Human Trafficking: How Media Portrayal Impacts the Public

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SENIOR HONORS THESIS

Submitted In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the
College Scholars Honors Program
North Central College

June 3, 2011

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Abstract

Human trafficking has always been a problem across the globe; however, it has recently morphed to meet growing consumer demands. Although the public is largely unaware of it, many of these atrocities occur here in the United States. In fact, thousands of people per year are bought and sold on U.S. soil for sexual and labor purposes. Unfortunately, without an increase in public knowledge as to the true extent and location of this crisis, combating it is nearly impossible. The primary purpose of this research is to provide an answer for why so many U.S. Americans are unconscious of the fact that a significant amount of human trafficking occurs within national borders. Through a critical discourse analysis study of 187 articles from the four most popular magazines and newspapers in the country, this research concludes that lack of public knowledge is a result of communication practices utilized by the media.

Statement of the Problem

Human trafficking has been an issue throughout history. This sexual or labor exploitation by means of threat, force, or coercion, intensified by the post-colonial era and the industrialization of formerly agrarian societies along with the continual subordination of women, exacerbates educational, economic, and work disparities, which in turn fuel the problem (Joshi, 2002). Today, there are more slaves worldwide than at any point in history (Panjabi, 2009). Due to its expansion, human trafficking has become an increasingly prevalent topic in the media. Unfortunately, while overall progress has been made in terms of enlightening the public about

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1 Human trafficking “…shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs…” (United Nations, 2000, p. 2).
this issue in general, the average U.S. citizen is unaware that human trafficking occurs in our nation as well as in others. Human trafficking is prevalent the United States; however, many U.S. Americans do not know about it for varying reasons.

Even though combating human trafficking has become a major political priority for governments across the world, available information concerning the magnitude of the problem is still very limited (Lackzo and Gramegna, 2003). Despite the need for more extensive studies, current research shows that between 14,500 and 17,500 of people are trafficked in the U.S. every year (Kara, 2007, p. 657). However, human trafficking does not just include those trafficked into the U.S., but also those who are already here\(^2\). Unfortunately, estimates of human trafficking have focused almost exclusively on internationally trafficked victims. Although anecdotal evidence is plentiful, there are few statistics on domestic human trafficking, and the little research that exists focuses solely on child victims. 300,000 U.S. American children are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation, which is the act of sexually abusing a child for economic gains (Exploiting Americans on American Soil, 2005, p. 2). In addition, about 199,000 incidents of exploitation of minors occur each year in the U.S. (Clawson, et al., 2009).

Although there is insufficient data to compare the U.S. to other countries in terms of human trafficking, the scale of the problem within national borders is evident when U.S. human trafficking rates are compared to rates of other crimes in the country, including hate crime and murder. In 2009, there were 6,604 reported instances of hate crime in the U.S., another topic of growing media interest (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010, para. 1). In the same year, 15,241 persons were murdered (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010, para. 6). While the exact numbers of

\(^2\) The term “international human trafficking” will refer to human trafficking that occurs outside the U.S., while the term “domestic human trafficking” will refer to human trafficking that occurs within U.S. national borders.
crimes are difficult to attain due to underreporting, the available statistics show that human trafficking occurs at least twice as often as hate crime and about as often as murder. In light of its prevalence and the media coverage of similarly frequent crimes, it is surprising that we as the public do not know more about human trafficking.

One difference between human trafficking and many other crimes is that human trafficking occurs not as isolated incidents, but as the result of an ongoing situation, as evidenced by the gripping stories of the survivors. Oftentimes victims are forced to endure conditions that cause psychological, sexual, and physical trauma (Sadruddin, et al., 2005). For example, Katya’s story, which was published in the *Trafficking Persons Report 2010*, illustrates the ongoing abuse:

Katya, a student athlete in an Eastern European capital city, dreamed of learning English and visiting the United States... But when she got to America, rather than being taken to a job at a beach resort, the people who met her put her on a bus to Detroit, Michigan. They took her passport away, and forced her and her friends to dance in strip clubs for the traffickers’ profit. (U.S. Department of State, 2010, para. 11)

Harriet was a victim as well, and her story illustrates a different context of trafficking, as she was not trafficked into the U.S, but within it.

Harriet ran away from home when she was 11 years old and moved in with a 32-year-old man who sexually and physically abused her and convinced her to become a prostitute. In the next two years, Harriet became addicted to drugs and contracted numerous sexually transmitted diseases. The police arrested Harriet when she was 13 and charged her with committing prostitution. They made no efforts to find her pimp. (U.S. Department of State, 2010, para. 14)
These stories are hard to read, but the juxtaposition of these accounts highlights an interesting phenomenon. While many would accept Katya’s story as an instance of human trafficking, the general public would tend to categorize Harriet’s story as merely prostitution, just as the police officers did. In reality, the themes of these accounts are the same: both women are being controlled and both have little hope of escape. There are thousands of other stories that vary in detail but are driven by the same themes.

