



### **Psychology and the News Media: Reflections on a Ten Year Initiative**

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The presence of psychologists in the news media has undergone enormous changes within the past decade and has contributed to the way psychologists are viewed by the public. Although in prior years psychologists have appeared on talk shows and occasional health segments, very few were interviewed on the morning or evening news about the impact of community and world events. In addition, human interest stories were viewed as "soft news" typically appearing as second or third day stories or sidebars, if at all.

In the early 90's a few psychologists began appearing in the news media. Initially, the interviews in which we participated were very brief, usually a few sound bites about such topics as why violence occurs. Over the years the interviews began to include social commentary about the impact of disasters and violence on victims and how children and the community perceive the world. Gradually, as interest in and the value of psychological information appeared to increase so did our airtime. Toward the latter half of the decade it was not unusual for an interview to last three or four minutes (a considerable length of time) on a prime time national network news program.

Having given many news interviews over the past decade, often several a week, I had the opportunity to observe firsthand the changes taking place in the evolution of psychology in the news media. The following are examples of interviews in which I participated that exemplify significant changes, turning points, and trends that have taken place. In addition, I have integrated media outreach and public education as part of various public interest initiatives that I developed since 1990, to increase psychologists' visibility in the media. These media changes have influenced the practice of psychology, moving it into the mainstream of everyday life and away from a profession primarily focused on pathology.

#### **The Fusion of Public Education and the News Media**

On a cold and sunny January afternoon in 1991, the ABC TV News camera crew arrived at the Red Cross meeting to cover the story of how families were coping with the stress of separation from their families and loved ones who were serving in the Persian Gulf Crisis.

Just having established NYSPA's Disaster/Crisis Response Network (DRN) in the fall of 1990, we soon found ourselves being called upon by community groups, the Red Cross, and several local hospitals to help the families manage stress. The weekly group, consisting of parents, spouses, and significant others, organized by the Red Cross, had no reservations about being interviewed, observed, and taped for the evening news. On several prior occasions newspaper reporters had interviewed some of the members, myself, Red Cross staff, and with the group's permission, sometimes sat in on parts of the meetings.

Having always been very protective of patients' confidentiality, the willingness of the group to permit observation and filming was a real eye opener and began to change the way I viewed public education and media involvement. Comments from various groups of family members of Persian Gulf service personnel, such as "I thought only social workers volunteered to do things like this" or "when you first came to talk to the group I was surprised when you mentioned you were a psychologist" were not uncommon. Discussion about these comments revealed that psychologists were seen as too busy or uninterested to be involved in community activities or were seen as only working with "crazy" or disturbed people. These comments by the public reflected how psychologists were viewed and the enormous potential of using the media to

promote public education and change these perceptions. It was this experience that convinced me to integrate a public education and media outreach as a unique integral component of NYSPA's Disaster/Crisis Response Network, and subsequent violence prevention and public interest programs I established.

### **Perception is Everything**

In the early '90s, neither the public and nor reporters were very familiar with the concept of post-traumatic stress. My specialty in stress and trauma enabled me to conduct many impromptu media interviews, often without any preparation time available. Frequently the interview took place on the phone between patient appointments or before and after my office hours. My being easily accessible increased the frequency with which I was interviewed and psychological information appeared in the media.

Simultaneously, through our state psychological association, I was conducting trainings in trauma and critical incident stress for psychologists interested in volunteering in our statewide DRN. Some of these volunteers also began participating in media interviews. As psychologists continued to appear in the news to help people cope in the wake of disaster and violence, the public began to increasingly see "normal" people being helped by psychologists. Our news interviews not only reported research findings, but demonstrated what we do, thereby beginning to change the public's perception of the value of psychological services.

### **Linking a Special News Program to a Seminar Conducted for the Public**

In 1993, several domestic violence fatalities on Long Island raised community anxiety and concern. As a result I organized a seminar for the community sponsored by our regional psychological association, with an interdisciplinary panel including a gynecologist, psychologist, and attorney to address medical, psychological, and legal issues. I was asked to provide psychological commentary for a special segment on domestic violence that ran on a 24-hour TV news station (News12). This segment was followed by a promo publicizing the free public seminar by our psychological association resulting in an excellent turnout. To our knowledge this was the first time a special TV news program was utilized to publicize a seminar for the public, which was sponsored by a regional psychological association. The public appeared very interested in the psychology of domestic violence with focus on the victim. As a result the public had another opportunity to see how psychologists help "normal" people with special problems.

### **Using The News Media to Promote Sensitivity and Empathy For Victims of Crime - Psychological Commentary Following Victims' Impact Statements.**

The 1993 Long Island Railroad commuter train shootings by gunman Colin Ferguson shattered the illusion of a safe haven and fueled great interest and much national news coverage focusing on Ferguson. An historic program was produced by News12, which provided live televised (prior to O.J. Simpson trial) coverage of the March 1995 trial, victims' impact statements, and sentencing. I was asked to provide commentary along with a defense attorney for the live three-hour coverage of the victims impact statements and sentencing.

