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Crying Wolf: An Analysis of the Use of Sensational Content within the Media and the Desensitizing Effects it has on Audiences

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CRYING WOLF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF SENSATIONAL CONTENT
WITHIN THE MEDIA AND THE DESENSITIZING EFFECTS IT HAS ON
AUDIENCES

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Lindsey Lowe

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ABSTRACT

CRYING WOLF: AN ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF SENSATIONAL CONTENT WITHIN THE MEDIA AND THE DESENSITIZING EFFECTS IT HAS ON AUDIENCES

by Lindsey Lowe

This thesis examines the development and use of sensational media content to analyze this growing phenomenon and the effects that it has had on audiences. This research focuses primarily on specific examples of sensational media content including: *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, *The Great Train Robbery*, the “War of the Worlds” broadcast, the Hindenburg disaster, footage of the Vietnam War, Apollo 11 and the first moon landing, and *The Day After*. These examples were chosen to chronicle the development and use of sensationalism and to illustrate that media audiences of today are desensitized to sensational content because the vicarious, successional use of this ultra-real content has progressively led audiences to believe sensational content is the norm within media. The historical analysis approach was chosen for this particular research because sensationalism is a phenomenon that has developed over a long period of time, and this approach allows for the researcher to encompass the origins, growth, and trends of this phenomenon when making conclusions about the collective research. This research suggests that the progressional exposure to sensational content has desensitized audiences and raised the baseline for what is considered sensational in media today.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how the media have transformed from collective media that captivated audiences with sensationalism and ultra-realism into ones that desensitized audiences with its content. To track the contrast between past and present media, this research examined milestone works of media from the late 19th Century and continuing into the 20th Century, including, but not limited to: *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, *The Great Train Robbery*, coverage of the Hindenburg disaster, the “War of the Worlds” broadcast, media coverage of the Vietnam War, Apollo 11 and the first moon landing, and the made-for-television movie *The Day After*. These examples were used to chronicle the development and use of sensationalism within the media. This sample of sensational content was analyzed in sequence primarily to illustrate the progressive use of sensationalism and the profound effects that this kind of content has had on audiences.

The early days of media drew in audiences by offering them audio and visionary wonders that they had never encountered before, beginning first with vaudeville and picture shows and developing into radio, television, and motion pictures. Technological developments in the early days of media helped to cultivate the concept of ultra-realism: a sensational, new, on screen experience, which drew in mass audiences. People were fascinated and excited to experience the new illusions being created on screen and radio, finding them to

be so life-like that the scenes unfolding on these various media provoked immense emotional responses from audience members. The new technological developments that advanced the media at the time of these productions expanded the dimensions of media innovations. The developing audio and visual stimulation made the audience feel like it was incorporated into the story which led to the heightened response of audience members. The examples listed above all elicited great, lasting, emotional responses from audiences, exemplifying the great effect that the media can have on individuals and our society. The media of today, however, has lost this sensational effect. Just as the old fable "The boy who cried wolf" depicts, the media have been using ultra-realist content repeatedly, and at a progressively heightened level, causing sensational content to no longer have the lasting effects on audiences that it once did.

It is important to explore this area of study within media research because it illustrates a number of things. First, it shows the progression of media development and how technology has aided developed. The media would not have progressed the way that it had without these advancements in technology. These developments have allowed the media to expand and push the barriers, exploring many new frontiers that were unthinkable in its early days. Second, this area of research demonstrates the powerful effect that the media have on society. In the book, *Victimology : A Study of Crime Victims and Their Roles*, author Judith Sgarzi (2003) maintains that, "Many researchers argue that in fact

television no longer reflects culture, but rather is the central cultural arm of American society. It is an agency that enculturates the viewer to its point of view” (p. 69). Audiences turn to the media for everything from entertainment to information gathering, and then use this information to formulate their opinions of the world around them. If audiences are repeatedly viewing subject matter that contains sensational content, the baseline for sensationalism will shift, creating a new foundation that audiences will then use to shape their opinions of the world around them. Sensational content will begin to look more and more like the norm.