Despite the enormity of the problem, most citizens are unaware that trafficking exists in the United States. Although again, statistical evidence regarding awareness of specifically domestic human trafficking is lacking, anecdotal evidence is abundant. Maxwell Bach’s 2010 video, *A Blind Eye: Human Trafficking in America*, which was highly acclaimed by C-SPAN's 2010 StudentCam Film Contest, explains that U.S. Americans are either uneducated about human trafficking, or deliberately ignoring it. This claim is supported by statistical information concerning U.S. awareness of human trafficking as a global problem. When asked what best defines human trafficking, almost half of U.S. Americans (48%) were unable to choose the accurate definition, or stated they didn’t know (Taylor Nelson Sofres Global, 2010, para. 4). The same survey found that almost eight in ten U.S. Americans (78%) couldn’t identify how much profit is generated by human trafficking each year (Taylor Nelson Sofres Global, 2010, para. 3). In fact, human trafficking is a 31.6 billion dollar industry (Belser, 2005, p. 17). Finally, even though globally there is an estimated 28.4 million people living in some form of bondage, nearly nine out of ten U.S. Americans (88%) were unaware of the number of people living in sexual slavery or some form of forced labor in the world today (Kara, 2009, p. ix; Taylor Nelson Sofres Global, 2010, para. 1).
Not only are U.S. Americans generally unknowledgeable about the topic of human trafficking, but they are also largely unaware of its status in the U.S. While several U.S.-based organizations that combat human trafficking (Not for Sale, 2011; HumanTrafficking.org, 2011; Polaris Project, 2011; Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 2011) recognize its presence in this nation, most U.S. citizens do not. David Quimby, the Manager of Student Abolitionist Movement within Not for Sale, explained, “I…believe that as people living in the United States, we are generally unaware of global issues and we tend to view problems such as human trafficking as issues that only occur in other parts of the world. Many people are shocked to hear that slavery occurs in their own communities” (personal communication, January 20, 2011). In addition, U.S. Americans place highest priority on other forms of crime, namely, identity theft, car theft, home burglarization, terrorism, mugging, sexual assault, hate crime, and murder (Gallup, 2009). The notable absence of human trafficking in the survey speaks to the fact that U.S. Americans disregard it or are unaware of it, particularly within national borders, especially given that, as mentioned before, human trafficking and murder occur with similar frequency and human trafficking occurs twice as frequently as hate crime.

Due to the extent of the problem, our country has taken several measures since 2000 to combat human trafficking. In 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was enacted. Since then, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) in 2003, and the Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center formed as a part of Immigration Customs and Enforcement. These are just a few of the measures taken to fight human trafficking in the United States. However, these governmental programs and mandates have not even scratched the surface of this problem. Only 841 survivors have been certified to receive social services benefits between 2001 and 2005, and only 140 traffickers have been prosecuted (Kara,
2007, p. 657). Despite the good intentions of governmental authorities, nonprofit and law enforcement agencies have more work to do in their fight against human trafficking globally and domestically.

Why do we think that human trafficking is a problem that other countries have and not our own? Why doesn’t it appear in the polls as a greatest threat? One would think that a country that values freedom and independence as highly as the U.S. would be aware of the fact that slavery occurs in our own communities. My project addresses these questions, and I believe that the public’s lack of knowledge as to the locations in which human trafficking takes place is in part due to the media’s framing of the issue as a whole. In order understand this in greater detail, I will consult scholarly communication work that serves as a foundation for my research, explain my methodology and my results, and then transition into a discussion that includes recommendations in light of those results.

**Literature Review**

Although human trafficking is such a pervasive issue, little research has been done on its coverage in the media. There are estimates on its prevalence, accounts of personal instances, and advisory articles explaining how to report it; however, information regarding the way it is constructed in our minds is extremely limited. In order to begin to explain why we think that human trafficking is a problem that other countries have and not our own, it is important to examine whether or not the media actually influences us, how the media might influence us, the bias of the media, and finally, how this bias applies to human trafficking coverage. Through this review of the literature, it will become clear that the media’s portrayal of human trafficking shapes the way the public perceives and thinks about the issue, which in turn affects governmental policy regarding human trafficking.
Does Media Influence Us?

The foundation of this project is rooted in the idea reality is socially constructed and therefore, that communication and culture are inextricably linked. In this section, it will become clear that culture is socially constructed through communication, and communication comes to reflect cultural practices and beliefs. They constantly interact and thereby influence and perpetuate each other. With this symbiotic relationship in mind, it is important to understand communication and culture’s codependence. Simply put, “the study of culture can also be called the study of communications…” (Carey, 1989, p. 34). Renowned communication scholar James Carey (1989) defines communication as a “symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23). In this description of communication, the word “reality” can be replaced by the word “culture”. Earlier scholars, such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) reinforce Carey’s argument. Indeed, a significant contingent of communication scholars agrees that reality is continually being produced through interaction and social processes.

