Exemplification in Newspapers: A Content Analysis and Case Studies

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Abstract

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The exemplification theory of communication suggests that the human mind is acutely receptive to concrete information from its surroundings. In a series of experimental studies, communication researchers have consistently found that people tend to extrapolate from exemplars they see in the media—even when given conspicuous statistics that suggest the given exemplars are in the minority of cases. Despite the findings of those experimental studies, only a handful of researchers have attempted to catalog the use of exemplars in media reports. This study was undertaken as a first step toward correcting that research imbalance.

This study employed a content analysis to measure the use of exemplars in six metropolitan American newspapers in 2003. The content analysis used a sample of two constructed weeks to search for exemplified narratives on the front page of each newspaper and on the front of the local news/metro section. The content analysis did not uncover a significant number of exemplified narratives in a constructed two-week sample of papers, which suggests that the experimental model of exemplification may be at odds with real-world journalism practices.
This study also examined four of the exemplified narratives found by the content analysis in qualitative case studies. Those case studies employed Hall’s model of encoding/decoding and Barthes’ conception of myth to reconsider the underlying theoretical assumptions of exemplification theory. The results of the exercise suggest that the interpretation of exemplars by an audience is a much more complex process than researchers may have previously acknowledged in the literature on exemplification.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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For my wife, Milada
Table of Contents

Abstract............................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgments................................................................................................ v
List of Tables....................................................................................................... ix
Chapter 1. Purpose............................................................................................... 1
Chapter 2. Introduction........................................................................................ 5
  Exemplification Concepts and Terminology................................................... 5
  The Ethical Implications of Exemplars.......................................................... 9
Chapter 3. Literature Review............................................................................ 13
  Measuring the Exemplification Effect............................................................ 13
  Exemplification: The Foundational Studies................................................. 14
  Exemplar Distortion and Base-Rate Precision ............................................. 21
  Exemplification and Prior Opinion............................................................... 22
  Emotion in Exemplars................................................................................... 23
  Quotes and Paraphrases............................................................................... 24
  Social Similarity............................................................................................ 25
  Measuring Exemplars in Content Analysis................................................... 26
Chapter 4. Research Questions......................................................................... 30
Chapter 5. Method.............................................................................................. 34
  Protocols Reliability Test.............................................................................. 42
Chapter 6. Results.............................................................................................. 43
  Discussion of Results of Content Analysis................................................... 52
List of Tables

Table 6.1: Number of Articles ($n$) Included in Coding Process ....................43
Table 6.2: Frequency of Exemplar Totals in Articles ....................................45
Table 6.3: Frequency of Exemplified Topics .............................................46
Table 6.4: Frequency of Exemplar Sources ..............................................47
Table 6.5: Frequency of Exemplar Sources in Each Newspaper ....................48
Table 6.6: Average Number of Sentences Per Exemplar Source Type ..........49
Table 6.7: Frequency of Exemplar Distribution. .........................................50
Table 6.8: Frequency of Exemplar Foci ....................................................50
Table 6.9: Precision of Statistics ................................................................51
Chapter 1. Purpose

The recently conceptualized\(^1\) exemplification effect of communication suggests that the human mind is acutely receptive to concrete information from its surroundings.\(^2\) The findings of exemplification research, which have accumulated over the past two decades, are consistent and provocative. Researchers have found that people unknowingly make judgments from exemplars they see in the media—even when given conspicuous statistics that suggest the rarity of the example. To borrow a term from Noelle-Neumann,\(^3\) it seems that people possess a quasi-statistical sense for scanning and assessing the social environment in which they live. Unfortunately, that type of cognitive scanning can foster perceptions out of line with empirical measurements of reality.

To date, the findings of exemplification research have been replicated enough to warrant confidence in the concept’s validity. Having established that the exemplification effect occurs (under admittedly precise conditions), it would seem prudent to compare the findings to samples of media content.

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Many researchers, including Zillmann and Brosius, have commented on the troublesome ethical implications of the exemplification effect,⁴ and yet little has been done to track the use of exemplars in the news. Without such data, it is difficult to assess the role of exemplars in day-to-day media presentation and reception.

Furthermore, there is an assumption in the writings of Zillmann and Brosius that deserves closer scrutiny. The authors claimed, “In the media of the United States, exemplification abounds,”⁵ and that the media generate “an exemplar flood.”⁶ According to those researchers, exemplification is ubiquitous in mass communication, as common as the weather report or the daily box score. “The news media thrive on exemplification,” they wrote. “The case report, or more accurately, the aggregation of intriguing case reports, as it appears to hold considerable public interest, may be considered the lifeblood of journalism.”⁷ (emphasis added).

Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of published data to justify or expand upon those claims. The only known content analyses of exemplars performed on American media were never published in complete form, and the coding protocol used to compile them is no longer available, according to Gibson and

⁵ Ibid., 19.
⁶ Ibid., 3.
⁷ Ibid., viii.
The data from those studies, which were outlined in the book on the subject by Zillmann and Brosius, also seem to be of limited scope due to the study’s design. While those analyses did find prevalent exemplar usage, they focused on news magazines and network television news shows, which have a very different style of reporting than their daily print counterparts. Thus, laying the groundwork for exemplification measurement in daily newspapers is the explicit aim of this research project.

This study will employ a content analysis to measure the use of exemplars in six major American newspapers. It will (a) begin with an overview of exemplification theory, terminology, and research, (b) review the literature to chart the theory’s origins and development, (c) form research questions from the literature review, (d) outline a content analysis method and coding protocol to answer the research questions, (e) present the findings of the content analysis, (f) introduce a framework for conducting case studies of selected coded articles, and (g) relate the coded articles to the findings of exemplification research to propose protocols for qualitative textual analysis of exemplars in the media.

The findings of the content analysis will call into question the idea that exemplification is common in newspapers. Chapter 7 will review possible explanations for the scarcity of cases found by this study and suggest

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8 E-mail correspondence with Dolf Zillmann, August 2004.
methodological tweaks for future attempts to study the concept via content analysis.

Because this study provides an opportunity to examine real-world instances of exemplification, Chapter 8 will present a framework for case studies of selected coded articles. That framework will incorporate theoretical perspectives from outside traditional exemplification research to show the potential for a broader approach to studying the phenomenon. Chapter 9 will present the case studies, and Chapter 10 will suggest further ideas for exemplification research that are worthy of attention.
Chapter 2. Introduction

This section will define and explain the terminology of exemplification theory to build a foundation for this study. The media’s ability to shape public perception will be linked to exemplars, and the practical and ethical issues raised by the exemplification effect will be introduced.

Exemplification Concepts and Terminology

Media exemplification theory came about largely due to the research efforts of Zillmann and his collaborators.² Besides producing important studies in the field, Zillmann co-wrote the most comprehensive summary of the theory and its ramifications, titled *Exemplification and Communication*. That text largely informs the summary that follows.

Understanding the theory of exemplification requires familiarity with a few key terms. The first, *exemplar*, is best understood in relation to other concepts, as an exemplar is simply a representation of a category. A man who killed his wife in New Jersey, for instance, is a person who exemplifies the concept of “murderer.” Depending on the details of the event, the Jersey homicide may also be used to exemplify extreme reactions to spousal disagreements, domestic abuse, heartbreak, infidelity, and so on. The possibilities for the use of exemplars in media messages are essentially limitless, as even singular events can take on exemplified properties. For

² Credit should be given to researchers in psychology, whose findings laid the groundwork for a media-focused approach. Zillmann and Brosius cited studies from that field extensively in *Exemplification and Communication*. 
example, Zillmann observed that the first manned moon landing could be employed as an exemplar of a successful spacecraft landing despite its unique place in history.\textsuperscript{10}

Certain features of human cognition, studied extensively by Kahneman, Slovic and Tversky,\textsuperscript{11} explain the psychological rationale behind exemplification studies. The researchers discovered people use cognitive shortcuts when collecting information about reality, unconsciously employing techniques called \textit{heuristics}. The \textit{representative heuristic} leads people to extrapolate from known examples when making judgments, essentially treating mental recollections as an objective population sample.\textsuperscript{12} “As a rule, information is not being evaluated in a detached, objective, and sciencelike fashion,” Zillmann and Brosius argued. “Statistical information and stated probabilities tend to have less influence on judgment than do concrete case histories because, concerning everyday situations, people usually do not have access to statistical information and thus are unfamiliar with incorporating such information when rendering judgment.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{13} Zillmann and Brosius, 42.
The availability heuristic holds that there is a hierarchy in the mind that makes some thoughts and memories easier to recall than others.\textsuperscript{14} That heuristic exposes rationality’s nagging blind spot: The easier a thought is to remember, the more influence it has, which means even the most disinterested of introspections are biased by the mind’s all-encompassing drive toward parsimony. This puts pallid, scientific information at a great disadvantage heuristically, since exemplified human drama tends to be very memorable.\textsuperscript{15}

Some exemplars are frequently repeated throughout the media, which can lead to chronic accessibility.\textsuperscript{16} As every propagandist knows, repetition can make a message more salient over time—a deception made possible by the heuristic machinery of the mind. Journalism’s well-documented culture of habits and routines,\textsuperscript{17} complemented by the tendency to succumb to agenda setting,\textsuperscript{18} seems to indicate that, at any given time, there will be a widely understood collection of exemplars dominating media coverage. As Zillmann explained, “Most significant media effects are, after all, thought to be built on

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Zillmann and Brosius, 46-47.
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frequent and consistent exposure to largely redundant concepts, most of which fall well within the conceptual range of exemplification.”

Researchers have argued that human beings habitually engage in heuristic thinking to make sense of the world. To illustrate, imagine a man who takes the same highway route every day to work. On two separate occasions, he witnesses horrific accidents at an intersection along the way. Rather than viewing those accidents as isolated incidents, he assumes that the intersection is incredibly dangerous and drives slowly past it every morning. Statistically speaking, it is entirely possible that the two accidents the man witnessed were anomalies, and that the intersection is actually the safest on the route. The man relies on exemplars, and the representative heuristic, to understand the world around him.

That kind of intuitive inductive reasoning, based primarily on personal observation, is equally applicable to media content; the man could have easily read about the accidents in the newspaper and then decided upon the same cautious driving pattern. As Shapiro noted, “The mental processes engaged in answering a social-reality question are probably not very different from the process a person uses to decide how safe it is to walk to the corner store at night.”

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The Ethical Implications of Exemplars

For most of human history an individual’s knowledge was limited to people, objects, and events in the immediate realm of physical sensory experience. As Lippmann explained, “The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event.” Media technology eliminates physical barriers, bringing a wealth of second hand information about all manner of people, places and events. That information, selected and filtered by news organizations and journalists, helps create what Lippmann called the pseudo-environment, or the limited environment of a person’s perceptions.

Because it is impossible for journalists to hold a mirror up to show all of society, media professionals compromise by modestly aiming to reveal superficial truths about the world through vigilant effort and disinterested analysis. Professional standards such as objectivity implicitly acknowledge human limitations, allowing journalists to construct a superficial summary of “the truth” without agonizing over its ultimate accuracy or comprehensiveness. As Schudson observed, “[Journalistic] objectivity is an ideology of the distrust of the self.” Detached, impartial weighing of evidence is widely viewed as a morally responsible way for journalists to

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22 Ibid., 274.
construct the news—a formula to be used, in good faith, to navigate the inherent limitations of the profession and inform the public about the world.

Exemplification research indicates that basic ethical framework is incomplete because it fails to account for the persuasiveness of anecdotes and quotes in news coverage. Exemplification research suggests the media has the potential to create unfounded fears and beliefs through the cumulative presentation of exemplars. Noted Craig, “Anecdotes are morally a double-edged sword. While they can bring attention to the plight of individuals in riveting fashion, and even place that plight in institutional, professional, and social contexts, the attention remains on a representative, or perhaps unrepresentative, individual or family.”

The potential for deceit is especially acute because newsworthy information is, by the common definition, novel and out of the ordinary, which makes it more likely exemplars will be drawn from extreme cases. As Sundar explained, exemplars “more often than not represent the fringes instead of the center.” The tendency of journalists to select dramatic exemplars can be seen in a New York Times article about unemployment from Nov. 7, 2008. The article told the story of Ken Stelma, a New Jersey

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man who was on the verge of losing his jobless benefits after failing to find work for a year. Stelma was being supported financially by his girlfriend and was at risk of losing his health insurance, which was an especially difficult problem, given he had a tumor in his foot. He was also unable to pay his car insurance, and the lack of transportation made it nearly impossible for him to find a new job. Stelma is the only unemployment exemplar in the Times article; viewed through the lens of exemplification theory, that privileged position effectively turned his tale of extreme misfortune into a typical case of joblessness from a reader’s point of view.

Journalists seem to consider exemplars mainly in terms of helping readers follow the narrative of a complicated story. One recent journalism text instructed, “Examples are especially important in stories about abstract issues. Sometimes numbers help put those issues into perspective ... In addition to reporting the general trends, a good writer would illustrate the story by describing ... specific examples of the trend.”27 Exemplars instruct, inform and entertain media consumers by turning abstractions into compelling human dramas that are easier to follow and understand.

Given the current research on the exemplification effect, it is imperative that journalists consider the persuasive power of anecdotes in news coverage and re-evaluate what meets standards of professional ethics and accuracy. The “inability on the part of news consumers to factor in the

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potential atypicality of exemplars in news reports puts an enormous onus on journalists,” explained Sundar.\textsuperscript{28} Zillmann and Brosius further argued, “The problem is that the journalistic format of apprising the public of relevant occurrences is fraught with manipulatory means of which neither journalists nor citizens are cognizant.”\textsuperscript{29} So while exemplars may help journalists make meaning more clear to the public, their use may actually create a misleading message that distorts the true extent or importance of an issue.