Research Questions

There are many essential questions about this area of the media that this study answers. How were audiences’ reaction to sensational content in the early days of media different than audience reactions within the 20th Century, and even today? What factors have allowed sensational content to develop? Is sensational content changing audiences’ reactions to real life events? Do audiences react differently to violent content than they previously had? The research done for this thesis will explore these questions.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

For over a century, audiences have been enjoying various forms of media as both a communal and private experience. Scholars have already done extensive research on various prominent media productions made during this time, all with significant influences on the growth of the various media. With many technological advancements happening simultaneously, the media industry progressed rapidly over the 20th Century, using the many technologies being developed to innovate new viewing experiences for the audience. The latest technological developments allowed for new ways to film, record, edit, and produce media, and kept audiences on the edge of their seats with each new expansion. There are many great examples of these milestones within the media industry. This research will focus on seven milestone examples of sensationalism including: *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, *The Great Train Robbery*, the Hindenburg disaster, “The War of the Worlds” broadcast, news coverage of the Vietnam War, Apollo 11 and the first moon landing, and *The Day After*. Each of these media occurrences has had a profound and lasting impact on audiences and forever changed the landscape of the media industry.

Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat

When the Lumiere Brothers released their short film, *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* on January 25, 1896, the amazingly realistic illusions created in the film astonished audiences. The 50-second long clip, “which allegedly caused the

audience to scream in terror anticipating the train's arrival in their laps" (Freedman, 2015, p. 159), consists of a single shot featuring a train, which appeared to be heading directly towards the audience in the last few seconds of the clip, pulling into the station. Many scholars have studied the audience reactions to this particular work as well as the perceptual growth that could be achieved with the use of the new technologies developed at this time.

In the article, "Spotlight on Lumière," Julian Marcel conveys the reaction of the original crowd after viewing the film. Marcel (2012) writes, "Reports of the film's screenings recount how a number of spectators left cinemas in blind panic, desperate to escape the moving image of the train bearing down on them" (p. 48). Jonathan Auerbach writes about the effects of the Lumiere Brothers film as well in his article, "Chasing Film Narrative: Repetition, Recursion, and the Body in Early Cinema." Auerbach (2000) states, "critics have pointed out complex patterns and symmetries that offer closure, and others have shown how these films are structured by diagonal lines of perspective that have a long tradition in Western painting and photography" (p.799). Countinuiq, Auerbach (2000) writes,

Yet narration in this sense depends strictly on concepts of spatial coherence at the expense of representation of time, which in a single continuous shot can only be 'real time,' the duration of the moment of filming, as opposed to abstract plots of causality, interrelated events that do not and cannot strictly adhere to the temporal succession between perceived images. (p. 799)

Film historian Martin Loiperdinger argues against the idea that the audience was driven into a panic after viewing this film in his article "Arrival of the Train': Cinema's Founding Myth." He explains that while the short film did have a

profound effect on the audience perceptions, claiming that the short film caused a panic in the viewers is an overstatement. Loiperdinger (2004) explains, “The repeatedly reiterated anecdote that the audience felt physically threatened and therefore panicked must be relegated to the realm of film historical fantasy” (p. 89). Loiperdinger focuses his argument on the hyperrealism created by the film, not the extent to which the audience reacted to it. Victoria Duckett (2014) writes, “hyperrealism is something that our eyes cannot achieve. It gives the train platform a new perceptual sense, foreign to audiences, of activity and commotion” (p. 36).

The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat was a great milestone film for the industry and exemplified the many developments that began to occur in filmmaking. Whether or not you believe the “legend that tells of a confused, terrified crowd fleeing a presentation of *Arrival of a Train* out of fear that the filmed locomotive would come right through the screen” (Stasukevich, 2010, p. 12), the effects of that image are clear. This film opened audiences’ minds to something that they had never experienced before, ultra-realism. This filmed allowed the audience to experience such a real-to-life event that they felt like they were a part of the film, opening their own worlds to the once foreign experiences captured by the lens of a camera.

It is important to consider this film and the past research that has been done regarding it when moving forward because it is the first example in film history that is regularly regarded by scholars to have elicited such a great response from

audiences, a film that audiences felt integrated into causing such a great reaction. Many scholars still debate to what extent this film affected the audience, but there is no question that it made a lasting impression. Audiences now had a taste for ultra-realism, and once they adjusted to this new dimension of film, they craved much more.