In other words, the process of communication serves four purposes in relation to culture: first, it teaches us the system of a given culture; second, it allows a culture’s practices to continue; third, it provides a mechanism to correct those who do not follow a culture’s expected behaviors and patterns; and fourth, it enables a culture to change. Consequently, culture is constructed through communication (Carey, 1989). For example, media systems dependency theory considers the mutual dependence of the political system, the media’s communication, and the general public (Pearce, 2009). Each segment of this triad is dependent on and has influence over the other two. In addition, with time, culture conversely impacts communication. The two are intertwined (Jandt, 2009). They are joined at the hip, so to speak; they shape each other, and both must be understood to make sense the other.
The concept of frames, or patterns of communication provide understanding in social relations and help acculturate cultural members (Fisher, 1997). Common forms of communication are necessary to make sense of the world. Societies interact and process information to generate meaning, and through this interaction, culture is born.

An examination of specific studies that illustrate this relationship in which communication and culture impact each other will aid in understanding their relationship. Two prime examples are Ostermann and Keller-Cohen’s (1998) examination of the media’s portrayal of acceptable female behavior and Corbett’s (1998) study of the media’s attention or inattention to social movements.

First, Ostermann and Keller-Cohen (1998) examined 15 quizzes in four popular teenage girls’ magazines, and argue that they work as “disciplinary instruments” that encourage and prescribe exclusively heterosexual perspectives. The authors explain that communication in the form of literacy “shapes social practices” and provides “a socialization of social values, expectations, patterns, and future goals” (p. 531, 532). In this case, a seemingly harmless publication actually teaches girls how to behave and advances certain practices over others. In other words, communication constructs reality.

Second, Corbett (1998) examines the consequences of the media’s attention or inattention to social movements. She writes, “Media coverage can greatly influence the nature, development, and ultimate success of social protest” (p. 41). She provides examples of many environmental groups and concludes that media coverage signals to the public that a group’s message is important. Once again, communication constructs reality: only after the media acknowledges a social movement group as important does the public consider it credible (Corbett, 1998).
These two examples, demonstrate that culture is a matter of media, and the media’s dominance and pervasiveness in terms of shaping societies should not surprise anyone. In fact, the public uses messages of the media to sift through the rights and wrongs of the world (Jameson, 1991). In part, our sense of morality regarding political or social issues and our tendency to have one opinion over another come from the media. In addition, the media is a prime tool to reinforce social order (Hall, Morley, & Chen, 2009). Dominant social groups are privileged in the media, while lower classes and racial minorities usually receive less attention or harsher criticism.

Given that communication has the power to sway an entire culture, and that media is a form of communication, it is safe to conclude that media has a significant voice in determining our intentional and unintentional opinions of certain topics, particularly those topics concerning which we have little to no knowledge apart from that which comes from media sources. With this in mind, how the media portrays human trafficking has profound implications for the culture’s perception of the problem, as discussed in more detail below.

**How Does Media Influence Us?**

Now that it is clear that media influences us, it is necessary to explore how media sways audiences and the effects of its influence. Media influences its public in three ways. First, it uses agenda-setting to dictate what issues we think about; secondly, it uses framing to determine how we think about them; and third, it creates a peer pressure where people don’t feel comfortable speaking up. All of these mechanisms have interesting implications for human trafficking coverage.
Agenda-Setting

The first way the public is influenced by the media is through agenda-setting. Iyengar and Simon (1993) describe agenda-setting as the ability of media sources to sway the public’s prioritization of issues through the amount of news coverage accorded to specific stories or areas of concern. They use the example of illegal drug usage to display agenda-setting by the media. In October of 1989, illegal drug usage was foremost in U.S. Americans’ minds, resulting in the political administration initiating major efforts to deal with the problem. However, in February of 1991, only 5% of the public regarded drug usage as a national problem (p. 367). Iyengar and Simon (1993) cite agenda-setting as the most plausible explanation for the shift in prioritization. The amount of news coverage dedicated to any given issue determines the level of importance the public associates to that issue (Iyengar and Simon, 1993, p. 367).

Boshoff, Fourie, and Swanepoel (2010) highlight a second example of agenda-setting. Unlike traditional South African women’s magazines, the publication Fair Lady presents politics in its content. Since the magazine deems politics as important and therefore incorporates it into its agenda, it not only provides readers with information they might not otherwise obtain, but it causes its readers to consider politics as an important area of interest. Again, the more often a person sees an issue in the news, the more this person will feel the issue is important (Pearce, 2009). Therefore, if domestic human trafficking does not have a significant presence in media coverage, the public will not associate a high level of importance to it.

Framing

The second way the media influences the public is through framing. Framing is a communication theory that explains the construction of a social phenomenon by media, movements, or organizations. It is an unavoidable process of selective influence over the
audience member’s perception of the meanings attributed to words or phrases (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). In other words, the way in which the media selects and contextualizes the content of their news stories will affect the way the public thinks about an issue.

Van Dijk (1980) holds that framing aids receivers of a message to derive facts from it. By deriving these facts, people construct a social reality that affects how they think and behave (Fisher, 1997). With the authority to place certain events in a field of meaning, the media influences audiences at a level of which many are unaware. For instance, if the media contextualizes human trafficking primarily as an international problem, the public will come to understand human trafficking as a non-domestic issue. For the purposes of this project, I will examine two forms of framing: verbal contextualization (the other) and verbal absence (textual silence).