The novel approach of including psychological commentary along with the typical legal commentary, helped to explain human behavior in more than objective legal terms. News12 agreed to my request that I would focus on the victims, not the offender, to explain their diverse reactions. As a result, I had the opportunity to introduce the term "empathy training" as a part of violence prevention. The program was helpful as it served as a reality check and highlighted the pain and suffering of victims and the impact on the community. This was a welcome departure from how violence was typically depicted in media. Previous research and observation show that

in both the entertainment and news media, the spotlight was on the perpetrators and the details of the crime and rarely on the consequences to the victim and their family and friends.

### **The Importance of the Psychological Well-Being of the Nation Makes News**

NBC TV decided to carry live coverage of President and Mrs. Clinton's White House talk with children and parents in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, as part of the special breaking news segment. This was an historic turning point for psychology as it highlighted the importance of dealing with the emotional aftermath of a crisis, with the psychological well-being of the nation warranting a special address by President Clinton. The presidential address was followed by various experts' live commentary via satellite with Tom Brokaw. I was asked to comment on President Clinton's speech and give advice to parents and children. This program was also unique as it was the first news program to include psychological commentary following a presidential address.

### **Psychological Information Becomes a First Day Story**

The 1996 TWA 800 explosion created great anxiety across the nation, as the cause of the explosion was undetermined, but with the possibility of terrorism being alluded to by the news media. The evening news coverage on the networks was in full swing shortly after the crash. The following morning my phone started ringing with reporters from various newspapers requesting advice for the community, which would appear the next (second) day. The afternoon breaking news from ABC-TV requested an interview and although they were unable to dispatch a camera crew in time for the program, decided to broadcast a live telephone interview with me about coping with the tragedy.

Often in the wake of such disasters, interviews would be aired or printed the second or third day. However, this was the first time TV news carried the psychological perspective with the first day coverage. It is likely that a combination of the nature of this disaster and the increased frequency with which previous traumatic events including psychological commentary had been reported in the news contributed to this milestone. Since this tragedy and with the proliferation of 24 hour news networks, the psychological perspective is now being included in first day news stories.

### **Complex Psychological Concepts and the TV News Media**

Often news interviews, especially for TV, are reduced to a few edited sound bites. For this reason I have always preferred to do live interviews, so as to have more control over the content. Nonetheless, much of TV and print interviews continue to be edited. However, with the proliferation of TV news magazine programs, came the opportunities to do longer and more in depth stories. I discussed the possibility of doing a segment with a Dateline NBC producer on and off for a number of years on the long-term effects of PTSD. Such a segment would be very useful for the public, as it became apparent that most of the public was not aware of the length of time required to recover from a traumatic incident. This lack of understanding was apparent in my practice as well as those of colleagues' who work with victims. Often family and friends of victims have reported that they should have "moved on" long ago with their lives. Unfortunately, the producer and I were not able to identify an appropriate story to serve as a vehicle for the concept of the long term effects of PTSD, until the Jonesboro school shootings.

However, following the Jonesboro school shootings, the Dateline producer contacted me to discuss a story as she had located a young man who was in the schoolyard during the Stockton school shootings 10 years earlier. He was now experiencing flashbacks and anxiety as a result of watching news accounts of the Jonesboro tragedy. Information from my two hour interview was used to build the visuals and connections for the two events. My comments were also woven through the segment, explaining flashbacks, panic, recurring intrusive thoughts, etc. In addition,

comments from the young man about his experiences and the helpfulness of being able to talk about his feelings were highlighted along with my recommendations for those who have experienced such traumatic events.

This Dateline segment was unique as it was the first TV news program that dealt with long term trauma and helped inform the public about this common phenomenon. Prior to this, news programs had focused on crisis intervention as a treatment, which served to reinforce the public's misperception of the quick fix and moving on solution to trauma.

### Summary

The majority of the public receives its information about people, the community, and world events from the news media, especially television news. As a result the media has enormous influence to shape "reality" whether accurate or not. The public's perception of psychologists is determined far more by how we appear in the media than by the experiences of the relatively small percentage of people who have had direct contact with or have utilized the services of psychologists.

Therefore utilizing the news media (which is seen as "real" information) to accurately portray psychologists is critical if we are to participate in shaping and defining how psychologists are viewed and the value of our services. This is not a skill we are taught in graduate school, but one that is very necessary in the 21st century. We need to be media literate as well as computer literate in this age of rapid technological change. For those with limited media experience, attending training workshops and doing radio and print interviews are a good way to become involved. This can be done from one's office and will be less anxiety provoking than being "on camera".

My efforts, over the past ten years, to publicize psychology in the news media have been very gratifying. Being able to contribute to expanding our role and the opportunity to see these changes, by virtue of the medium, is especially meaningful. I strongly encourage others to participate in news media opportunities.

As more psychologists appear in the news media, the diversity of services available to benefit the public will become more apparent. As a result, the public's perception of psychology as primarily pathology focused will continue to lessen and the perception of psychologists' contribution to enhancing everyday life will continue to grow.

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