The Great Train Robbery

The Great Train Robbery is a 12-minute film written, directed and produced by Edwin S. Porter. The film, considered by many film historians to be the first of both the action and western genres of film, was released in 1903. It is referred to by many scholars as a milestone in the film industry because of its unconventional filming techniques including composite editing, on-location shooting, and frequent camera movement. This film is one of the earliest examples of the use a cross cut technique of editing, which allows for two events to appear to be happening simultaneously. Stanley Kauffmann (1995) writes,

Porter's editing helped to free film from the strictly linear story and showed, among other things, that different simultaneous time strands are part of its power. The transition embodied in Porter's film is fascinating: some of the fourteen scenes are patent theater imitations, with painted scenery and with actors playing profile, while others are as "real" as anything done today. (p. 27)

This film was an expansion of a previous film that Porter had completed entitled, *Life of the American Fireman*. Expanding further on this, author Richard Corliss (2010) writes in his article, "Lights, Camera... Edison!" discusses the research he found on *The Great Train Robbery*.

Even more daring was *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), which Musser properly calls the first blockbuster. The 10-minute movie comprises 10 urgent tableaux, including the takeover of the train, the assaulting and reviving of a telegraph operator and the bad guys' escape. It ends with the famous medium close-up of an outlaw aiming his gun straight at the audience and firing away--the money shot seen round the world. (p. 54)

Although the entire film had great effects on the film industry, the last scene was particularly moving. In this scene there is a medium shot of one of the bandits holding a gun. After pausing for a slight minute, the bandit aims the gun and takes fire, pointing directly at the audience. This image startled audiences after viewing the film. Stanley Kauffman explores the effect this scene had on the audience in his article, "The Great Train Robbery." He writes, "Imagine being a member of that audience. People could have had as much as eight years of filmgoing experience by then, mostly of non-fiction films, but now they were entering a dimension in which everything in the world could become a character in a story" (Kauffmann, 1995, p. 27). Even the viewers, as members of the audience, or their surroundings could be included into workings of the film. "A breeze, a leaf, a raindrop, a ship at sea could become a member of the cast" (Kauffmann, 1995, p. 27).

The Great Train Robbery is an important work to examine when continuing research in this field because it exemplifies the profound effect that one scene can have on an audience. While the whole movie had lasting effects on the media industry, the last scene in particular remains in the minds of the audience long after viewing the film. Having a gun aimed and fired directly at onlookers

created the illusion of ultra-realism, a scene that could only happen in a real life situation if it were not created by the camera. This scene puts the audience into otherwise unknown territory, unearthing the fear and emotion provoked by such a situation.

The Hindenburg Disaster

After a three-day journey across the Atlantic Ocean that started in Frankfurt, Germany, the German passenger airship LZ 129 Hindenburg was preparing to land at the Naval Air Station, Lakehurst in Manchester Township, New Jersey on May 6, 1937. The Hindenburg was the largest aircraft of any type ever to take flight. It was an impressive 804 feet long and 135 feet in diameter (Potter, 2007, p. 16) and at maximum capacity could hold 72 passengers and just as many crew members. On this particular flight, the Hindenburg was filled only to about half its capacity, with 36 passengers and 61 crewmen on board. Due to thunder storms, the weather conditions that day were not ideal for mooring such an aircraft, so the vessel's Captain Max Pruss charted a course over Manhattan Island and the New Jersey coast to wait out the storm. By 6:22 that evening, the storms had dwindled down to a light rain and the aircraft was cleared for landing. The Hindenburg navigated its way back to Manchester Township, New Jersey and at 7:21pm the Hindenburg dropped the mooring lines from the bow in preparation for landing. Moments later, the Hindenburg ignited in flames. Reporter Herbert Morrison, from the Chicago Radio station WLS, was on scene when the Hindenburg exploded. Morrison was there with sound engineer Charles

Nehlsen, to “record the landing which was being celebrated as the first anniversary of the inauguration of transatlantic passenger service and the opening of the 1937 season” (Scenes From Hell, n.d., para. 2).