Verbal Contextualization: The Other

The first type of framing is verbal contextualization, in which word choice and usage impact how readers think about a particular issue. One type of verbal contextualization that is helpful for understanding human trafficking is “the other”, which is the use of words that perpetuate misperceptions of other people. According to Marianna Torgovnick (1990), in her book, Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives, Westerners are enamored with the idea of the “primitive life”. We (and in this case the media sources) construct an image of what we want non-Western life to look like: violent, highly sexualized, savage, crude, primal, and uncivilized. We are fascinated by this “other”. Not only is the idea captivating, but by separating us from them, it makes us feel more unified and more powerful. Torgovnick (1990) writes:

“…for Euro-Americans the primitive… [is] an inexact expressive whole - often with little correspondence to any specific or documented societies – [primitive] has been an
influential and powerful concept, capable of referring both to both societies “out there” and to subordinate groups within the West.” (p. 20)

Framing in the media often favors the dominant groups of the world, and although stories with such framing have a certain type of appeal, they are biased and absolutely false. With this in mind, a story about a victim of sex slavery in Russia or Cambodia is highly appealing to Western audiences because of our fascination with “the other”. Unfortunately, this appeal can lead to an increased focus on international human trafficking, which perpetuates the belief that human trafficking is merely an international problem, and not one that occurs in the U.S.

Verbal Absence: Textual Silence

The second type of framing is verbal absence, or textual silence, which is the “omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand” (Huckin, 2002, p. 348). There are five types of textual silence: speech-act silences, presuppositional silences, discreet silences, genre-based silences, and manipulative silences. *Speech-act silences* are used to convey information. For example, a pregnant pause, the silent treatments, and moments of silence are all textual silences that convey a message. *Presuppositional silences* are the result of a desire for efficiency. “Writers and speakers will often omit information that is presumed to be already known…” (Huckin, 2002, p. 349). This type of textual silence can be innocent, but is not always. *Discreet silences* describe instances in which the writer does not include sensitive information in order to avoid offending the reader or infringing on the privacy of another individual. *Genre-based silences* are those that omit information because it is normal and expected to do so. Finally, *manipulative silences* purposefully conceal relevant information from the audience in order to benefit the writer. Advertisements and press releases are common forms of communication that include manipulative silences. Any one of these types of textual silences can
effect the public perception. For instance, if for whatever reason the media’s coverage of human trafficking omits stories about human trafficking in the U.S., public knowledge about domestic human trafficking will be severely limited.

The Spiral of Silence

The third way the media influences the public is through a type of peer pressure, the spiral of silence. The spiral of silence is actually a public opinion theory, but it is relevant nonetheless. It is founded on two assumptions: first, that people dislike isolation, and second, that society tends to isolate individuals whose ideas are not congruent with prevailing opinion. As a result, we constantly consider the circumstances around us, including perceptions of others we encounter and judgments made by sources like the media. If our opinion is deviant from the norm, we tend to suppress it so as to avoid isolation. This suppression can lead to an actual change in opinion. Consequently, the views portrayed in the media can have a stifling effect that causes the public to be persuaded in one way or another (Pearce, 2009). If the media largely ignores domestic human trafficking, those who believe domestic human trafficking to be a significant problem will be stifled, and their efforts to combat it will be largely hindered.

How is the Media Biased?

Agenda-setting, framing, and the spiral of silence would not be a significant concern if the media was not biased. However, the media often favors certain groups over others, and therefore certain stories over others. Communication scholar, Stuart Hall (1997), reasons that mass media preserve the supremacy of those who already hold powerful titles or positions.

The media is biased in two primary ways: discriminatory bias and structural bias. According to discriminatory bias, the media favors the dominant values in society. Havens (2008) addresses the issue of media bias in terms of both race and class. Concerning race, he
maintains that for most of its history, U.S. television and other media sources have been predominantly White, both in terms of the faces they have portrayed and the cultural norms they have supported. In addition to race, Haven (2008) writes that media limits diversity to middle- and upper-class cultural values. Budd, Craig, and Steinman (1999) expand on this idea of media bias by maintaining that the media participates in consistent framing in favor of White privilege, patriarchy, heterosexism, and individualism, among other things. With this discrimination and the previous discussion of the public’s fascination with the other in mind, it is easy to see how media coverage of human trafficking would focus on non-Western, non-White scenarios instead of on domestic human trafficking.

Structural bias explains that the media provides the public with inaccurate and distorted information about the world (Levasseur, 2008). Within the news industry, as is the case with all industries, individuals face specific pressures or incentives. In the United States, news comes from profit-driven corporations, and so there is incentive to increase readership. This incentive results in the production of stories designed to attract larger audiences. Consequently, the news media’s account of reality does not reflect actual reality (Levasseur, 2008). Despite this fact, the media’s account of reality still shapes public opinion and belief, which can lead to misconceptions about human trafficking and other issues.