Exemplification research suggests journalists should reexamine their professional practices and consider how exemplars can undermine good-faith efforts at balanced reporting. Based on the data collected so far, it seems that exemplars should be used judiciously and sparingly in the news, and only after determining whether the mix of exemplars is representative of the issue being covered. Those kinds of ethical considerations are absent in journalism today, which is why it is critical to determine whether exemplification is common in the media. Until that issue is studied thoroughly, the implications of the research for professional practice will remain unclear.

\textsuperscript{28} Sundar, “News Features and Learning,” 286.
\textsuperscript{29} Zillmann and Brosius, 39.
Chapter 3. Literature Review

The first section of this literature review will cover the foundational studies of exemplification theory. The discussion will then turn to the theoretical distinctions made by other studies, which will be presented in separate subsections for the sake of clarity. A section also will be devoted to an in-depth discussion of one research project—a content analysis of exemplars—that is of particular interest to this study.

Measuring the Exemplification Effect

The exemplification effect has been tested within a number of media, including radio, television and print. In a typical exemplification experiment, researchers manipulate a news story that contains statistical information and exemplars. Respondents are usually divided into three conditions, with each receiving a slightly altered version of the news story. That alteration comes in the form of different exemplar ratios.

The three exemplar conditions have been given various names in the literature, the most common being selective, representative and blended. In selective exemplification, all of the exemplars in a story agree with the “take,” or focus, of the narrative. Representative exemplification is a more balanced approach, as the exemplar ratio is proportionally similar to the given statistic. In blended exemplification, a mixture of supportive and contradictory exemplars is presented.
When respondents in the three conditions are asked to estimate the prevalence of the phenomenon in the media content, they consistently fail to remember the statistics in the story, instead offering estimates that are proportionally similar to the exemplar ratio they are given. If the majority of exemplars in the story support the idea that a phenomenon is rare, respondents tend to rate it as statistically rare. If the majority of exemplars support it as common, respondents tend to rate it as common. As Zillmann explained, “The point is that our dispositions reflect a quantitative assessment of exemplar experiences, not necessarily in precise numerical estimates but in proportional terms.”

The method used in exemplification experiments has not changed much over time, despite the innovative contributions of some researchers. The precision of the methodology has produced a strong set of findings, but it is open to criticism, as Chapter 7 will show. More research will ultimately prove whether the exemplification effect exists outside the confines of tightly controlled experiments.

**Exemplification: The Foundational Studies**

The starting point for a review of the exemplification literature is an early study by Hamill, Nisbett and Wilson that investigated the appearance

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31 Busselle and Shrum, “Media Exposure and Exemplar Accessibility,” employed a particularly innovative approach.
and power of heuristic thinking in human thought. The term *exemplification* was not used at that time, but the research can be accurately labeled under the category; indeed, the format of the study was very similar to the one later employed in much of Zillmann’s research.

Respondents were given a booklet that contained an abridged story about a woman on welfare. According to the researchers, “The article provided a detailed description of the history and current life situation of a 43-year-old, obese, friendly, irresponsible, ne’er-do-well woman who had lived in New York City for 16 years, the last 13 of which had been on welfare.” In addition to that extreme exemplar, the booklet contained statistical information. In the typical condition, the statistic confirmed that the exemplar was representative of the larger population of welfare recipients. In the atypical condition, the statistic firmly contradicted the validity of the exemplar, stating that “the average length of time on welfare ... is 2 years.” After reading the booklet, respondents were given a survey designed to ascertain their attitudes toward welfare recipients.

There was not a significant difference between the conditions, as both groups conveyed negative attitudes toward welfare recipients. The atypical condition—which contained a contradictory statistic showing lengthy stints on welfare are rare—failed to influence respondents’ judgments. However,

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33 Ibid., 580.
researchers acknowledged that respondents might have regarded the statistical information as irrelevant when making character judgments about welfare recipients. To correct for that possibility, researchers conducted a second study.

In the second experiment, four groups of respondents watched a videotaped interview with a prison guard. Two of the groups saw an interview with a gentle, humane guard who espoused liberal views on rehabilitation; in the other interview, also seen by two groups, a bitter, angry guard railed against the prisoners and announced his extremely low opinion of their characters. As in the previous study, the groups were divided into two conditions and told the humane/inhumane worker was either representative or unrepresentative of prison guards at large. When respondents’ attitudes about prison guards were surveyed after watching the videos, comparison with control groups showed that all of the respondents had their beliefs altered. The “humane” groups rated guards more favorably, and the “inhumane” groups less favorably, than the control groups, which suggests the sampling information had little effect on their judgments.

Hamill, Nisbett and Wilson argued that the results of the studies showed people tend to draw too much information from atypical examples. “Subjects in the atypical sample condition would seem to have little justification for their unfavorable generalizations,” they wrote. “We are

34 Hamill, Nisbett and Wilson, 583.
35 Ibid., 586.
proposing that subjects may engage in an unconscious, memory-mediated
generalization from sample to population that remains unaffected by any
conscious processing of information about sample typicality.”

Zillmann, Perkins and Sundar performed the first media
exemplification study in 1992. Researchers manipulated an article about
post-diet weight gain, creating three distinct exemplar conditions—selective,
blended and representative. The story contained statistical information (often
called “base-rate”) that placed the overall weight gain in the given population
at 32 percent. This study was the first to explicitly discern the power of
exemplar distribution; respondents’ estimates of post-diet weight gain clearly
reflected the exemplar emphasis they were given. The average estimate of
post-diet weight gain in the selective condition was 75 percent of the original
weight loss; in blended, 62.3 percent; and in representative, 58.5 percent.

In addition, the study found that respondents in a delayed condition—
asked to make estimates 14 days after reading the articles—seemed to escape
the influence of the exemplar distributions, instead reverting to prior beliefs.
Estimates of weight gain given by people who had not read the article were
statistically consonant with the delayed response, giving credence to a prior
belief explanation.

36 Hamill, Nisbett and Wilson, 582, 587.
37 Results are summarized in Zillmann and Brosius, Exemplification in Communication. The
original study was written in German.
Brosius and Bathelt conducted a diverse battery of exemplification experiments that were published together in 1994.\textsuperscript{38} One of the most important elements of that research was the use of differing media—namely, radio and print. A radio news package that was professionally recorded contained the following stories, all framed in terms local to the student subjects: changes to a community pay phone system, the quality of cafeteria food, the quality of the region’s famed hard cider, and the introduction of mandatory computer courses at a university. All of those stories contained statistical data. In the radio stage of the experiment, the exemplars were presented in the form of direct interviews. The print version of that package, used in the final leg of the experiment, presented the same stories with the exemplars in paraphrased form.

In the first experiment, limited to radio, Brosius and Bathelt manipulated exemplar distribution, exemplar vividness and exemplar form. Regarding distribution, respondents heard a news package in which a majority of exemplars were consistent or inconsistent with the statistics. As expected, “Perceived majority and minority opinions were judged in almost perfect accord with the exemplar distribution.”\textsuperscript{39} The vividness of the exemplars was manipulated such that the interviewees in one package spoke in emotional tones, while the other featured dry, monotone deliveries. No


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 59.
effect was found for the vividness manipulation. Similarly, exemplar form—all paraphrases in one condition versus all quotations in another—did not produce a difference in the data. A second run-through of the experiment produced the same results.

In a third experiment, again using the same materials, Brosius and Bathelt once again looked for an effect of exemplar distribution. The results were conclusive. “In the extreme condition, which illustrated only one opinion with exemplar interviews, subjects attributed this opinion almost exclusively to the population.”40 Similarly, when the exemplars were presented in an equal split, respondents estimated about half of the population shared one perspective.

In the fourth experiment, radio and print were varied between conditions. Respondents in both conditions were influenced by the exemplar distribution, although the effect was slightly weaker with the print-media condition. In a final print-only test, the researchers manipulated the persuasiveness of the exemplar arguments, while also repeating the statistical information at the end of the text. As Brosius and Bathelt explained, “If the effects of exemplar distribution are considerably weaker in versions with weak arguments and repetitions of the base-rate information, one cannot attribute the effects to the specific quality of exemplars but rather

40 Brosius and Bathelt, 63.
to information imbalance or strength of arguments or recency.” However, no effect was found for persuasiveness or recency, leaving exemplar distribution as the most likely explanation for the effect.

In another study, Gan, Hill, Pschernig and Zillmann studied the exemplification of a massacre in Israel using an actual news package from CNN. The package was professionally edited to create four exemplar conditions that the authors labeled “justification,” “condemnation,” “balanced” and “without exemplification.” In the “justification” condition, all of the interviewees in the news package were Jews who condoned and glorified violence against Islamic worshippers. In the “condemnation” condition, all of the Jewish interviewees strongly condemned the brutality. The “balanced” condition featured a mixture of the two. The without-exemplification condition lacked interviews altogether. After watching one of the four news packages, subjects were given a survey instrument; in it, they were asked to assign fault for the violent state of Israel. The “justification” condition produced significant differences in the respondents’ assignments of blame, effects that failed to appear in the “condemnation” condition. Researchers speculated that the “condemnation” condition portrayed the Jewish population as being beyond the control of the country’s leaders, and therefore as a driving force for violence. Most importantly, the balanced conditions were not effective in changing respondents’ perceptions.

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41 Brosius and Bathelt, 69-70.
condition produced judgments similar to those in the “without” exemplification condition. “Balanced exemplification thus recommends itself once again as a method of informing about social phenomena that is more appropriate than selective alternatives.”

With the basic contours of the theory settled, Zillmann, Brosius and others continued to test for the exemplification effect, but turned much of their attention to other factors that may mitigate or enhance the persuasiveness of exemplars in message reception.

**Exemplar Distortion and Base-Rate Precision**

Gibson and Zillmann built on earlier findings using manipulated magazine coverage of carjackings. Three exemplar conditions were offered to respondents, and once again, the exemplification effect produced statistically distinct estimates that reflected the given manipulation.

Gibson and Zillmann also found that the level of exemplar distortion played a powerful role in message reception. “Respondents exposed to extremely distorted exemplars, when compared to respondents who had received less distorted exemplification, were more likely to consider the carjacking issue a serious national problem.” The study found that exemplars of carjacking deaths were more influential than ones in which

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43 Gan et. al, 130.
44 Gibson and Zillmann, “Exaggerated Versus Representative Exemplification in News Reports.”
victims escaped unharmed, lending support to a vividness effect in exemplification.

Contrary to expectations, the precision of the base-rate information did not affect respondents’ answers; a vague estimate (e.g., “more and more” or “some”) was ultimately as unpersuasive as a numeric statistic. Researchers also found that the exemplification effect increased after a one-week delay, but only in the two extreme exemplar conditions. They hypothesized that “the dominant influence of sensational accounts on judgments is bound to grow over time.”46

**Exemplification and Prior Opinion**

In 1996, Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar and Perkins Jr. clarified the results of the first media exemplification study from 1992.47 An article about family farming was manipulated in the study because researchers believed it was an issue for which the respondents would lack a strong prior opinion. This hypothesis was supported by the data, as the exemplification effect persisted unchanged after a two-week delay. Similar to Brosius and Bathelt, the researchers did not find an effect for the precision of the statistical information. The post-test survey also found that the selective overrepresentation of suffering farmers created distress in readers.

Perry and Gonzenbach further tested the exemplification effect with television coverage of a controversial topic in the United States—institution-sanctioned prayer in public schools. As they hypothesized, the exemplification effect was found even for that emotional political issue. More importantly, the data showed a positive correlation between exemplar condition and change of opinion.\(^\text{48}\) Significantly, researchers found that exemplification alters not only the perception of public opinion, but also overwhelms prior beliefs—even for an issue as heated as the role of religion in public education in the United States, where there is a strong but contested tradition of church and state separation.

**Emotion in Exemplars**

Aust and Zillmann conducted a television-specific study to see if the emotional content of exemplars has any effect on persuasiveness.\(^\text{49}\) They utilized three manipulated conditions in stories about handgun violence and food poisoning: “highly emotional” exemplars, “unemotional” exemplars and “without-victim” exemplars. In the “highly emotional” condition, paid actors “spoke in a choked fashion, paused to control their apparent emotional disturbance, fought back tears, cried, and wiped off their tears.”\(^\text{50}\) In the “unemotional” condition the actors spoke in a calm, collected manner. The


\(^\text{50}\) Aust and Zillmann, 793.
“without-victim” condition lacked personalized exemplification altogether. The emotional content produced a significant difference in the subjects’ judgments. Those in the highly emotional condition rated the threat of food poisoning and handgun violence the highest, followed in succession by the unemotional and without-exemplar conditions. In addition, respondents in the highly emotional condition rated their own personal risk as being higher, an effect that did not appear in the other two conditions. The results suggest sensational exemplars are more persuasive and memorable to news consumers.

**Quotes and Paraphrases**

Gibson and Zillmann sought to ascertain the power of direct quotes in print journalism.51 Researchers once again manipulated an article about family farming in the United States. That time, the story placed rich and poor farmers in ideological opposition. In the “impoverished” exemplars, farmers blamed banks for their financial woes; in contrast, the rich farmers praised the financial community for its reliable support. In one condition, the plight of the poor farmers was presented in direct quotations, while the testimony of the rich was paraphrased. In a second condition this arrangement was reversed. The control condition article contained statistics and other information about family farms, but lacked exemplars.

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Subjects who read the poor-farm testimony in direct quotes attributed more fault to the nation’s banking system and offered the highest estimate of failing farms. The effect was not as strong in the “rich-farm” quotation condition; researchers suspected that outcome was caused by a failure to rotate exemplars to different positions within the manipulated stories. Nonetheless, the study suggested direct quotes are a powerful form of print exemplification. Contrary to expectations, ratings of story quality, fairness, and balance did not differ between conditions. “The findings lend no support to the contention that readers are capable of detecting bias in reporting,” Gibson and Zillmann observed.52

Social Similarity

Another consideration in exemplification theory is the degree of socio-economic similarity between audience members and exemplars. Brosius tested the role of social similarity in exemplification in a study in the late 1990s in Germany.53 Respondents were given four newspaper articles dealing with a proposed abolition of public phones, a possible traffic ban, tele-shopping and the quality of the local hard cider. Brosius hypothesized that exemplars that resembled the respondents—in this case, college-aged students—would have a stronger effect on judgment. To test that hypothesis,

52 Gibson and Zillmann, “Effects of Citation in Exemplifying Testimony on Issue Perception,” 174.
two versions of each article were created, one describing the speakers in the articles as “students,” and another describing them as “pensioners.”

