtually every aspect of society, it makes sense that media scripts would be present in many different facets of everyday life. The decisions we make – from what kind of coffee to drink to what kind of life insurance to buy – are influenced by media scripts. As Best says, "we depend on language to talk about – even to think about – social problems. The language we choose makes a difference: it shapes what we think about, and therefore how we deal with, our problems" (Best, 1999).

A "crisis" that receives heavy media attention will rise into the eye of public concern whereas an event that it largely ignored by the media will sputter and fall out of the public's awareness. While the media has the ability to thrust certain issues into the center of public attention, it struggles to maintain that attention and usually resorts to a similar or "new" crisis to raise interest. As a result, many of the same social problems – such as the structure of our public school system – are skirted over in favor of melodramatic examples of violence or sex. The media is helpful – in the sense that it

brings attention to an aspect of society that deserves serious discussion and reevaluation –

yet it impedes progress with melodramatic examples that distort our perception of what

the problem is. It is difficult, then, to determine which scripts are being used consciously

to manipulate rhetoric for personal gain and which are using it unknowingly. In order to

make responsible social decisions, Americans must be aware of the scripts they ingest as

well as the subtle manipulations of those scripts. For example, a current area of heated

political and social debate is immigration. The current spike of illegal immigration in

this country has led to a resistance movement with heavy nationalist undertones.

Advocates for anti-immigration legislation rely on fear-producing scripts to persuade

their publics. The causes and effects of illegal immigration are generalized and

dramatized in order to simplify the situation. News media categorize any immigrant as

an illegal alien, regardless of his or her social circumstances or situation. Similarly, they

point to statistical variances or inclines, and suggest that these statistics are indicative of a

growing phenomenon that will ultimately threaten U.S. jobs and security. On the other

side of the spectrum, advocates downplay the negative connotations of immigration and

insist that appropriate measures are being taken. Using different scripts with varying

levels of melodrama, the same social situation can be painted as either a crisis or a

normal occurrence.

In a society where the distinction between entertainment and news is steadily

fading, scripts are a useful tool for the media. Aside from their attention-grabbing

qualities and simplification of complex issues, melodramatic scripts are also useful in that

they wield the ability to transcend genres. A script borrowed from a popular action

movie can be used to help explain mounting tensions in Iraq or Darfur. In this way, the

media facilitates awareness – explaining a problem in terms that are understandable to large groups of people. Using cultural resources such as scripts is a way to connect people under a collective understanding. However, simplification and a common understanding are useless when that understanding is distorted through the misrepresentation, or exaggeration, of fact.

It is important for Americans to be aware of – and be able to recognize – the scripts that they encounter during everyday life. Rhetorical scripts are an inescapable feature of media in a society where the free flow of information is constant. Sociologists theorize on the cause and implication of social problems, yet they rely on language to convey their analysis. Language is an essential tool to understanding social problems. The language used in these scripts – whether the scripts are mundane or monumental – has an impact on those whom it reaches. Words carry connotations, both negative and positive. Even subtle references to terrorism or pedophilia, for example, can shift the entire meaning of an article. These things must be taken into account to truly read an article objectively. The language we choose to describe social problems shapes how we think about, and subsequently, how we address social problems. Effectively correcting these problems starts with comprehending the way in which we talk about them.

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