**How Does the Media’s Bias Apply to Human Trafficking Coverage?**

These biases permeate human trafficking coverage. Kara (2007) writes an article concerning the need for greater involvement in fighting against human trafficking by state agencies and local non-governmental organizations. While this topic seems to have little to do with the media’s construction of human trafficking in the media, the way in which Kara begins the work is particularly pertinent to our discussion. Kara (2007) writes, “While much of the
media and reporting on human trafficking concentrate on other regions of the world, there are countless hidden slaves here in our own back yards” (p. 657). Consequently, stories in the media about human trafficking are framed in such a way that it becomes easy, even natural to ignore the countless slaves within U.S. borders.

Few studies have specifically focused on media representation of human trafficking; however, as they reflect how the media is biased in terms of human trafficking coverage, it is worthwhile to outline them. Although his work had to do with policy action and this project is concerning theoretical implications, Gulati (2008) performed a content analysis of coverage of human trafficking in six major newspapers from the U.S., the U.K., and Canada. He found that a limited range of viewpoints were presented in Western media, and that the coverage maintained that criminal activity is primary cause for trafficking, which is best combated by building on current policy. Although the publication of this view has legitimized the views and decisions of policymakers, it also has compromised alternative viewpoints and criticism of government policy.

Logan, Walker, and Hunt (2009) explain and synthesize nine reports that address the U.S. service organizations’ knowledge of human trafficking cases, in addition to information from actual cases and media reports. In doing so, they sought to define human trafficking, understand its causes, and recommend effective responses. Interestingly, they too agree that while human trafficking has received increased media attention in recent years, there has been limited research on the nature and scope of domestic human trafficking.

Newton, Mulcahy, and Martin (2008) performed a study in response to a congressional mandate to explore human trafficking further. Not only do they report that a large proportion of law enforcement officials and prosecutors are unaware of anti-trafficking legislation, they also
write that the absence of reports of definitive data on the amount of domestic human trafficking reflects a lack of awareness.

In summary, despite the pervasiveness of slavery in the modern world many U.S. Americans are unaware of its presence in the United States. I propose this phenomenon is related to the media’s portrayal of the issue. Our knowledge is socially constructed through communication, and so the media plays a significant role in the construction of our awareness of domestic human trafficking. Through the discussion of whether or not the media actually influences us, how the media influences us, how the voice of media is biased, and how this bias applies to human trafficking coverage, it is clear that the media’s portrayal of human trafficking shapes the way the public perceives and thinks about the issue.

**Methodology**

The methodological process was driven by the question, “Why doesn’t the public know about the extent of human trafficking in the US?” Answering this question will shed light on what can be done to combat domestic human trafficking. The process divides into four major steps: 1.) Gathering data, 2.) Numbering, 3.) Open coding, and 4.) Axial coding.

**Gathering Data:** The first phase of my research focused on gathering artifacts about human trafficking from national media sources including articles, documentaries, and photographs. As I argued in my literature review, news sources have the greatest ability of all other information sources to widely influence what the public thinks about, including which issues, which social problems, and how to think about them. Because of this, I limited my research to articles from *Time* (since 2005) and *Newsweek* (since 2000) magazines as well as from *USA Today* (since 2000) and the *New York Times* (since 2005). At this point, the collected articles totaled 223. I chose these sources because *Time* and *Newsweek* are the most highly
circulated U.S. news specific magazines, and *USA Today* and the *New York Times* are the most highly circulated U.S. newspapers aside from the *Wall Street Journal* (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2005, 2006). I excluded the *Wall Street Journal* because of the strongly economic nature of the publication.

Next, I limited the corpus in order to make it more manageable. Since I had to approach articles and visual artifacts in two very different fashions, I decided to narrow my focus to literary media from news sources, as opposed to visual media, such as documentaries and photographs. In addition, I cut out articles prior to 2005, simply to limit the size of the project. I was left with 187 articles: 23 from *Time Magazine*, 31 from *Newsweek*, 18 from *USA Today*, and 116 from the *New York Times*.

**Numbering:** This step served as an organizational tool for me as the researcher and writer. I saved each article to my computer as the publication title with a three digit number (i.e. NYT001). This organizational technique kept my artifacts organized as well as easily accessible.

**Open Coding:** I performed steps two and three simultaneously; however, they are distinct. The outcome was that I separated the articles into two broad categories: U.S.-Focused Articles, and Internationally-Focused Articles.

During this organization, I first read the texts by simulating how a reader reads. In other words, while I researched, I wanted to have the same reactions that the intended reader might have. Second, I adopted the resistant stance, a mind frame in which I approached and the artifacts again, but read the articles more carefully and analyzed the texts and my initial reactions (Huckin, 2002). Open coding was useful to me in terms of reducing the texts both physically and conceptually (Lindloff, 1995). This was effective for organizational purposes as well as managing purposes.
Based on previous research, I entered this step with a few basic assumptions about the data. I expected the artifacts to portray human trafficking the United States as different from human trafficking abroad. As I read the articles, I looked for these differences. While at first, open coding tends to be a bit chaotic because the researcher doesn’t know what to expect specifically, after awhile, I began to notice that the trend was to speak focus on human trafficking in other countries (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This step was helpful in terms of acquiring a general idea of what specific categories the articles fell into and how they could be organized and coded. I found three general categories. I then counted how many articles fell into each of these categories; this helped me to further test my hypothesis of whether the media treats human trafficking abroad differently than it treats human trafficking in the United States. Since my hypothesis was upheld, I continued my project.