Brosius found that group membership did not cause differences in the data. Social similarity had no effect on respondents’ judgments. The data suggested that “for issues that are mostly a matter of taste, exemplars appear to possess the power to change opinions; for issues that touch existing political, economic or social attitudes, the effect is weaker and appears only as a tendency.”54 Brosius based that claim on the finding that exemplar distribution influenced subjects’ personal opinions about cider quality, but not about the three social issues.

**Measuring Exemplars in Content Analysis**

So far in this literature review, the focus has been on experimental media-effects studies of exemplification. There appears to be little published research of exemplification using other methods of analysis. In particular, there appears to be a large gap in the literature regarding the actual use of exemplars in media messages, both in terms of frequency (as would be determined by quantitative content analysis of news content) and in terms of possible cultural influence (via some type of cultural/critical inquiry). Analyzing exemplar use in the media is a critical step toward understanding the full implications of the experimental research, but the theory has rarely been examined outside the confines of experiments.

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54 Brosius, “Research Note.” 220.
The only published content analysis of exemplars found by this author was a study by Daschmann and Brosius of television news magazines aired in Germany.\textsuperscript{55} That study did find prevalent exemplar usage in the media, although the application of those findings to American media is uncertain. The study was an invaluable guide and helped clarify some of the difficult methodological issues encountered in this thesis.

Daschmann and Brosius studied news magazine shows televised in Germany to try to gauge the use of exemplars by television journalists. The analysis considered 63.5 hours of footage drawn from five consecutive weeks of coverage. From that footage, 806 individual stories were identified for coding. The stories were then separated into two categories: generalizing portrayals and isolated incidents. Of the 806 stories recorded for coding, a total of 474, or 58.8 percent, were classified as generalizing portrayals. Because those stories made a connection between the subject matter and broader trends in society, they were considered pertinent to the theory of exemplification and suitable for an analysis of exemplars.\textsuperscript{56}

All of the stories recorded for analysis were coded by topic so researchers could determine which kinds of stories were most likely to be presented as generalizing portrayals. The topic categories were: politics, business, cultural, sports, society, crime, human interest, accidents/disasters,


\textsuperscript{56} Daschmann and Brosius 38, 40.
health, and environment. Researchers found a significant difference between the categories when it came to exemplification. Human interest, sports and cultural stories were the least likely to be generalized, at 22.1 percent, 25 percent and 27.6 percent, respectively. For all of the other topics, a generalized approach was the norm.57

Researchers took a close look at the specificity and validity of the base-rate information cited in the generalized portrayals. They found that less than half (45 percent) of the reports presented concrete base-rate information and only 10 percent cited an external source when making generalized statements.58 That finding suggests journalists may sometimes fall prey to dubious inductive reasoning in their reporting. Furthermore, more than one-third of the generalized portrayals presented statistics without giving the source of that information.

Daschmann and Brosius catalogued the stylistic devices used in the generalized reports. Those devices included exemplars, expert interviews, inserted film and documents, and on-screen appearances by the reporter. Only four of the 474 reports were without one of those stylistic devices. The average story contained more than seven exemplars, and 94.5 percent of the stories contained at least one.59 Expert interviews appeared in 57 percent of

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57 Ibid., 38-41.
58 Ibid., 42-43.
59 Daschmann and Brosius, 46.
the stories; inserted film and documents were seen in 55 percent; and on-
screen commentaries by reporters were found in 15 percent of the stories.

The study found that German television journalists overwhelmingly
used exemplars to bolster the chosen story focus, as more than 96 percent of
the exemplars analyzed supported the storyline. Only 9.4 percent of the
stories contained exemplars that were contradictory to the generalized
account. “[The exemplars] are obviously not intended to document the
plurality of opinion,” Daschmann and Brosius observed.60

The study supported the notion that exemplification is a common
practice on television news programs in Germany. Daschmann and Brosius
also concluded more generally that exemplars are “a popular journalistic
device,” and are used “as a service to the viewers” to facilitate easier
comprehension.61

Given its unique place in the literature, the format of Brosius and
Daschmann’s study was used as a general roadmap for the content analysis
formulated in this study. Although the goal of analyzing print newspapers,
rather than television, required slightly different coding definitions, the
overall structure of the method translated easily. The study was also used to
help devise research questions, which will be outlined in Chapter 4.

60 Ibid., 46-47.
61 Ibid., 47.
Chapter 4. Research Questions

This study was undertaken to measure the use of exemplars in six major American newspapers. Because there were no comparable studies to build upon, this study used basic, exploratory questions intended to yield descriptive data upon which future studies could be advanced.

As previously stated, the relationship between exemplification research and everyday journalism has not been fully explored. Brosius and Daschmann showed that exemplars were common in German television news magazines, but other media formats have not been studied, according to a review of databases of published research. Without even descriptive data about the use of exemplars in the news, it is impossible to fully assess the implications of the theory for journalists and media consumers alike. Thus, the first research question posed by this study is:

R1 How often are exemplars employed in major American newspapers?

That question reflects the dominance of large, metropolitan newspapers in establishing professional standards and practices in American journalism. It does not suggest, however, that the practices of those
newspapers can be generalized to all U.S. newspapers, the vast majority of which are small-circulation.

Lautrer analyzed newspaper circulation figures from Editor & Publisher in 2004 and found that 97.7 percent of the listed American newspapers had a circulation below 50,000, giving so-called “small papers” a total audience of 108.9 million people. In contrast, Lautrer found “large papers” had a total audience of 38.2 million. A recent study by Reader suggested there may be significant differences in the way journalism is conceptualized and practiced at large and small newspapers, specifically when it comes to matters of professional ethics. Given the relative dominance of small newspapers in America, it is possible a sample of metropolitan papers, such as the one proposed here, captures only one subset of journalistic practice.

Following the lead of Brosius and Daschmann, this study will look at exemplification from a topical point of view, guided by the second research question:

R2 Which story topics covered in major metropolitan American newspapers most often use exemplification?

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That question will test whether exemplification is a universal practice within the sample or whether it is employed only for certain topics (the specific topic categories will be outlined in the next chapter).

To gauge whether exemplar use in the sample may also be related to the types of information sources journalists use, this study poses the following question:

R3 *What sources do large U.S. newspapers exemplify most often?*

The results from experimental studies suggest exemplars’ impact on human perception is increased when similar exemplars are grouped together within a news story. That finding is what led researchers to create three categories—selective, contradictory and blended—to describe an exemplar’s relationship to the focus of a story. If a news story presents a hypothetical “Statement A” as true, but then presents a litany of exemplars that are in opposition to “Statement A,” exemplification research predicts the news audience will largely discount “Statement A” as well. Therefore it is critically important that exemplars not be viewed in isolation, but rather in relation to the dominant viewpoint established within a story. That is why the scarcity of contradictory exemplars found in the content analysis by Brosius and Daschmann is noteworthy, for it suggests exemplars are usually selected to bolster specific assertions about reality. Therefore, the fourth question for this study is:
To what degree does story exemplification in major U.S. newspapers follow the story focus?

Despite evidence from Zillmann, Brosius, and others that the precision of base-rate information does not affect the persuasiveness of exemplars, this study will look at the use of statistical evidence in six major U.S. newspapers based on the following question:

Do major U.S. newspapers typically use high- or low-precision statistics in newspaper stories?

The second half of this study employed a cultural/critical studies approach to examine selected articles from the content analysis sample. Those case studies explored questions such as: What are the possible interpretations of exemplars from a socio-cultural perspective? Is it possible to interpret an exemplar incorrectly? How do exemplars reflect and shape social reality? And what role do cultural codes play in the interpretation of exemplars?
Chapter 5. Method

This study used a constructed-week sample of stories published in 2003 by six major U.S. newspapers. The stories were drawn from the following major U.S. newspapers: Los Angeles Times (L.A. edition), The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, The (Baltimore) Sun, The New York Times and the Washington Times. With the exception of the Washington Times, all of those papers have a reputation for professional, impartial journalism that gives them tremendous influence within the news industry. The Washington Times is not as large or as influential as the other sample papers, but it produces original content in a large metropolitan region, which makes it similar enough to warrant examination.

A sample of two constructed weeks was employed in the content analysis, with two newspapers selected for each of the Monday through Sunday editions.65 A computer script was used to pick the random dates for the sample, based on a spreadsheet that included every calendar date in 2003, organized into seven columns by days of the week. All weekly editions published in 2003 had an equal chance of being pulled for the sample.

Coding was limited to the front page of each newspaper and to the front of the local news/metro section. That limited the sample to what was

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65 Two constructed weeks was found to be an adequate sampling method for a year’s worth of newspapers by Daniel Riffe, Charles F. Aust and Stephen Lacy. See “The Effectiveness of Random, Consecutive Day and Constructed Week Samples in Newspaper Content Analysis,” Journalism Quarterly 1 (1993).
presumably the paper’s strongest news content on that particular day (as opposed to features, sports, or opinions, all of which deviate from the norm of objectivity and “straight” reporting that has been the traditional concern of exemplification research). In the case of front-page articles that jump to later pages, coders followed the article to the indicated page and continued coding to the end of each article. Two coding protocols, included in Appendix B, were used to analyze articles and exemplars in the analysis. The first protocol was used to collect data at the article level, while the other was employed at the level of single exemplars found within individual articles.

The first criterion of the coding protocol was the use of statistical information in the articles. News stories that did not include references to statistical data were excluded entirely from the coding process. Furthermore, to warrant inclusion in the sample, the statistical data in the story had to be cited to an external source. Thus, articles that offered generalized statements such as “Statistics seem to show...” or “Recent surveys support the claim...” were included, while articles that contained unattributed opinions were not. Similarly, statistical information that was presented in quotes from a human source did not qualify the story for coding unless the person in turn offered a source for his or her statistical claims. That rule equally applied to experts, public officials and scholars. The study was purposely limited by that criterion in the hopes of a obtaining a data set based on articles that closely
resembled the narratives used in exemplification experiments, in which empirical claims are a prominent research consideration.

The second coding criterion was a trend-story orientation. To warrant inclusion in the sample, the story had to focus on the appearance or prevalence of a continuing phenomenon or social issue (i.e., crime rates, economic trends, policy debates, etc.). Stories that focused on an isolated incident were uniformly excluded from coding; in their content analysis of exemplars, Daschmann and Brosius classified such stories as generalized portrayals, and their definition of that category is instructive here. In such stories, they stated, “the reporter is suggesting or claiming that the story deals with a topic that occurs repeatedly in everyday life (and is in some form quantifiable) and that can serve as an example of a general trend (no matter how strong this trend may be).”66 The quantification of the frequency of “exemplar” news articles thus provided data in response to Research Question 1.67

If an article met the standard of being “trend” articles that use attributed statistics, it was ready for the next stage of coding. Coders were instructed to record the date and source of the article. Next, they indicated the story’s subject matter from a list of 14 general topics. Those categories, along with the coding explanations, were adapted from Stempel’s

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66 Daschmann and Brosius, 38.
67 “How often are exemplars employed in major American newspapers?”
foundational “Gatekeeping” study of 1985.68 (A full explanation of the
category definitions can be found in the protocol, which is included in
Appendix A.) In cases in which an article seemed to match more than one
category, coders were permitted to make multiple selections, although they
were to indicate the best-fitting category with an asterisk. Those data were
collected to answer Research Question 2.69

Coders then recorded the exact statistic(s) in the story, along with a
brief explanation of the implied meaning of the statistic(s), if necessary. If an
article contained competing statistics from different sources, each was
included on a separate line on the coding sheet.

After the summary of statistics, coders indicated the precision of the
given statistical information. Two precision categories, high and low, were
employed based on the use of similar categories in numerous exemplification
studies.70 Statistics that contained specific counts, percentages, ratios and
estimates were coded as high precision. In contrast, low-precision statistics
were vague, generalized statements such as “more and more” or “a strong
majority.” Those low-precision cases cited statistics without offering specific,
quantitative proof, relying instead on comparative language for emphasis. In
cases in which both high and low precision statements were present, coders

68 Guido H. Stempel III, “Gatekeeping: The Mix of Topics and the Selection of Stories,”

69 “Which story topics covered in major metropolitan American newspapers most often use
exemplification?”

70 See Gibson and Zillmann, “Exaggerated Versus Representative Exemplification in News
Reports,” and Zillmann et. al, “Effects of Exemplification in News Reports on the Perception
of Social Issues.”
selected a third category, “mixed.” Those data were collected to answer Research Question 5.\textsuperscript{71}

The next task in the article-level coding process was the counting of exemplars. That task was guided by the simple idea that exemplars are merely examples—illustrations, aides—of a larger phenomenon. Zillmann and his colleagues defined exemplars as “case descriptions or specifications of singular incidents that fall within the realm of a particular social phenomenon and that exhibit the pertinent properties of that phenomenon to some degree.”\textsuperscript{72} However, exemplars need not be a direct representation of a category. Quotes and paraphrases are a form of exemplification because they relate concrete information from the social world and therefore serve an exemplifying function. Similarly, reporters often include descriptions that exemplify the topic at hand (e.g., a description of a worn-down school building in an article about education costs) from a first-person perspective. Those common forms of exemplification—quotations, summaries and descriptions—were all considered exemplars in this analysis.