When the Hindenburg burst into flames, Morrison’s reactions were audibly recorded and later combined with film footage of the event. The Hindenburg is believed to have exploded because of a hydrogen leak in one of the compartments. According to an article entitled “This Day In History” (2016), published by History.com, hydrogen is extremely flammable, and the official cause of the fire was due to a “discharge of atmospheric electricity” near a gas leak on the ship’s surface. “Conspiracy theories have questioned whether the tragedy was an act of anti-Nazi sabotage” (Bowerman, 2015, para. 7). Of the 97 passengers aboard the Hindenburg, there were 35 casualties, 13 passengers and 22 air crewmen. The explosion also killed one ground crewman.

According to Edwin D. Miller, author of *Emergency Broadcasting and 1930s American Radio*, Morrison’s report was not broadcast until the day after the tragic event but it still left profound effects on audiences. Miller (2003) writes, “local stations began breaking news of the explosion eight minutes after the event, but none of the reports had the impact of the real ‘are you there’ testimony of reporter Morrison” (p. 48). The technologies developed at the time allowed networks, in this instance NBC, to transmit events from the field as they unfolded to the listening audience at home, which increased the impact of the story.

The “War of the Worlds” Broadcast

“The War of the Worlds” aired as a special Halloween episode of the American radio drama anthology series *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*, and premiered on October 30, 1938. Actor Orson Welles directed and narrated the CBS Broadcast, an adaptation of the H.G. Wells’ novel *The War of the Worlds*, written in 1898. Structured to imitate a news report, the narrative featured a series of news bulletins that explained an alien invasion currently in progress. Many listeners, especially those who tuned in late to the broadcast, are believed to have panicked due to the fabricated tale of Martians invading the planet. In the article, “Aural Chiaroscuro: The Emergency Radio Broadcast in Orson Welles’s ‘The War of the Worlds,’” author Michele Speitz (2008) discusses the extent to which citizens panicked after hearing the broadcast, explaining, “Due to Welles’s deftly calculated airing of ‘The War of Worlds,’ New Yorkers and New Jersey residents molded damp towels to their heads to detour the impact of non-existent alien fog and fled the empire city that was only virtually or fictitiously under attack” (p. 194). Because this broadcast had such a widespread effect on the people that listened to it, it is imperative to examine the audience’s reactions and responses to it. “Ultimately, Welles’s fictional portrayal of the news bulletin that aired in the 30’s exposes how a mass radio audience can train its ears to receive the abrupt shots of information and how an audience can (over)react according to these powerfully-suggestive, technologically-mediated narratives” (Speitz, 2008, p. 194). Another significant aspect that should be considered

when examining “The War of the Worlds” broadcast is why the audience believed such a report and how the news media was able to make it seem so believable.

Speitz (2008) touches on this concept, stating,

Most historians agree that the famed episode carried whatever weight it did for two main reasons: first, that the drama successfully mimicked the form of an emergency report, and second, that this technologically produced art landed in the ears of New Englanders already preoccupied with an impending war, WWII. (p. 195)

This broadcast had a great influence on the audience as well as a significant effect on the media world as a whole. Speitz (2008) explores this idea as well, writing, “Welles's 1938 broadcast of H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* quite famously highlights the coercive effects of the emergency radio report, or at least the massive sway and potential these reports have on a listening audience” (p.194).

In the article, “Exchange and interconnection in US network radio: A reinterpretation of the 1938 War of the Worlds broadcast,” authors Joy Elizabeth Hayes and Kathleen Battles (2011) examine this broadcast as well, stating, “Analyses of both the sound-text of the broadcast and audience responses collected afterwards show that ‘War of the Worlds’ -- like a number of other radio programme genres -- explored the possibility of two-way communication in national network radio” (p. 60). This broadcast was one of the first examples of a radio program that the audience could interact with. They felt as if they were a part of the story as it unfolded and merged the details of the news bulletins into their lives, which explained why many had such a substantial reaction to the

broadcast. Hayes and Battle (2011) continue, “The play celebrated radio's ability to coordinate multiple communication media and create a 'constant communicative presence' in which the listener was a central part” (p. 52). The broadcast sucked in the audience because the news was about a sudden change in their world, which opened up discussion with the people around them.