**Axial Coding:** After open coding categories emerged, I was able to proceed with axial coding, a cross-referencing tool that allows for more efficient realization of connections between artifacts. During this step, I read once again through the articles and highlighted phrases that jumped out to me as a reader. This step was like fitting puzzle pieces together; I asked myself which of the three categories each article fit into and why (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At first, there was no set rhyme or reason to my highlighting, but eventually, I noticed common aspects across the articles from all four sources. The main purpose of this step was to identify these specific aspects and refine subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Titscher et al., 2000). These common aspects provided patterns that helped me to start the process of categorizing the articles further into five subcategories.

As I coded, I kept two lists. These lists aided in the organization of my articles and provided a cross-reference tool that is helpful to me for the purposes of located specific articles.
The first was a list of articles that contains information regarding which articles contain phrases that fit into each of the categories listed above. The second list was a list of the phrases themselves which indicates what category each phrase falls into.

After I completed these lists, I noted the frequency of each type of article and was then able to determine the most common and least common ways in which human trafficking enters media discourse.

**Results**

As a result of open and axial coding, I found that the articles from the four sources fell into two broad categories: U.S.-focused articles and internationally-focused articles. Within each of these broad categories, I found three subcategories. In order to explain the results of my research, I will first discuss the frequency of U.S.-focused articles in relation to internationally-focused articles; I will then describe each of the subcategories and provide information concerning how many articles fell into each of them.

**U.S.-Focused Articles vs. Internationally-Focused Articles**

U.S.-focused articles are stories that describe either domestic human trafficking or the United States’ involvement in combating human trafficking globally. Either way, in U.S.-focused articles, the United States was the primary geographic area of interest. From this category, three subcategories emerged: Not in My Backyard, White Knight, and Mission Accomplished, each of which will be explained shortly.

Internationally-focused articles, on the other hand, characterized articles that honed in on human trafficking outside of the United States. These stories mentioned human trafficking in a variety of countries, including, but not limited to Russia, Cambodia, Mexico, and Afghanistan. Just as was the case for U.S.-focused articles, three subcategories emerged from this broad
category: Narrative-Perpetrator, Narrative-Victim, and Statistics. Again, each of these will be explained in more detail shortly.

Interestingly, I found that the sources ran disproportionate amounts of internationally-focused articles and U.S.-focused articles, and that three out of the four sources favored internationally-focused articles over U.S.-focused articles (see Graph A).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Source</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>US Focus</th>
<th>Intl Focus</th>
<th>Unclear</th>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsweek</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA Today</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

USA Today was the only publication that ran more U.S.-focused stories than internationally-focused stories. It will be made clear below that this does not necessarily mean that there was a balanced portrayal; however, the fact that the majority of the sources favor internationally-focused articles is important. It is also important to note that the three sources that ran more internationally-focused articles than U.S.-focused articles favored internationally-focused articles to varying degrees. For example, the magazines (Time and Newsweek) ran significantly more internationally-focused articles, while the New York Times, although it still favored internationally-focused stories, relied on them to a lesser extent. Nearly 91% of Time and a little over 80% of Newsweek articles were internationally-focused while internationally-focused articles from New York Times made up 75%.

Now that we have established that U.S.-focused articles are vastly outnumbered by internationally-focused articles, it is important to review the specifics of each of these broad categories:

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3 The numbers for USA Today and The New York Times do not add up to the total number of articles from those sources due to overlap. Some articles that addressed domestic human trafficking also addressed international human trafficking.
categories. In order to do that, I will describe the subcategories of U.S.-focused articles and explain the results concerning them, and then do the same for Internationally-focused articles.

U.S.-Focused Articles

As previously mentioned, three subcategories emerged from the U.S.-Focused category: Not in My Backyard, White Knight, and Mission Accomplished. I will first describe each of these categories, and then provide the numerical data that resulted from my research.

Not in My Backyard

First, Not in My Backyard describes discussions of domestic human trafficking that frame it as a problem that is not naturally occurring in the U.S., but rather seeping in from other countries. Similar to a contagious disease, human trafficking infects the U.S. from nearby countries. These articles say that human trafficking is “spilling across the border” or “sneak[ing] across the border” (Johnson, 2009, p. A1; The Associated Press, 2008, p. A23). A particularly appropriate article for this category said, “It’s terrifying to live next door to homes filled with human traffickers...clearly something needs to be done about the traffickers who bring [immigrants] to the U.S” (Conant, 2010, para. 3).