The article-level coding protocol specified that each counted exemplar be “distinct.” However, the source or the content of the exemplar need not be unique. Rather, distinct exemplars were sometimes the same person or example, found as separate entries in the text of the article. An expert, for

\textsuperscript{71} “Do major U.S. newspapers typically use high or low precision statistics in newspaper stories?”

example, who was quoted and discussed for three straight paragraphs was counted as one distinct exemplar. If that same expert was quoted again later in the article, the second quote was counted as a separate exemplar. Essentially, so long as an exemplar remained uninterrupted in the narrative, it was counted as one. The counting for every article was executed in that fashion, with one exemplar added to the count each time a distinct one was encountered. These data were collected also to answer Research Question 1.73

It could be reasonably argued that the length of exemplars should be given weight or influence in the counting procedure. Under the first coding system, a 1,500-word article with one long, unbroken exemplar would be counted the same as a 200-word story with one short exemplar. That is problematic because one would expect longer exemplars to exert more influence than shorter ones; thus it could be argued that a coding protocol that did not take exemplar length into account would be an inadequate measurement system.

However, the influence of length in exemplification is an open question in the literature. In one recent exemplification experiment, Brosius found that the number of sources did not influence recipients’ judgments.74 An article with one quoted source was as convincing as an article with five. The amount of information (length) was the same between conditions, which points to a possible length effect—but that is merely a tentative inference.

73 “How often are exemplars employed in major American newspapers?”
Lacking a definite empirical answer, the present research considered exemplars as both distinct units and as strings of text.

For purposes of comparison and discussion, exemplar ratios were coded two separate ways in the article-level protocol. In one section, the coding was based on article focus; coders simply counted the number of exemplars that supported the discernible “take” of the article. By support, it is simply meant that the exemplar was an example of the phenomenon/risk/social problem/opinion described. For example, if an article stated, “1 percent of the population is susceptible to rapid, premature aging,” all exemplars of people suffering from the ailment were counted as supportive exemplars. Consequently, all exemplars of doctors or experts talking about the ailment were also counted as supportive exemplars. Only exemplars that downplayed the risk, in this instance, were not counted as supportive. That approach was apparently used in the content analysis cited by Zillmann and Brosius, in which “story focus” was the criterion for exemplar coding. The number of exemplars that were contradictory and neutral to the article focus also was recorded. A more detailed explanation of those categories can be found in the codebook in Appendix A. Those data were used, in part, to answer Research Question 4.

75 Zillmann and Brosius, 20.
76 “To what degree does story exemplification in major U.S. newspapers follow the story focus?”
Next, coders indicated whether the exemplification in the article was selective or blended. (The definitions of those categories can be found in a more detailed form in Appendix A.) Generally stated, any article that contained an exemplar contradictory to the article focus was categorized as blended. These data were also collected in response to Research Question 4.77

After coding at the article-level, the individual articles were analyzed a second time, with data collected regarding each individual exemplar. As before, exemplars were counted as distinct, unbroken units in the text. First, coders recorded the date and publication in which the exemplar was presented. They then counted and recorded the number of sentences in the article in question. Finally, to answer Research Question 3,78 coders recorded the information sources that served as the exemplars. The possible information-source categories were as follows: quote of expert/academic; paraphrase of expert/academic; quote of public official; paraphrase of public official; quote of resident; paraphrase of resident; anecdote; hypothetical; and “other.” (A detailed definition of the categories can be found in Appendix A.)

Specifying the use of direct quotation is important in light of the study by Gibson and Zillmann, discussed earlier in the literature review, which

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77 “To what degree does story exemplification in major U.S. newspapers follow the story focus?”
78 “What sources do large U.S. newspapers exemplify most often?”
suggested quotations can under some conditions make exemplars more persuasive.79

**Protocols Reliability Test**

An intercoder reliability test of the coding protocols was performed using 10 articles culled from the five newspapers sampled for the content analysis. Those 10 articles, which all met the basic trend-with-statistics criteria of the coding protocol, came from newspapers published in 2003. The reliability test with those articles produced a simple agreement of 81.4 percent between two coders, reflecting agreement in 202 out of 248 total cases. Riffe, Lacy and Fico noted 80 percent is usually considered the baseline level for a simple agreement test, which puts the reliability test for this study barely above the acceptable threshold.80 However, Riffe, Lacy and Fico also said new, untested coding methods—such as the exemplification protocols devised for this study—should be given more leeway during reliability tests, so the simple agreement results generated by the exemplar protocols were deemed sufficient for moving forward.81

79 Gibson and Zillmann, “Effects of Citation.”
81 Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 131.
Chapter 6. Results

This section will outline the findings of the content analysis, which suggest exemplification was not common in the sample of six major American newspapers in 2003. A discussion section following the results will look for methodological limitations that may have affected the results. The issue of isolated-incident coverage also will be explored.

R1 How often are exemplars employed in major American newspapers?

A random sample of two constructed weeks from 2003 yielded 20 trend stories for coding. Exemplified content was most prevalent in the Los Angeles Times and The New York Times.

Table 6.1: Number of Articles (n) Included in Coding Process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Total n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New York Times</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Times</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sun</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Twelve of the exemplified articles, or 60 percent, came from the front page of one of the newspapers. The other eight came from the front of a metro section. The 20 coded articles produced 182 exemplars for coding, for an average of 9.1 exemplars per story. No story contained fewer than three exemplars, and 14 of the articles contained seven or more.

Those results seem to suggest, contrary to the assertions of Zillmann and Brosius, that the type of exemplification presented in experimental research was rare in the sample of major U.S. newspapers analyzed in this study. To put that figure in perspective: Given that the front and metro sections of each edition typically had at least five articles, exemplified content can be estimated at about 0.05 percent of lead-section content in the front and local sections of those six metropolitan dailies. Given such a small data set, the descriptive data generated by this analysis cannot be used to draw any conclusions about exemplification in major U.S. newspapers. However, given the novelty of the study’s subject matter, the findings may be instructive for future studies, so a brief summary of the data will be presented here. A discussion about the relative lack of exemplification in the sample will follow.

\[82\) Zillmann and Brosius, *Exemplification in Communication.*
Table 6.2: Frequency of Exemplar Totals in Articles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total # of exemplars</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Which story topics covered in major metropolitan American newspapers most often use exemplification?

Half of the coded articles dealt with issues of public health and welfare. Of the 14 possible categories on the coding protocol, only six appeared in the sample.

Table 6.3: Frequency of Exemplified Topics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Health and Welfare</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Activity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Moral Problems</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics and Government</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What sources do large U.S. newspapers exemplify most often?

The most widely used exemplar type in the sample was the anecdote, defined here as the description of an experience from a first or second-hand perspective, with a total of 69 cases. Anecdotes represented 38.3% percent of total exemplars, followed by quote of expert/academic at 22.2% percent and quote of resident at 19.5% percent.

Table 6.4: Frequency of Exemplar Sources.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of expert/academic</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of resident</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of public official</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of expert/academic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of public official</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of resident</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>180</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source data was accidentally not recorded for two of the exemplars.

The anecdote was the most common exemplar source in the *Los Angeles Times, The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The
newspapers with the most exemplified stories, *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, represented the majority of total exemplars from academics and experts in the sample.

Table 6.5: Frequency of Exemplar Sources in Each Newspaper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of expert/academic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of resident</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of public official</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of expert/academic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of public official</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of resident</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6.6: Average Number of Sentences Per Exemplar Source Type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemplar Source</th>
<th>Average length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quote of resident</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of expert/academic</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of public official</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote of expert/academic</td>
<td>2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of public official</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase of resident</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Direct quotes represented 55 percent of the exemplar total, as compared to 6.6 percent for paraphrases. The prevalence of direct quotes not surprising, but noteworthy in light of Gibson and Zillmann’s finding that “selective direct quotation greatly increases the persuasive power of exemplars.”

R4 To what degree does story exemplification in major U.S. newspapers follow the story focus?

83 Gibson and Zillmann, “Effects of Citation,” 173-174.
The majority of the articles in the sample, 65 percent, contained blended exemplar distribution. Seven of the blended articles, but only one of the selective, came from the Los Angeles Times.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exemplars were most likely to agree with a story’s focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exemplar Type</th>
<th>Total #</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradictory</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>182</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 35 percent of the coded articles contained selective exemplification, which indicates the newspapers often attempted to construct multi-faceted narratives. However, it is clear that article focus could be a
substantial influence on exemplar selection at large newspapers. The overwhelming majority of exemplars—83.5 percent—were supportive of or neutral to the story’s focus, which suggests the newspapers did not stray far from a central organizing principle and rarely seek to undermine it. The data complement Fico and Soffin’s exploration of story balance, which found that 48 percent of newspaper articles were one-sided in their coverage.84 The data also supports Zillmann’s musings about focal points in news coverage85 and validates the findings of the exemplification content analysis performed by Brosius and Daschmann.

**R5** Do major U.S. newspapers typically use high or low precision statistics in newspaper stories?

The majority of statistics cited by the newspapers were high in precision.

Table 6.9: Precision of Statistics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Precision</th>
<th>Total #</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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85 “As focal story points are usually defined by cases drawn from a minority of newsworthy cases, all illustrations tend to be consistent with the minority, not the majority, of cases of interest.” From Zillmann, “Exemplification Theory,” 434.
Discussion of Results of Content Analysis

The small number of articles found to be suitable for analysis begs the question: Why did the coding protocol fail to produce a substantially larger \( n \)? Was the study’s design faulty or is exemplification in trend stories simply rare in print journalism?

A study by Berger provides some corroborating evidence for the findings.\(^8^6\) Berger’s research, which focused on the use of quantitative data in newspaper and television reports, dealt with theoretical and methodological issues similar to the ones encountered in the present study. Berger’s analysis also encountered difficulty producing a large \( (n) \).

Berger limited his data to accident, crime and health stories that presented statistical trends. After failing to produce a robust \( (n) \) in a pilot study, Berger settled on a large population for the sample—four weeks of coverage from four newspapers and six television networks. After considering 2,075 stories, the coding produced 84 stories for analysis—a mere 4 percent of the total population. That result led Berger to conclude that “news reports containing quantitative data about trends are relatively rare in both newspapers and television news.”\(^8^7\) Berger also found that health was the


\(^{87}\) Ibid., 664.
most-covered trend story topic, which is consistent with the relative dominance of public health and welfare stories in this analysis.88

Despite the corroborative nature of the findings, the \((n)\) found by Berger was significantly larger than the one found by the present study.89 While Berger’s research does lend support to the finding that trend stories are infrequent in daily news coverage, it does not eliminate the possibility of methodological flaws.

First, consider the sample. The data for the present analysis came from six urban newspapers; mid-size and small publications were not included. A more comprehensive sample, inclusive of varying geographic regions and circulation numbers, may have produced a larger \((n)\) for analysis. It is possible that the use of exemplification varies greatly within the industry. Perhaps small and mid-size papers are more frequent users of the technique? On the other hand, the sample that was employed may have simply been too small to produce a robust data set; a content analysis of four constructed weeks (or perhaps more) would provide a larger population of stories for analysis, and perhaps more exemplified narratives as well.

Second, because coding was limited to the front pages of the newspapers and the fronts of the local news/metro section, it is possible that more exemplified content appeared on the inside pages of the newspapers.

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88 The study also found that newspaper stories with trend statistics were twice as long as those without.
89 Though it is worth noting that only 65 of the 84 trend stories he found came from newspapers.
and thus escaped analysis. Perhaps exemplified content was viewed as less
important than the just-breaking stories of the day and ended up in less
prominent placements inside the newspapers? A 1989 study by Bridges
suggested editors rely heavily on timeliness when choosing stories for a
paper’s front page, so there could be some validity to that idea.90 At the very
least, a content analysis should be performed on entire newspapers in a
sample, from beginning to end, before trend exemplification can be
considered an anomaly.

Third, it is possible that the sample was greatly reduced by the
statistical data criterion; a number of articles, otherwise appropriate for
analysis, were excluded from the sample due to a lack of statistical
information. Given the basic tenets of exemplification theory, there is no
reason for trend stories without statistics to be excluded completely from
analysis; in the absence of base-rate information, the exemplifying effect
should remain. However, including trend stories without statistics would not
have produced a dramatic difference in the total (n) in this particular study.
Trend stories were simply not that prevalent in the population.

Finally, the most debatable aspect of the study’s design is the trend
story criterion itself. If that requirement had not been part of the coding
protocol, any news story with sourced statistics would have been included in
the sample and the total number of coded stories would have been

90 Janet A. Bridges, “News Use on the Front Pages of the American Daily,” Journalism
significantly larger. Was the trend-story criterion a critical design flaw? Or was it a necessary and justifiable limitation?

**Exemplification and Isolated Incidents**

The trend-story criterion was included in the content analysis so that the data could be interpreted in the framework of exemplification theory. Without that sampling limitation, any purported link between the results of the study and the findings of exemplification research would have been tenuous at best.

Is an example serving an exemplifying function if it is not explicitly presented as the representation of a statistical trend? The small \( n \) produced by the analysis can be attributed partly to the fact that most of the stories in the newspapers were about isolated incidents in which there was no text to exemplify the event at hand. Stories such as: “Man sentenced to jail time”; “Politicians bicker over budget”; “Police hire 40 new recruits.” In stories such as those, connections between one incident and a larger population are usually not made.

The above raises an important theoretical issue. Zillmann has made it clear that samples from a population are the basic building blocks of exemplification. “An exemplar is, of course, nothing other than an event subsumed in a population or subpopulation.”\(^\text{91}\) In the same essay, however, Zillmann claimed that exemplification “is essentially independent of the

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\(^91\) Zillmann, “Exemplification Theory: Judging the Whole by Some of Its Parts,” 78.
competition with base-rate information.”92 If the exemplification effect is distinct from population samples, nearly anything that appears in the news media could be considered an exemplar—symbolic interactions between story, population and heuristic processing would be essentially context-free.