White Knight

Second, White Knight is an important category to understand. It is not made up of articles that describe instances of domestic human trafficking; rather, it includes articles that speak to the U.S.’s involvement as a global leader in combating human trafficking. Stories in this category frame the U.S. as a worldwide hero, of sorts, that comes to the rescue of other countries. Sometimes individuals act as the heroes, while sometimes the white knight is the U.S. government. Phrases such as “Elizabeth Longino...taught an undergraduate course on the root causes of human trafficking, drawn from her work in Taiwan, Cambodia, Vietnam, South Africa
and Bosnia Herzegovina” and “Mike Mercer…the human-trafficking resister from Oregon is committed to…the reclamation of Eka’s (an enslaved prostitute in Indonesia) freedom” described U.S. Americans as global leaders in the fight against human trafficking (Marklein, 2010, p. D1; Krattenmaker, 2009, p. A9). Phrases like “…the…Department of State in a 2010 report singled out Kuwait, along with 12 other countries, for failing to do enough to prevent human trafficking”, or “Last year, the State Department listed Malaysia among countries not complying with minimum standards for combating human trafficking”, and “The United States added four Arab allies…to its list of countries with the worst records of preventing people from being sold into the sex trade and servitude” described the U.S. government as the global leader in combating human trafficking (Fahim, 2010, p. A4; Gooch, 2010, p. A12; New York Times, 2007, p. A6). In both cases, these articles frame the U.S. as the authority in regards to combating human trafficking.

**Mission Accomplished**

Third, Mission Accomplished describes articles that address isolated instances of domestic human trafficking that are immediately solved within the story. Stories that tell of a single instance of domestic human trafficking oftentimes included phrases such as “has been charged” or “was sentenced”, which gives the reader closure about the problem (Capecchi, 2007, p. A26; Urbina, 2009, p. A1).

U.S.-focused articles constitute just 36% of the entire corpus⁴, and the breakdown of its subcategories can be viewed in Graph B:

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⁴ Although internationally-focused articles made up 75% of the corpus, U.S.-focused articles still constituted nearly 36% of the corpus due to overlap. Some articles addressed both U.S. involvement in human trafficking and international human trafficking.
Graph B:5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
<th>USA Today</th>
<th>NYT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not in My Backyard</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Knight</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Accomplished</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is evident, the majority of U.S.-focused articles highlighted not domestic trafficking, but the U.S.’s involvement as a global leader fighting against human trafficking in other countries. A fewer number of articles spoke of isolated incidents of domestic human trafficking, and an even fewer number of articles described domestic human trafficking as a problem that is merely “seeping” into the United States.

Internationally-Focused Articles

As previously mentioned, three subcategories emerged from the Internationally-Focused category: Narrative-Perpetrator, Narrative-Victim, and Statistics. As I did for the U.S.-Focused category, I will first describe each of these categories, and then provide the numerical data that resulted from my research.

Narrative-Perpetrator

First, Narrative-Perpetrator articles are stories on human trafficking instances in countries other than the United States that focus on a foreign perpetrator. These articles commonly describe perpetrators and their activities as “murky”, “shadowy”, “shady”, “hidden”, or “corrupt” (Hooker, 2008, p. A6; Wehrfritz, 2008, para. 8; Kotkin, 2008, p. BU4; Herbert, 2007, p. A17; McNeil, 2005, p. 4). Phrases like “…trafficking in Iraq is a shadowy underworld where nefarious female pimps hold sway” led me to organize articles into this category (Abouzeid, 2009, para. 2).

5 The sum of the number of articles under Time and Newsweek does not equal the total number of articles from those sources due to overlap. Some articles had phrases that could be categorized in more than one subcategory.
Most narrative-perpetrator stories speak of arrests, attempted arrests, accusations, police involvement or lack thereof, investigations, and undercover research in foreign countries, particularly in the Middle East.

Narrative-Victim

Second, Narrative-victim articles are stories on human trafficking instances in countries other than the United States that focus on foreign victims, particularly women and girls. These articles describe victims as “traumatized”, “terrorized”, “terrified”, “impoverished”, and “childlike” (Leinwand, 2009, p. A3; Kennedy, 2009, p. C5; Koppel, 2006, p. B6; Bilefsky, 2009, A6). Phrases like “Sindiswa…lay curled in a fetal position…”, “…she struggles over the high sink every morning to wash the breakfast dishes”, and “…after her trafficker sealed her mouth with electrical tape, drugged her and threatened to kill her family…the childlike woman…realized the man she had planned to marry had seduced her…” led me to organize articles into this category (Skinner, 2010, para. 1; Bhowmick, 2009, para. 1; Bilefsky, 2009, p. A6).

Statistics

Third, the final category of internationally-focused articles is statistics. This category enabled me to place articles that provided bullet-pointed human trafficking-related percentages, fractions, and numbers, and that I could not honestly place in the previous two categories, into a third category. For example, phrases like “The Chinese government insists there are fewer than 2,500 cases of human trafficking each year…” or “More than 2,000 people throughout Italy…have been accused of human trafficking” or “Today, tens of thousands of Haitian children live lives of modern-day bondage” led me to categorize articles into the Statistics subcategory.

The breakdown of internationally-focused articles in regards to these three categories is provided in Graph C:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Newsweek</th>
<th>USA Today</th>
<th>NYT</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narrative: Perpetrator</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative: Victim</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note that the vast majority of internationally-focused articles focused on victims, a lesser number highlighted perpetrators, and even fewer articles provided mere statistics on international human trafficking.

**Discussion**

Recall the idea that reality is socially constructed (Carey, 1989, 2009; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jandt, 2009; Fisher, 1997). In light of this fact, we can maintain that we only know what we are told or what information we have access to, and that the media’s bias helps us know to benefit some end. This provides a basis for a meaningful discussion of the three major findings that resulted from this study: first, the ratio of internationally-focused articles and U.S.-focused articles, second, the high count of narrative-victim internationally-focused articles, and third, the high count of White Knight U.S.-focused articles. From the data provided, it is clear that the media regarding human trafficking is largely internationally-focused, and when the focus is on the U.S., the story does not usually cover domestic human trafficking, but the efforts of the government or citizens to end human trafficking in other nations.

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6 The sum of the number of articles under each publication does not necessarily equal the total number of articles from those sources due to overlap. Some articles had phrases that could be categorized in more than one subcategory.
Discussion Point 1: Major News Sources Favor Internationally-Focused Articles

The first major finding is that a vast majority of the articles since 2005 are internationally-focused. Three out of four of the publications ran more stories regarding human trafficking in other nations than stories that spoke of domestic human trafficking or U.S. involvement. While these three sources favored internationally-focused articles to varying degrees, there are still profound implications on public perception of human trafficking. The amount of news coverage dedicated to any given issue determines the level of importance the public associates to that issue (Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Boshoff, Fourie, and Swanepoel, 2010; Pearce, 2009). Since domestic human trafficking does not have nearly as significant a presence in media coverage as international human trafficking, the public will not associate a high level of importance to it, and in turn, disregard it. More specifically, media coverage signals to the public that a social movement group’s message is important. Without it, a social movement group is likely to fail (Corbett, 1998). In addition, according to media dependency theory, a lack of media coverage not only affects general public opinion, but also results in less attention from the political system as well (Pearce, 2009).

Discussion Point 2: U.S.-Focused Articles Favor the White Knight Category

The majority of U.S.-focused articles are framed to highlight the U.S.’s leadership in fighting against human trafficking (White Knight). In the majority of cases, U.S.-focused articles do not highlight domestic human trafficking at all, but rather the efforts the U.S. is making to stop international human trafficking. In the few instances in which domestic human trafficking is the main topic of the article, it is either a specific instance that is solved within the article (Mission Accomplished) or it is attributed to a problem in other countries that is simply seeping into the U.S. (Not in My Backyard). It seems the Western world, and particularly the United
States, has a hero complex of sorts. Instead of addressing domestic human trafficking, we are much more interested in hearing about rescuing other countries from a problem from which we ourselves are far from immune.

Discussion Point 3: Internationally-Focused Articles Favor the Narrative-Victim Category

The third major finding is that out of the internationally-focused articles, 90 of them are framed to focus on the victim, which is more than both of the other categories combined. What is the impact of this type of framing? Van Dijk (1980) and Fisher (1997) would hold that it impacts the way we think and behave regarding human trafficking. Our misperceptions of other people are perpetuated. Torgovnick (1990) wrote that we are attracted to a savage view of non-Western life; we make “the other” violent and highly sexualized to separate ourselves from them to feel more powerful. The fact that the majority of internationally-focused human trafficking articles focus on victims maintains our misguided ideas of those in other countries. While our perceptions of the other may uphold our self-image and satisfy our attraction to highly violent and sexualized non-Western life, our perceptions are false. They should not be perpetuated as they currently are because they blind us from reality and allow us to make sweeping generalizations about those who are different.

These findings have significant impacts on public perception. Since a minority of articles are U.S.-focused, and a minority of those articles even address domestic human trafficking, it is not surprising that U.S. Americans consider human trafficking to be a problem in other countries and not in our own and consider themselves to be free from responsibility. This not only perpetuates misconceptions about other countries, but also hinders efforts to effectively combat domestic human trafficking.
Recommendations

After performing extensive research on the topic of the media’s portrayal of human trafficking, I am convinced that some sort of change has to be made in order to achieve adequate public awareness about the issue, particularly about domestic human trafficking. Although a law or a policy for journalists and media sources may be necessary in the future, I think an effective initiation for change would be to hold media sources informationally accountable. Since the media depends on the public and widespread readership for revenue, the public is has the power to demand higher standards for news coverage.

In terms of research related recommendations, the next step is to learn how framing human trafficking as an international problem benefits the U.S. Why do we frame ourselves as the saviors of the world and others as sexually perverse and abusive? Why do we deny crime at the cost of individuals within our borders? These communication choices, while they may be largely subconscious, no doubt have severe negative implications for solving the problem.

Domestic human trafficking, and undoubtedly other topics as well, is an issue that, for whatever reason, is largely ignored by major U.S. media sources. However, it is a significant problem that requires public awareness in order to find a solution. Consequently, the public should not only question the content (both unpublished and unpublished) handled by the media, but also demand higher standards for more extensive and unbiased coverage.
References


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