In fact, nearly all of the empirical evidence for the exemplification effect has come from experiments that used trend stories, many of them hypothetical stories created simply for the experiments. None of the studies cited in the literature review utilized the isolated-incident format that pervades news coverage. That rather narrow aspect of the research method has not been fully explored in exemplification studies. More research is needed to determine whether the exemplification effect persists when a news event is presented as an isolated incident.

If trend stories are rare in the media, as the present analysis suggests for daily newspapers, the theory of exemplification will need a major theoretical expansion to retain its relevance for print media. In the second section of this study, some of the possibilities for theoretical expansion—explored through textual analysis of selected content analysis articles—will be presented in the form of case studies.

Until the question of population sampling and isolated incidents faces empirical testing, the trend-story criterion recommends itself as the only method compatible with the theory’s design. If methodological flaws

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hampered the coding protocol for the analysis, the trend-story requirement was not to blame.

**Exemplified Narratives**

Finally, it must be considered that exemplification as defined by Zillmann and colleagues simply might not that common in the news. If further study of the phenomenon, undertaken with larger sample sizes and refined coding protocols, fails to turn up meaningful samples of exemplified narratives in newspapers, exemplification researchers may need to consider whether it is worthwhile or even appropriate to use such articles as a basis for experiments.

Furthermore, if studies of other media (e.g. television news programs, Web site postings, magazine articles) also fail to turn up significant instances of exemplification, researchers may have to confront the ironic possibility that the theory is itself wholly founded on a misleading exemplar—a form of exemplified narrative that rarely appears in the news.
Chapter 7. Case Studies: Purpose

The most noteworthy finding of the content analysis was the rarity of exemplification found in news articles. Having exhausted the discussion of that particular result, an opportunity presented itself. Although the sample was small and not generalizable, the exemplified articles collected for the content analysis were, in turn, suitable for qualitative case study. Unanswered qualitative questions about exemplification remained, such as: What does exemplification look like? What forms does it take? How is it written? How does it organize and reflect the social, political and cultural landscape in which it was created? The articles gathered for the quantitative study could be analyzed using a cultural/critical approach to shed some light on those questions.

Up to this point, the study of exemplification theory per se has remained firmly rooted in the social-scientific paradigm. Considering the theory via an approach more reserved for the humanities might expand the utility of the theory. The following case studies suggest that such an approach is worth exploration.

Ahead of the case studies, a brief literature review will introduce theoretical concepts not traditionally associated with exemplification. Those concepts were incorporated into the case-study discussions, along with the
exemplification research already described in Chapter 3. Copies of the articles studied via case study can be found in Appendix C.

For the case studies, exemplars were analyzed from a cultural perspective to reveal the wide range of meanings they could suggest to a likely reader, beyond the simple comparison with a statistical benchmark. The case studies also employed concepts from semiology to show how exemplars can naturalize constructed cultural meanings and function as widely understood myths in society.
When it comes to the form exemplars take in the news, it is important to recognize the possibility for different styles of presentation. Exemplars can be packaged into a baseline format unaccompanied by narrative elements, and they can also be linked, to varying degrees, to larger cultural meanings. Analyzing the context surrounding an exemplar is critical to discerning the possible meanings they may suggest to a reader.

Important differences can also exist among individual exemplars. Because this study concerns itself with newspapers, the pertinent differences are grounded in the use of language, as the meanings of exemplars are inevitably shaped by the rhetoric used to construct them. That is not to say, however, that there is only one “correct” interpretation of an exemplar, or that the meanings they suggest are the same for every individual. Viewed through the encoding/decoding model of mass communications devised by Stuart Hall, it is instead suggested that the meanings of exemplars are complex and subject to “determinate moments” of active sense-making within a circuit of discourse.93

**Encoding and Decoding Exemplars**

On a basic level, exemplification theory is structured around the premise that there is a measurable causal relationship between media

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production and media reception. The theoretical model essentially postulates
the following: When people are exposed to certain stimuli (exemplars), they
will respond in predictable ways (by making mental estimates that
correspond in proportional terms to the exemplars). That effects-driven,
reductive approach has yielded valuable data on the psychological responses
to media patterns, suggesting exemplars alter an individual’s perceptions of
reality in ways that can be observed and measured.

However, that reductive approach is limiting because it assumes a
linear relationship between media content and media reception and fails to
consider the active interpretation of an audience, or of individuals within
that audience. Exemplification’s effects-driven orientation toward the media,
grounded in the transmission model of communication, simplifies both the
meanings suggested by exemplars and the process by which they are
produced and interpreted.

Hall’s model offers a different view of mass communication, grounded
in the idea that “there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a
code.”94 McQuail defined codes as “systems of meaning whose rules and
conventions are shared by members of a culture,” and the idea is central to
the approach Hall developed.95

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In Hall’s model, media messages pass through “distinctive moments” that are linked together but ultimately subject to different systems of meaning. In the first stage of the model an identifiable media producer, such as a newspaper, turns a “raw” event from the world into meaningful discourse (e.g., a written narrative) by encoding it. At the point of encoding the sense-making structures of the media institution are in “dominance,” producing a pattern of “preferred meanings” for an audience.96

In the second stage of Hall’s model the meaningful discourse constructed by the media institution is placed into circulation by being published or broadcast. The meaningful discourse (i.e., media message) is subsequently decoded in the third stage. Hall conceptualized decoding as an active process; rather than simply “receiving” a message, audience members construct meaning from within the context of their own sense-making structures and cultural understandings.

Hall argued the moments of encoding and decoding are not always symmetrical, because audience members decode messages from their own cultural perspectives. The “preferred meanings” encoded in a message can be misinterpreted, distorted or missed entirely (in the view of the encoder) due to a “lack of equivalence” between the sense-making systems of media producers and audience members.97 Nonetheless, there most be some degree of equivalence between the sense-making systems of encoders and decoders.

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96 Hall, “Encoding/Decoding.”
97 Ibid., 169.
for an act of communication to take place. Hall argued that encoding has “the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate,” and thus confines, but does not determine, the interpretive acts of an audience.⁹⁸

Hall identified three positions from which an audience member can construct meaning during the decoding of a message. In the first position, which he termed the “dominant-hegemonic position,” audience members construct meaning from within the same dominant code as the media producers, thus creating a crude symmetry of understanding between the two sides. From the dominant-hegemonic position, the constructed cultural meanings in a message are viewed as natural, transparent and self-evident.

From the second, “negotiated” viewpoint, audience members also accept the dominant code and construct meaning within it, but reject or modify some of the codified meanings to bring them in line with their own “local conditions” (i.e., personal experiences). Finally, from the “oppositional” position, audience members recognize the dominant code employed in the discourse and consciously reject it, instead employing an “alternative framework of reference” for decoding.⁹⁹

This study will argue Hall’s encoding/decoding model of mass communication can be applied to qualitative studies of exemplars in the news. The model’s emphasis on the active interpretation of an audience

⁹⁹ Ibid., 175.
provided a useful counterpoint to the transmission-model orientation that
dominoes exemplification literature, and its system of decoding positions
offered a framework for re-conceptualizing the possible interpretations of
exemplars by an audience. The decoding systems highlighted the capacity of
media consumers to consciously accept or reject, to varying degrees, the
exemplifying function of an exemplar in a media message.

The encoding/decoding model provided a structure for thinking about
the production, transmission and interpretation of media messages, but it
offered little insight into the ways those messages are individually
structured. For help on that front, this study turned to the study of
semiology, a research field that is chiefly concerned with the way social
meanings are made in a culture.

**Exemplars as Myth**

Perhaps the most applicable translation of exemplification theory from
media-effects research to cultural theory is to consider how single incidents
and oversimplified examples can take on lives of their own and become seen
as more widespread cultural phenomena, akin to what Roland Barthes called
modern “mythologies.”100 Indeed, Barthes alluded to a media connection in
*Mythologies* when he observed, “the press undertakes every day to
demonstrate that the store of mythical signifiers is inexhaustible.”101

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100 Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers, trans. (New York:
101 Ibid., 127.
Before delving into the specifics of Barthes’ work, it is necessary to introduce a few concepts from the study of semiology. Barthes’ definition of myth was based, in part, on the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who proposed studying language and communication as signs. Saussure defined the sign as the recognizable association of a signifier, or sound pattern, and a signified, or mental concept. The sign “smile,” for instance, is composed of the sound pattern produced when the word “smile” is spoken (the signifier) and the mental concept of a happy, upturned face (the signified). Saussure defined the interplay between a signifier and signified as a signification, and argued that the two entities are in practice inseparable, as there can be no thought (i.e., a signified) without sound (i.e., a signifier).\(^{102}\) Nonetheless, Saussure’s model did not assume a fixed, exclusive relationship in signs, as a signifier can be associated with more than one signified, and vice-versa.

Subsequent scholars generalized Saussure’s dyadic model, expanding the definition of a sign to include other forms of communication. “Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, actors or objects,” Chandler noted.\(^{103}\) A “stop” sign for traffic in the United States, for example, is a red octagon on a pole (signifier) that is interpreted as an injunction to bring your vehicle to a complete stop (signified). The “sign” is the associative


\(^{103}\) Chandler, 13.
totality of the signifier and the signified—a unified, inseparable and widely recognized meaning. Within the context of Saussere’s arguments, the stop sign is a purely human creation, arbitrarily endowed with meaning; a purple circle on a pole, to take just one hypothetical, could just as easily be a signifier for the “stop” injunction, if so constructed. The ultimate arbitrariness of the sign suggests that language does not reflect reality, but rather constructs and organizes it.

It is important to note that, in semiology, signs are viewed as complex and typically contain multiple levels of meaning. In semiology, the literal or “common-sense” meaning of a sign is called the “denotation.” That literal meaning is the foundation for broader “connotations,” which are meanings that are more idiosyncratic and socio-cultural in nature. Connotations are created when a sign becomes a signifier, and thus part of a second-order system of meaning. Champagne, for example, on a denotative level is a sign composed of the word “champagne” (the signifier) and the concept of a bubbly white wine (the signified). On a connotative level of meaning, champagne (a self-contained sign) is reconstituted as a signifier, thus allowing for an association with new signifieds; possible connotations include, but are not limited to, concepts such as celebration, glamour, happiness, or wealth. Through such layering of signs, numerous connotative meanings can be chained together within the confines of a single sign.

104 Ibid., 138.
On a connotative level, signs are polysemic, or open to multiple interpretations. A reader of signs constructs meaning from within the context of available social codes, which are broadly, but not universally, shared in a culture. In contrast, the denotation of a sign is typically defined as a meaning that nears cultural consensus. That does not mean that the interpreted connotations of a sign are arbitrary—as they are often widely shared—but rather that they can never be catalogued in full. The polysemic nature of signs is very much in line with Hall’s conception of decoding, which also leaves room for idiosyncratic interpretations.

Myth in Society

Barthes took Saussure’s model of the sign and conceived a system for deciphering the dominant ideologies of a society. Myth, Barthes argued, is a peculiar type of trope that naturalizes historical meanings through the appropriation of existing signs. Barthes called myth a “second-order” semiological system because it is structured on two levels of meaning. On one level is the “language-object,” which is a linguistic system (i.e., a sum of signs) that contains a rich, self-contained history of connotations. Myth is a second-level “metalanguage” that speaks about a language-object and subsumes it within a larger, cultural signification.

In myth, a fully formed linguistic system becomes a signifier associated with a new signified. On the first level of the semiological order, a linguistic

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105 Chandler, 139.
system is a sign replete with denotative and connotative meanings; on the second, myth level, a linguistic system is a “form” for a mythical signified. The distinction between “meaning” and “form” is critical to Barthes’ model. When a linguistic system becomes form in myth, its original meaning is suppressed and held at a distance. “When [meaning] becomes form, [it] leaves its contingency behind,” Barthes explained. “It empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains.”

By putting the original meanings of a linguistic system at a distance, myth makes room for an association with a second, higher-order concept: the mythical signified. The mythical signified fills the form, implanting the linguistic system with a “whole new history.” Thus the tri-dimensional pattern of the sign reconstructs itself on the second level, with a linguistic system existing as meaning and form, sign and signifier, in the service of a global signification, which is the myth.

Barthes observed that myth is a unique semiological system in that it distorts the meaning of a signifier. Recall that on a simple, denotative level, a signifier is wholly arbitrary; the word “champagne,” to reuse the previous example, has no natural, intrinsic relationship to a bubbly, alcoholic beverage (the word actually refers to a particular wine-making region of France), and thus it is not distorted in the sign. Myth, in contrast, takes a linguistic signifier (i.e., a sign) rich with connotative meanings and distorts its history.

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107 Ibid., 117.
108 Ibid., 119.
in the service of a mythical concept. That distortion of the signifier, Barthes argued, is motivated, intentional, and never arbitrary. It is a purposeful construction for the creation and maintenance of ideology in a society.

Barthes devoted attention to mythical speech because he argued it naturalizes culturally constructed meanings, thereby “transforming history into nature.” To a reader of myth, “things appear to mean something by themselves,” and the associative link between a signifier and mythical signified is viewed as a self-evident fact, rather than as a constructed reality. It is through myth that man-made values, attitudes and beliefs become widely recognized and accepted in a culture as “the way things are.” What is at once historical and intentional—the mythical signified—is transformed into common sense from the perspective of a myth-reader. Barthes viewed myth as a vehicle for naturalizing the ideology of the bourgeoisie, although one need not accept that formulation to recognize the naturalization of meaning that the semiological system represents. Ultimately, Barthes conceived myth as a vehicle for the dominant ideologies of a culture, regardless of who may benefit from them.

**Myth in the News**

Applying Barthes’ concept of myth to Zillmann’s concept of exemplification seems like a natural marriage of two theories from very different paradigms, as both concepts deal with the construction of meaning.

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109 Barthes, “Myth Today,” 129
110 Ibid., 143.
based on assumptions derived from limited bits of information. Exemplars in the news that are widely publicized have the potential to become myths in a culture. Consider this example: During discussions of high-profile lawsuits in America, someone (e.g., a pundit on a television news show) will often mention the infamous “hot coffee case” against McDonald’s.111 The case involved Stelle Liebeck, a 79-year-old woman who spilled a cup of McDonald’s coffee on herself and “suffered third degree burns over 6 percent of her body,” leaving her “partially disabled for up to two years.”112 After the incident, Liebeck asked McDonald’s for $20,000 in compensation to cover her medical costs; the company returned with an offer of $800, so Liebeck took McDonald’s to court seeking millions of dollars.113 Few people remember the actual facts of the case, which have been overshadowed by the constructed, mythical meaning that greedy, litigious Americans will do anything to win large financial settlements from corporations.114

A Barthesian analysis of the McDonald’s hot-coffee exemplar could go something like this: The case itself (the “sign”) is reported in the news media with comments that suggest it is a possible “frivolous lawsuit.” Over time, the “frivolous” comments become codified into a new, second-order mythical signification. The hot-coffee case, a sign, becomes a signifier associated with a

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112 Ibid.
113 Schudson.
114 Ibid.
second-order signified, which is the concept of the “frivolous lawsuit” in the United States. Thus the constructed myth of the McDonald’s hot-coffee lawsuit becomes a widely understood example of “frivolous lawsuits” in reports about various issues, such as tort reform, corporate liability reforms, safety labels on common products, etc.

The mythical construction of the hot-coffee exemplar illustrates one of Barthes’ key points: that myth impoverishes a meaning (i.e., a sign) and obscures its history. The “frivolous” construction of the hot-coffee lawsuit persists as a “self-evident” interpretation of the experience of Stelle Liebeck, despite the complexity of the case. As a meaning, the hot-coffee case is a self-contained linguistic system with a complex history. As a mythical form, the complex hot-coffee case has been distorted into a simple caricature, such that only the basic outlines of the incident (i.e., woman spills coffee on self, then sues the coffee-seller for millions) are brought to the fore. As Barthes observed, “The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation.”

Thus Liebeck’s personal tale of pain and suffering is obscured and appropriated in the service of a constructed, ideological signification: that Americans are too quick to turn to the legal system to solve their problems, and often have spurious reasons for doing so.

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Barthes observed that the concept of a myth (i.e., the signified) could be associated with a potentially unlimited number of signifiers. It is through such repetition that myth draws its power. The construction of the hot-coffee case, for example, could represent but one example of a lawsuit that is routinely constructed as “frivolous” in the news. All of that suggests that the journalists who collect, arrange and propagate the news may be at the forefront of mythmaking in culture.

**Summary**

Hall’s encoding/decoding model and Barthes’ system of analyzing mythical speech are useful tools with which to analyze exemplars in newspapers. Hall’s model suggests exemplars are open to multiple interpretations, and that audience members actively construct their meaning from varying social contexts. Hall’s model also suggests that news consumers can decode narratives from an oppositional viewpoint, and thus reject, outright, the exemplifying function of an exemplar. The following case studies employed Hall’s analytical framework to consider some of the possible interpretations of the exemplars in various news articles that were scrutinized for the content analysis portion of this study. The case studies also contrasted those possible interpretations with the transmission-model assumptions about exemplars found in the experimental literature.

Saussure’s system of semiotic analysis, coupled with Barthes’ writings on myth, provided an additional theoretical framework with which to analyze
the way individual exemplars may be structured to create meaning that is “decoded” by the recipients of a message. Thus, the following case studies also deconstructed the exemplars as possible instances of myth-construction by the press.
Chapter 9. Case Studies

Case #1: Exemplification by the Numbers

The first case study is based on a report about child poverty from the Sept. 23, 2003, edition of The Sun. The article could be categorized as a “baseline” example of exemplification in a newspaper—to borrow a term from the literature—because it covered complex statistical evidence without the aid of explicitly illustrative anecdotes. The first paragraph established the report’s by-the-numbers approach:

The number of children living in severely distressed neighborhoods in Maryland and nationwide increased substantially in the 1990s despite the decade’s booming economy, according to a study released yesterday.

The report examined the statistical indicators used to tally the number of “distressed neighborhoods” and contrasted the study’s findings with other poverty studies from the same time period. The article focused on statistics from Maryland, and particularly Baltimore, in the second half, and reviewed the ethnic disparities that were found for distressed neighborhood residency. The article also compared the local statistics on distressed neighborhoods to the rates found in other states and cities.

Under the coding guidelines employed in the content analysis, the distressed neighborhoods article was found to contain three exemplars. Those exemplars all came in the form of direct quotations related to the study’s

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117 Ibid.
findings. For example, one of the sources (an author of the study mentioned in the article) was quoted trying to make sense of the trend:

“We were surprised to see that kids in distressed neighborhoods increased at all,” said Mark Mather, a policy analyst with the Population Reference Bureau and a co-author of the study. “I think it says there’s some persistent problems, particularly in inner-city areas. A lot of families are isolated from what goes on in the economy outside their neighborhood.”118

Although there are cultural meanings suggested by the phrasing of Mather’s statement, the exemplar itself is mostly explanatory, and not illustrative, in nature. The other two exemplars in the article were of a similar construction.

Within the context of exemplification research, the child-poverty article’s lack of illustrative exemplars can be viewed as a key characteristic. The article was not localized with exemplars of “distressed” Baltimore neighborhoods, nor were children in difficult circumstances profiled as “living proof” of the statistical findings. The article demonstrates that information about social trends can be presented in newspapers without the exemplified narrative elements that Zillmann and others have found so troubling.

Also of note is the article’s thorough presentation of statistical evidence. Research has shown that high-precision base-rate information alone does not mitigate the exemplification effect,119 but Baesler and Burgoon have demonstrated that heavily emphasized base-rate information can, in

118 Siegel.
119 Gibson and Zillmann, “Exaggerated Versus Representative Exemplification in News Reports.”
some instances, lessen the persuasive power of exemplars. With manipulated, illustrative exemplars added, the distressed neighborhoods story could serve as an interesting experimental test case of the limits of the exemplification effect.

The “baseline” example of the distressed neighborhoods report stood in stark contrast to the three other case study articles, which all used illustrative exemplars open to broad interpretation.

**Case #2: Where Did the Crabs Go?**

This case study considers an article from the July 22, 2003, edition of the *Washington Times* that explored the sudden disappearance of blue crabs from Maryland’s Eastern Shore. The statistical basis for the story was, in this case, complementary to the overall story focus: according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the area’s blue crab harvest had dropped 40 percent from the average harvest. In contrast to the distressed-neighborhoods report, the crabs story did not examine the relevant statistical evidence in detail, instead making it a secondary element in the larger cultural narrative.

After a lead paragraph that introduced the subject matter, the article related an anecdote of one crab-picking house that was forced to shut its doors after 53 years in business:

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James Dodson, owner of the waterfront Original Captain’s Galley restaurant, this year closed his crab-picking house. For 53 years, women gathered at the plant to harvest meat from hundreds of bushels of Maryland blue crabs a day.

This year it wasn’t worth Mr. Dodson’s time.

“There is just a scarcity of crabs. It’s hard to get domestic crabmeat now,” said Mr. Dodson. “Whether it’s weather or overfishing or the regulations, it’s a combination of everything.”

In a traditional exemplification study, that exemplar would typically be viewed as “supportive” of the story’s contention that Maryland’s blue crabs were disappearing. Researchers would treat the exemplar as a straightforward, unambiguous illustration of the crab’s decline.

Applying Hall’s model of encoding/decoding provides a different perspective on the failed business exemplar. When readers are viewed as active decoders of media messages, the “supportive” construction of an exemplar cannot be taken for granted as a universally shared interpretation. A contemporary reader could have adopted a negotiated decoding position, for example, and interpreted the exemplar as a factual anecdote that exaggerated the reported decline in blue crabs. Or a reader could have taken an oppositional decoding position and rejected the construction of the exemplar outright, perhaps viewing the crab house’s failure as a simple case of mismanagement by the owner. In any case, readers did not have to accept the encoded message of the exemplar, as they were fully capable of constructing a limitless number of different interpretations that accepted and

122 Parker.
rejected, to various degrees, the purported exemplarity of the crab house anecdote.

One of the exemplars in the crab house article can also be seen as a possible instance of myth in the news. Near the middle of the report, the pricing effects of the blue crab’s decline were considered:

The dearth of crabs quickly translates into higher prices for customers.

People are looking at us like, ‘Are you dumb?’ for putting such an expensive price on them,” said Bob Shorb, 25-year manager of Sea Pride Crab House in Baltimore. He called prices for crabs this year “ridiculous.”

At first glance, that exemplar would seem to be another instance of an anecdote constructed as “supportive” of the purported decline in blue crabs. However, it can be argued that there was an additional level of meaning encoded into the exemplar that was mythical in nature. The exemplar seems to have been built upon a widely understood ideological construct in the United States: the theory of supply-and-demand. The first sentence made that association explicit, by stating a causal relationship between crab scarcity and high prices. The supply-and-demand construct was, in effect, validated by the crab house manager, who attributed his high prices to supply forces beyond his control.

That’s not to say the exemplar is a perfect fit for Barthes’ mythical model; the crab house manager’s story was not given “a whole new history” in

123 Parker.
the service of a second-order signified, nor was its meaning distorted within a global signification. Nonetheless, the exemplar displayed one of the defining qualities of myth. Through the association with the exemplar (the signifier), the supply-and-demand theory (the signified) was arguably presented as a self-evident, “natural” way of understanding the world. Thus, through its reinforcement of an historical, ideological point of view, the exemplar can be viewed as a sign that supported and contributed to a larger mythmaking process in the United States.

The supply-and-demand exemplar also highlights the importance of what Hall termed “equivalence” in decoding. A hypothetical reader from another country—particularly one without a capitalist background—could have missed the mythical meaning the exemplar seemed to suggest, or simply found it puzzling. When there is a general lack of equivalence between the knowledge and social understandings of an encoder and decoder, the dominant/hegemonic meanings suggested by a media message can be lost, as the naturalized meanings of mythical speech are always rooted in a distinct time and place.

The article also explored the causes of the blue crab’s population decline:

No one can agree on what’s causing the downslide. Crabbers blame farmers for putting too much nutrient runoff into Chesapeake Bay. Farmers blame watermen for overharvesting.
“You can ask 20 different people. They’ll have 20 different opinions,” said Bill Cox of Fresh Catch in Crisfield. “But it’s overfishing if you ask me.”

Bill Cox seems to have exemplified the town’s confusion in the report; his statement implied that the disappearance of the blue crab was not only unprecedented, but also that its cause was perhaps unknowable. At no point did the article present the opinion of a scientist or researcher who had studied the crabs’ disappearance, so the statement that “no one could agree” on the cause of the trend went unchallenged in the text. The newspaper’s readers, however, may have interpreted the possible meaning of the exemplar quite differently.

Given that The Sun is located in Baltimore—a major U.S. seaport—it is likely that some of the people who read the report brought previous knowledge of the fishing industry to bear on their interpretation of the exemplar. That knowledge might have led some readers to adopt negotiated or oppositional readings of the encoded message. A reader with second-hand knowledge of the crab industry, for example, may have rejected the “mysterious” construction of the exemplar in favor of a strongly held prior opinion about the cause of the decline. When considering the meaning of an exemplar, it is important to recognize the idiosyncratic nature of interpretation, and how individual knowledge invariably factors into its outcome.

124 Parker.
In a traditional exemplification study the blue-crabs article would likely be categorized as “selective” in its presentation, as there were no exemplars in the report that seemed to contradict or call into question the crabs’ population decline. However, the “selective” category is debatable, as it assumes the encoded exemplarity was the “correct” interpretation for all of the exemplars. It is possible, for instance, that one of the exemplars in the blue crabs report that seemed “supportive” of the story’s focus was actually decoded as “contradictory” to the trend by the majority of readers. If that were the case, it could be argued that the story was not an example of “selective” exemplification at all, since it contained what was widely viewed by the audience as a contradictory exemplar. When the possible interpretations of readers are given primacy in this way, it becomes much more difficult—if not untenable—to categorize a report as an example of “selective” exemplification.

Case #3: Suicides in Japan

The third case study will consider an article from the August 24, 2003, edition of the Los Angeles Times that was headlined, “Internet Suicides Plague Japan: Young People Make Death Pacts With Strangers.” As in the previous case, this report examined a distressing trend in a community. The story began with the exemplar of Murata, a 28-year-old sushi deliveryman in

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Japan who became ensnared in the “recesses of the Internet.”墨田spent his days “glued” to the Web until he met online two anonymous individuals who shared his “dark interest” in committing suicide。墨田 The three individuals died together on a mountain pass after following suicide instructions they apparently found on the Internet.

The introductory anecdote of Murata’s death was presented as part of a larger trend in Japanese society:

The deaths of the three men marked only one incident in an extraordinary string of Internet suicides to hit Japan. Over the past six months, police investigators say at least 32 people—mostly in their teens and twenties—have killed themselves nationwide after meeting strangers online。墨田

It is worth noting that contemporary readers of the report could have adopted an oppositional decoding position and rejected the existence of the purported Japanese suicide trend altogether. Given that 32 is (arguably) not a large number of suicide cases, that oppositional interpretation seems particularly plausible in this instance. A reader who rejected the trend also would have been likely to take an oppositional approach when interpreting the rest of the suicide exemplars in the report.

Murata’s brother was quoted in the article trying to make sense of the suicide:

“Maybe he didn’t have high hopes for the future, but it is still so hard to understand how he could have done it,” said Murata’s 35-year-old brother, who shared their apartment. He spoke on

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
condition that both their names be withheld. “I’ve disconnected the Internet at home, at least while our family comes to terms with this.”129

The exemplar of Murata’s brother humanized the anecdotal suicide by showing the distress it caused family members. Given the research that found vivid, dramatic exemplars were more persuasive to readers than pallid ones,130 such emotional flourishes are worth noting, as they may have a measurable impact on the interpretations of an audience.

One of the things that differentiates the L.A. Times report from the previous two cases is the fact that the exemplified trend (i.e., an outbreak of Internet-assisted suicides) was explicitly linked to another, broader trend in Japanese society:

Psychiatrists and suicide experts are linking the phenomenon to a profound national identity crisis during Japan’s 13-year economic funk. Indeed, the Internet deaths come at a time when Japan is undergoing an alarming surge in its overall suicide rate—with financial reasons cited as the fastest growing reason for despair.

That statement added considerable complexity to the narrative, as the exemplars that followed in the report could have been viewed on two mutually inclusive levels of meaning: as exemplified cases of the Web suicide trend, and as exemplified cases of Japan’s national identity crisis. The complicated interpretive situation—which could be termed “multi-

129 Faiola.
exemplarity”—does not seem to have a precedent in the research literature on media exemplification.\textsuperscript{131}

The report described young people in Japan as a “lost generation” unmoored from the traditional “pillars of society.”\textsuperscript{132} The article cited rising homelessness, unemployment and job insecurity as evidence of the country’s growing social instability. Near the middle of the report a psychiatrist was introduced as a “supportive” exemplar for the purported identity crisis phenomenon:

> “[Japan’s youth] are lost and confused. The long-held direction and goals of Japanese society are collapsing around them,” said Rika Kayama, a Tokyo psychiatrist who has studied the Internet suicide phenomenon.\textsuperscript{133}

The report claimed Japan’s identity crisis was manifesting itself in other ways besides suicide. One sign of the trend, the report claimed, was an increase in so-called “shut-in” lifestyles among young people. The article also cited an increase in *kreru*—known in Japan as episodes in which people respond violently to minor provocations—as more proof of the trend. Those two exemplars (shut-ins and *kreru*) seem to have been encoded as “supportive” of the national identity crisis, a meaning that may not have been similarly constructed by the contemporary readership of the article.

\textsuperscript{131} None of the exemplification studies presented in the literature review of this project used news reports with multi-exemplarity for an experimental test.  
\textsuperscript{132} Faiola.  
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
After the exploration of the identity crisis trend, the article presented another exemplar of Internet-assisted suicide. That case, which the report cited as the “beginning” of the Web-death trend, involved a man and two women who killed themselves in a vacant apartment after meeting on a suicide site:

A 17-year-old girl who had originally agreed to join them but backed out at the last minute, told police that the three were jobless and worried about the future. They had met after Michio Sakai, a 26-year-old unemployed magazine salesman from just north of Tokyo, posted a “death ad” on an underground suicide site: “I am looking for suicide partners,” it said. “If you join me, I will give you sleeping pills ... It is lonely to die alone.”

Note that this second suicide exemplar seems to have been organized to reinforce both of the trends that were discussed in the report. On one level, the exemplar was clearly an illustration of the Web-suicide “trend.” But the exemplar also mentioned that all three of the suicide victims were “jobless and worried about the future,” apparently in order to suggest their deaths were also a symptom of Japan’s social instability. Thus it can be argued that the three-death anecdote was an instance of multi-exemplarity in action, at least within the context of the report.

The proposed multi-exemplarity of the three-death anecdote made for an interesting interpretive puzzle. Contemporary readers of the report could have adopted the dominant/hegemonic construction of the exemplar wholesale and interpreted it as factual evidence of both the suicide and

134 Faiola.
identity “trends.” Readers also could have constructed the meaning of the exemplar from more than one decoding position, perhaps accepting the exemplar as evidence of the Web death trend (a dominant/hegemonic decoding) but rejecting the purported link to a crisis in national identity (an oppositional decoding)—and that’s just one example of the possible meanings. When an exemplar illustrates more than one trend, it becomes that much more difficult to justify a “supportive,” “neutral” or “contradictory” label, as the possible interpretations by an audience could display the kind of fragmentation that is beyond the scope of a simple descriptor.

The multi-exemplarity of the suicide cases also can be viewed, from the Barthesian perspective, as a possible instance of myth-construction by the press. On one level of meaning, each suicide exemplar was a fully formed linguistic system (i.e., a sum of signs) that relayed a rich history. But each exemplar also could have been interpreted as a mere signifier for Japan’s national identity crisis, a mythical signified.

Nonetheless, the L.A. Times report cannot be considered a pure example of mythical speech, because the mythical association was presented in a distant, hazy manner that preserved the independence of the exemplars as self-contained meanings. It is perhaps more accurate to think of the suicide exemplars as half-finished or in-progress myth constructions. Consider, for example, the suicide of Murata that was introduced at the beginning of the L.A. Times report. That exemplar could have been
presented, from the outset, as an example of Japan’s national identity crisis; in that hypothetical revision, the details of the suicide (i.e., his emotional and employment problems, the Internet’s role) likely would have been omitted or mentioned only in passing. In the form of simple caricature, the Murata exemplar could have been appropriated as a signifier for Japan’s national identity crisis. In that scenario, the exemplar would have existed as both meaning and form under the totality of the global, mythical construct of societal instability.

Of course, Murata’s death wasn’t presented in the manner of that hypothetical, and neither were the other suicide exemplars in the article. This thought exercise is valuable nonetheless because it shows the materials of myth were present in the article; the potential for myth was there, even if it wasn’t fully constructed in this instance. The exemplars were structured around ideological associations that could have solidified, over time, into the “self-evident” meanings that Barthes defined as myth. Barring that development, the exemplars nonetheless were structured to suggest a cultural, ideological meaning (i.e., cultural dissolution in Japan) that was mythical in nature.

The suicides story also illustrates the importance of cultural knowledge in the interpretation of exemplars. It seems likely that most L.A. Times readers lacked substantive knowledge of Japanese culture or history and were dependent on the interpretations encoded in the story to make
sense of it. Compare that situation to the blue crabs report, which covered a hyper-local issue known to many readers on a first-hand basis. Readers of the blue crabs report could have drawn on knowledge of the Eastern Shore’s culture and social history to construct idiosyncratic interpretations of the report. Readers of the suicides story, in contrast, would have been hard-pressed to adopt a negotiated or oppositional interpretation of a phenomenon occurring in a culture foreign to them.

Finally, similar to the other case study articles explored thus far, the suicides article did not undercut the story focus with explicitly contradictory exemplars. All of the statistics and exemplars in the story were used to highlight the Internet-assisted suicides and social instability trends, and no attempt at questioning the prevalence of the alleged phenomena was made. Looking at it purely from the encoding side of Hall’s process, it can be argued that the story was an example of selective exemplification in the press.

**Case #4: Young Offenders**

This case study will review a report about juvenile crime from the December 18, 2003, edition of the *Los Angeles Times*. The article, which was headlined “Jobs, Not Juvenile Hall,” examined a program in Santa Cruz, California, that placed young criminal offenders under house arrest as part of a comprehensive rehabilitation program. Participants in the program were closely supervised and given jobs, tutoring and counseling as part of the

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government-led effort to cut recidivism, according to the report. One of the statistics presented in the article suggested the program was having its intended effect, as only 2 percent of the juvenile participants “committed new offenses while awaiting resolution of their cases.”\textsuperscript{136} The report singled out Santa Cruz as a notable exception to a shift toward increased incarceration of juvenile offenders in California and in the United States.

The article examined the Santa Cruz reform effort within the context of a broader cultural and political debate about the proper way to deal with young criminals. The lead paragraph of the report noted that a “get-tough” approach to juvenile crime was sweeping the nation, a mindset that had been rejected by “liberal” Santa Cruz.\textsuperscript{137} That competition of ideas between increased incarcerations for juvenile offenders, one on hand, and rehabilitation, on the other, appeared often throughout the article, and may have influenced the possible interpretations of the exemplars that were presented.

The article introduced the exemplar of Nick Jackson, 17, who was trying to turn around his life with the help of the Santa Cruz reform program:

\begin{quote}
On one recent evening, the 17-year-old aspiring chef stood rapt amid glistening pots and pans, learning to whip up wok-seared salmon. Jackson, who started shoplifting at 8 and had graduated to grand-theft auto by his teens, said he has traded crime for a commercial kitchen.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
“It was getting to the point in life where I didn’t know what to do,” he admitted, gingerly flipping a fish filet under the watchful eye of his tutor, a local executive chef. “I fell in love with this.”

That anecdote seems to have been encoded as “supportive” of the idea that the Santa Cruz effort was working. By extension, the exemplar also seems to have been encoded with a preferred meaning that was “supportive” of the idea that juvenile criminals should be given a second chance before being institutionalized.

Unlike the other case study articles examined thus far, the juvenile crime report also explicitly acknowledged the possibility of oppositional readings of the exemplar. In the paragraph immediately following the Jackson anecdote, the article noted that skeptics viewed the Santa Cruz program as a “soft-headed experiment with potentially dangerous results.”

The proximity of that statement to the exemplar is interesting, because it could have prompted a reader who interpreted the exemplar from a dominant/hegemonic position to question or possibly abandon that original interpretation in favor of a negotiated or oppositional reading (e.g., a reader could decide Jackson actually should be in a juvenile prison because he’s likely to commit another crime). At the very least, the report’s acknowledgment of a different viewpoint would seem to have made the article

138 Bailey.
139 Ibid.
an instance of what researchers have termed “blended” exemplification in the news.

After a section that reviewed pertinent national statistics on juvenile incarceration, the report presented an exemplar that seems to have been encoded as “contradictory” to the purported success of the rehabilitation program in Santa Cruz:

Stalwarts in the juvenile justice system contend the pendulum shouldn’t swing too far. Jail, they say, is the best spot for many teenage offenders.

Larry Price, president of Chief Probation Officers of California, admits to an “uncomfortable feeling” that reformers in places such as Santa Cruz, despite commendable intentions, sometimes fail to make safety a high enough priority. Price said “they need to bring it back to a middle point.

Harsher critics say reformer want to coddle natural-born criminals. The nation’s get-tough stand, they contend, has played a role in stemming youth crime, proving that we should stay the course.¹⁴⁰

That oppositional exemplar was given more than just a passing mention in the report, but the opinion it expressed was marginalized to some extent. At no point did the report present evidence, statistical or otherwise, to bolster the oppositional view. Within the context of the report, the preferred, encoded meaning of the exemplar seems to have been that the successful program in Santa Cruz disproved the “contradictory,” dissenting viewpoint. Therefore, it can be argued that only readers who adopted a negotiated or oppositional decoding of the exemplar would have interpreted the exemplar

¹⁴⁰ Bailey.
in a manner “contradictory” to the report’s claims about rehabilitating juvenile offenders.

The counterintuitive idea that seemingly “contradictory” exemplars can be encoded as “supportive” of a story’s focus had no precedent in the exemplification studies that were reviewed for this project. The phenomenon could help explain why respondents in experimental studies typically discounted contradictory exemplars when they were in the minority of cases; perhaps some of those contradictory exemplars were not encoded in a way that actually challenged the dominant message of the manipulated articles. That idea deserves to be explored formally in future research, as it calls into question the consensus that the experimental results uniformly reflect a stable bias in human perception.

After the oppositional exemplar, the report explained that officials in Santa Cruz decided to focus on juvenile rehabilitation partially out of a desire to ease overcrowding in their lockup facilities:

Even in Santa Cruz, where a progressive spirit seems part of the civic constitution, bureaucratic inertia had to be overcome. Some police and prosecutors needed to set aside the notion that juvenile hall is the best way to handle errant kids.141

That statement was an example of the subtle phrasing used in the report that appears to marginalize opponents of juvenile rehabilitation. The description of law enforcement officials in Santa Cruz was arguably dismissive of their concerns and suggested they were wrong to have

141 Bailey.
reservations about the new approach. Readers nonetheless may have disregarded the preferred meaning and constructed the “contradictory” exemplars as “correct” and “legitimate” points of view.

**Case Studies: Review**

The case studies in this project employed Hall’s model of encoding/decoding and Barthes’ mythical system to explore the possible meanings suggested by exemplars. The results of the exercise suggest that the interpretation of exemplars is a much more complex process than researchers may have previously acknowledged.

The articles that were analyzed in the four case studies illustrate the untidy realities of exemplification in newspaper journalism. The case studies suggest the exemplifying function of a quote or anecdote is complex and open to multiple interpretations by an audience. Nonetheless, all of the stories analyzed here fit the theoretical mold used in a traditional exemplification study. One can easily imagine any of the case study articles being used in an experiment by Zillmann, Brosius or other exemplification scholars, so the issues raised by the case studies are deserving of serious research consideration in the future.

The case study articles validated the research finding that exemplars tend to follow the focus of a report—at least from an encoder’s point of view. The debatable professional standard of “telling both sides” seems to fall by the wayside in many exemplified narratives, which again raises concerns
about the coverage of dramatic-but-rare events, illnesses and crimes, since the potential for exaggeration is so great.

The first case study article, about distressed neighborhoods, was notably different from the other three reports, as it lacked explicitly illustrative exemplars. Rather than using the data on poor neighborhoods as a jumping-off point for the examination of a “distressed” community in Baltimore, the article stuck to the statistics at hand and avoided cultural and social debates about poverty. The article’s thorough presentation of research data would likely meet the approval of Zillmann, who has long advocated for a more empirical approach to news coverage in his writings on exemplification.142

The second article, about the disappearance of blue crabs on Maryland’s Eastern shore, was a fairly conventional instance of an exemplified narrative. However, the case study showed how Hall’s model of encoding/decoding can be used to challenge the notion that there is a single, “correct” interpretation of an exemplar. When readers are viewed as having an active role in the communication process, the possible meanings of an exemplar become nearly limitless, as one can no longer assume the “dominant” construction of an exemplar will be shared by audience members. The case study also showed how an exemplar can potentially naturalize

142 For an example, see Zillmann, “Exemplification Theory: Judging the Whole by Some of Its Parts.”
culturally constructed ideologies and thus be viewed as an example of myth-making by the press.

The third report, about suicides in Japan, was arguably the most intriguing of the four case study articles. The report purported the existence of two trends in Japan—Internet-assisted suicide and social instability—that were related to each other, yet fundamentally distinct. The presentation of two trends created what could be called “multi-exemplarity,” as the exemplars in the report could be viewed as constructed representations of more than one observed phenomenon. The report’s dual structure could also be viewed as a likely precursor to myth-construction, as one of the purported trends in the report (social instability in Japan) was a culturally constructed meaning that could have solidified, over time, into a naturalized, mythical signified.

The suicides story also highlights the need to take reader familiarity into account when considering the possible interpretations of exemplars. Reports about cultures foreign to an audience are fundamentally different from stories about local issues, as readers are much more dependent on the encoded perspectives of a reporter to create meaning.

Finally, the fourth case study article, about juvenile rehabilitation, showed that the concept of “blended” exemplification in the news is problematic, as the exemplars in a report that seem “contradictory,” at first glance, may not actually challenge the focus or “take” of an article when
viewed in context. Furthermore, when readers are viewed as active decoders of exemplars, it would seem problematic, if not impossible, to classify the mix of exemplars in an article as “supportive,” “contradictory” or “blended,” unless the categories are defined from the point of view of an encoder.
Chapter 10. Suggestions for Future Research

Exemplification is a relatively new theoretical framework with room for expansion and refinement. Further analysis using various research methods holds great promise for the creation of a theoretical viewpoint with substantial explanatory power.

The content-analysis format used in this study is a logical starting point for additional inquiry. The study needs to be replicated on a larger scale, so that the real-world implications of exemplification theory can be better understood. For newspapers, the key refinement should come in sample size; a robust content analysis would examine more stories from a diverse mix of publications. The analysis would also code for exemplification in stories without a trend orientation, so that all aspects of exemplification can be better understood. The coding protocol used in this study seemed suitable for the task of recording exemplification, and no major revisions to it would be necessary if it were to be adapted to future studies.

Second, it is imperative that the type of analysis performed in this study be expanded to a variety of media. Based on the content analyses performed by Brosius, Daschmann and Zillmann, there would seem to be a strong possibility that exemplification is far more prevalent in some media than in others. If that is found to be the case, then the focus of future exemplification research should shift accordingly.
Third, it would be worthwhile to perform longitudinal case studies on exemplars from different eras in history. For example, one could review stories about AIDS from the 1980s to the present to see how the exemplars used to illustrate a problem have changed over time. That analysis would be more than a simple framing study, as focusing on exemplars alone could be a revealing exercise; charting the patterns, recurring motifs and phrases in the exemplars would be a powerful addition to the historical record on almost any topic, and the possible connections to contemporary public opinion data would open new areas of exploration.

Fourth, more exemplars—ideally sampled from a variety of media—should be subjected to rigorous case study analyses. Such case studies would not necessarily need to utilize the same critical studies framework that was employed in this project, as more insight may well be gained from an entirely different approach. Regardless of form or method, such exercises have the potential to enrich the literature on exemplification by uncovering possible refinements and improvements to the model that could then be incorporated into the design of experimental studies.

Finally, the exemplification model itself is deserving of further scrutiny from researchers. The analyses of case study articles presented in this project suggest many of the operational definitions that have been used in exemplification studies (e.g., “supportive,” “contradictory”) are overly rigid and fail to take into account the possibility of multiple interpretations. The
transmission-model orientation of exemplification research will not be easy to change, as it is intrinsic to most of the quantitative findings about exemplars. Nonetheless, it is worth considering whether a more nuanced model of exemplification can be created that recognizes the active, idiosyncratic interpretations of an audience.

The results of the content analysis performed for this study call into question the idea that exemplified narratives are common in the news. It is imperative that researchers undertake additional quantitative studies of media content to determine whether the exemplification theory of media effects correlates to real-world journalism practices. If further study does not uncover robust samples of exemplified narratives in the news, researchers may be forced to consider the possibility that the exemplification theory is a mythical research construct with limited relevance to contemporary media practices.
Works Cited


Appendix A. Codebook

For purposes of this study we will only be considering stories on the front page of the newspaper and the front page of the local news/metro section. The only time you should go inside the paper is if an article jumps to another page.

*** In order for a news article to be included in the coding process, the story must contain statistical information. News stories that do not include statistical data are to be excluded from the coding process.

To warrant inclusion in the sample, the quantitative data in the story has to come from an identified external source. This rule applies equally to experts, public officials and scholars. If empirical data is mentioned, and it is linked to a source (however vague), the article should be included for coding in the sample.

There are two key exceptions to the method detailed above. One: Articles focused on the budgetary matters of governments, businesses and other agencies are not to be included in this analysis. Financial statistics are typically not generalizations about the world and thus fall outside the exemplification paradigm. Two: in some cases, a statistic in a story has no relationship to the exemplars given and is completely tangential to the focus. Looking through the story reveals that all of the exemplars are neutral because none of them relate to the statistic. These articles should be excluded.

Finally, news columns (opinion pieces) are not fit for inclusion.
Article-Level Protocol

Once you have decided that an article is fit for coding, you should read the entire article from start to finish, taking careful note of the story’s subject matter. Then you are to indicate the story’s topic in the category list. In ambiguous cases, refer to the following list of definitions for guidance:

- **Politics and Government**: Government acts and politics at the local, state and national level.
- **War and Defense**: War, defense, rebellion, military use of space. Includes both foreign and domestic stories.
- **Diplomacy and Foreign Relations**: Both foreign and domestic items dealing with diplomacy and foreign relations. Includes United Nations.
- **Economic Activity**: General economic activity, prices, money, labor, wages and natural resources.
- **Agriculture**: Farming, farm prices and economic aspects of agriculture.
- **Transportation and Travel**: Transportation and travel, including economic aspects.
- **Crime**: All crime stories including criminal proceedings in court.
- **Public Moral Problems**: Human relations and moral problems including alcohol, divorce, sex, race relations and civil court proceedings.
- **Accidents and Disasters**: Both man-made accidents and natural disasters.
- **Science and Technology**: Science other than defense related and other than health and medicine.
- **Public Health and Welfare**: Health, public welfare, social and safety measures, welfare of children and marriage and marriage relations.
- **Education and Classic Arts**: Education, classic arts, religion and philanthropy.
- **Popular Culture**: Entertainment and celebrities, newspaper sports, TV, movies, radio and other media.
- **General Human Interest**: Human interest, weather, obits, animals, cute children and juvenile interest.

After recording the story’s statistical information you are asked to indicate its precision. The three categories are defined as follows:
**High precision:** Statistics that contain specific counts, percentages, ratios and estimates. Data that is quantitative in nature; specific instead of vague; numeric and not generalized.

**Low precision:** Statistics than use comparative language, such as “some,” “more and more” and “a majority.” Specific numbers are not given.

**Mixed:** Statistics that are both high and low in precision.

The next task in the protocol is the counting of exemplars. Consider this textbook definition of the term exemplar:

Exemplars are “case descriptions of specifications of singular incidents that fall within the realm of a particular social phenomenon and that exhibit the pertinent properties of that phenomenon to a certain degree.”

In non-technical terms, exemplars are merely examples—illustrations, aides—of a larger phenomenon. However, exemplars need not be a direct representation of a category. Quotes are a form of exemplification because they relate concrete information from the social world. Oftentimes, quotations are offered in summary form, but they nonetheless retain their exemplifying function. Similarly, reporters often include descriptions that exemplify the topic at hand (e.g., a description of a worn-down school building in an article about education costs) from a first-person perspective. These common forms of exemplification—quotations, summaries and descriptions—should all be considered exemplars in the analysis.

In order to count as a unit, an exemplar must be distinct in the text. However, the source or the content of the exemplar need not be unique. Rather, distinct exemplars may sometimes be the same person/example, found as separate entities in the layout of the article. An expert, for example, who is quoted and discussed for 3 straight paragraphs should be counted as one distinct exemplar. If this same expert is quoted again later in the article, the second quote should be counted as a separate exemplar. Essentially, so long as an exemplar remains uninterrupted in the narrative, it should be counted as one. The counting for every article should proceed in this manner, with one exemplar added to the count each time a fresh (distinct) one is encountered.

After recording the exemplar count, you need to record how many of the exemplars support the story focus. To determine story focus, ask yourself: What is the main thesis of this article? What perspective is the writer trying to convey? If someone asked you what the article you’re reading is about, what would you say?

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By support, it is simply meant that the exemplar is an example of the phenomenon/risk/social problem/opinion described. For example, if a story states, “1 percent of the population is susceptible to rapid, premature aging,” all exemplars of people suffering from the ailment should be counted as supportive exemplars, since that is the story’s focus.

Consequently, all exemplars of doctors or experts talking about the ailment should also be counted as supportive exemplars. Only exemplars that downplay the risk, in this instance, would escape the supportive category—instead falling under the contradictory label. If an exemplar does not support or contradict the story focus, it should be counted as neutral.

Next, you need to indicate the story’s exemplar distribution. The two categories are defined as follows:

**Selective:** All of the exemplars in a story follow the given focus. No contradictory examples are given. The focus of the story does not shift, and no attempt at balance is made.

**Blended:** The exemplar distribution is not selective.
Exemplar-Level Protocol

In this portion of the coding you will be looking at each exemplar individually. **Exemplars must be distinct in the text, using the same guidelines of the earlier article-level protocol.**

After recording the date and source of the exemplar, count and record the total number of sentences in the exemplar.

Finally, record the exemplar’s source. The division between quotes and paraphrases is not rigid: **if an exemplar contains a full quote, it is not a paraphrase.** However, **quote marks around a phrase or word do not make the exemplar a quote. The quotation must be a full sentence.**

- **Quote of expert or academic:** The source is described as an expert, doctor, researcher, professor, etc. **The journalist ascribes authority to the source,** either by title or by explicit statement.
- **Paraphrase of expert or academic:** The source is described as an expert, doctor, researcher, professor, etc. The journalist ascribes authority to the source, either by title or by explicit statement. The source is never offered in direct quotation.
- **Quote of public official:** The source is someone in government (local or national) or in a government agency.
- **Paraphrase of public official:** The source is someone in government (local or national) or in a government agency. The source is never offered in direct quotation.
- **Quote of resident:** Anyone who is not a public official or an expert is almost certainly a resident/community member. The person need not reside in a particular community, since some stories have a national focus. Resident simple means that a person is not in the government or the academy.
- **Paraphrase of resident:** Anyone who is not a public official or an expert is almost certainly a resident/community member. The person need not reside in a particular community, since some stories have a national focus. Resident simple means that a person is not in the government or the academy. The source is never offered in direct quotation.
- **Anecdote:** In an anecdote **the journalist is the speaker.** The writer is not relaying what a person said; instead, they are providing a description of an experience from a first or second-hand perspective. Sometimes journalists paraphrase a person’s experience in anecdote form; so long as the person does not speak (key word: said), it is an anecdote. Some exemplars may be a combination of an anecdote and a quote or paraphrase—in
which case it should be filed under one of the above categories, and not anecdote.

- **Hypothetical**: The writer offers a purely hypothetical situation or instance to illustrate a point.
## Appendix B. Coding Protocol

### Article-level Coding Protocol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (xx/xx/xx):</th>
<th>1 - Front page 2 - Metro</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>4 - The Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Washington Post</td>
<td>5 - The New York Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>6 - Washington Times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Article Topic

| 1 - Politics and Government |
| 2 - War and Defense         |
| 3 - Diplomacy and Foreign Relations |
| 4 - Economic Activity       |
| 5 - Agriculture             |
| 6 - Transportation and Travel |
| 7 - Crime                   |
| 8 - Public Moral Problems:  |
| 9 - Accidents and Disasters |
| 10 - Science and Technology |
| 11 - Public Health and Welfare |
| 12 - Education and Classic Arts |
| 13 - Popular Culture        |
| 14 - Human Interest         |

### Please record the exact statistic(s) below:

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### Statistical Precision:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - Low 2 - High 3 - Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - Low 2 - High 3 - Mixed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Exemplar Focus

- Total # of exemplars: ________
- # that support the focus: ________
- # that contradict the focus: ________
- # that are neutral: ________

### Exemplar Distribution

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## Exemplar-level Coding Protocol

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<th>Date (xx/xx/xxx):</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper:</td>
<td>Newspaper:</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 - Washington Post</td>
<td>2 - Washington Post</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 - Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>3 - Chicago Tribune</td>
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<td>4 - The (Baltimore) Sun</td>
<td>4 - The (Baltimore) Sun</td>
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<td>6 - Washington Times</td>
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</table>

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<tr>
<td>Exemplar Source:</td>
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<td>4 - Paraphrase of public official</td>
<td>4 - Paraphrase of public official</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 - Quote of resident</td>
<td>5 - Quote of resident</td>
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<td>6 - Paraphrase of resident</td>
<td>6 - Paraphrase of resident</td>
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<td>7 - Anecdote</td>
<td>7 - Anecdote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 - Hypothetical</td>
<td>8 - Hypothetical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - Other:</td>
<td>9 - Other:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C. Case Study Articles

Japan’s Young People Find a Proliferation Of Suicide Web Sites.

In Japan, 17-year-olds are the new generation of web surfers, and for many of them, internet suicide sites are a deadly attraction.

According to a recent study by the National Suicide Prevention Center, 11,000 Japanese teenagers have committed suicide in the past decade, and the number of internet suicides is expected to increase. The rise of internet suicide sites is causing concern among parents and educators.

The rise of internet suicide sites has been attributed to several factors, including the increasing pressure of academic and social expectations, as well as the anonymity and accessibility of the internet.

In response to this growing trend, the government has launched a campaign to raise awareness and provide resources for those in need. However, the problem remains a pressing issue, and more work is needed to address the underlying causes of internet suicide.