Although many audience members were frightened or disturbed by the broadcast, we argue that the primary audience response was to communicate with others through social and technologically mediated networks. Listeners drew on these networks to interrogate the meaning of the broadcast, share information with family and friends and 'talk back' to the media. (Hayes & Battles, 2011, p. 52)

It is important to look at “The War of the Worlds” broadcast when researching this thesis because it provided a foundation for future programs. “The play has been regarded as the pinnacle of an all-but-abandoned expressive form of sound art, its aftermath a pivotal moment in the history of mass media” (Verhema, 2014). This broadcast is an early example of the powerful effects the media have had on society and the spread of information. It also demonstrates the concept of ultra-realism discussed earlier in this paper. It is also important to understand that broadcasts such as this had mass audiences since radio was one of the few ways that citizens could get information at that time. Cheryl Bracken and Paul Skalski (2010) elaborate on the affects a broadcast such as the “War of the Worlds” had on audiences and scholarly research alike in their book entitled, *Immersed in Media: Telepresence in Everyday Life*. Bracken and Skalski (2010) write,

This famous incident of millions of Americans being panic to by a radio dramatization highlights the power of the mass media to affect audiences, which has received a great deal of scholarly attention. The scientific study of media affect has a rich history dating back to investigations of such high profile phenomenon as World War II propaganda and the War of the Worlds broadcast itself. (p. 158)

This broadcast is a pivotal event in media history and an important example to analyze when researching sensationalism.

The Vietnam War

Prior to the Vietnam War, the attitudes of the people of the United States toward the nation's involvement in war was mostly patriotic and positive because they were exposed to limited information about what was going on. The article, "Television's Role in the Vietnam War," author Oscar Barrett (n.d.) explains,

The horrors of war entered the homes of Americans for the first time ever during the Vietnam War. Whenever they could, Americans would turn on the television and watch a Vietnamese village getting pillaged, or a Vietnamese child getting burned to death, or a fellow American coming home in a body bag, at lunch, during breaks, after school, during dinner.

Because the Vietnam War was the first war shown on television, citizens of the United States began to distrust the American government based on the grisly images they were seeing on screen. Author Daniel C. Hallin recalls Richard Nixon's comments on the reports of the Vietnam War, writing,

In each night's TV news and each morning's paper the war was reported battle by battle, but little or no sense of the underlying purpose of the fighting was conveyed. Eventually this contributed to the impression that we were fighting in military and moral quicksand, rather than toward an important and worldwide objective. More than ever before, television showed the terrible human suffering and sacrifice of war. Whatever the intension behind such relentless and liberal reporting of the war, the result

was a serious demoralization at the home front, raising the question whether America would ever be able to fight in an enemies of product with unity strength of a purpose and enemies of product with unity strength of a purpose at home. (p. 3)

These sensational images of war opened America's eyes to the realities of warfare. The American citizens had never before been exposed to such content and this content elicited great responses from them. There was a great outcry against the war, arguing against the governments decisions with many protests and demonstrations. Today, however, the ongoing war in the Middle East, goes on with little outcry from the public. Audiences have been overloaded by content that shows the devastations of warfare for years since Vietnam. The footage of the Vietnam War shocked audiences because it was something that they had never been exposed to. Since then, war has been portrayed in numerous movies and television programming, real or fictional. When audiences today see footage similar to that of the Vietnam War, the shock value has been lost. It is important to examine how sensationalism affects current affairs, such as war, because it can vastly shape the way the public thinks and feels about what is going on in the world around it.

Apollo 11 and the First Moon Landing

The First Moon Landing had a profound effect on mass audiences as well. Like *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* and the other examples explored earlier, the audience observed something it had never seen before unfold on screen, in this case space travel and landing on the surface of the moon. The spaceship Apollo

11 carried three astronauts when it landed on the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969. About six hours after landing, on July 21, 1969 at 02:56 UTC, Neil Armstrong stepped out onto the surface of the moon, an event broadcast live to a world-wide audience. News coverage of the Apollo landing was prevalent during the weeks around this event but this moment in particular was what audiences had been waiting for. “An estimated 53.5 million television households (93.9% of all U.S. TV households) each watched an average 15 hours and 35 minutes of the sponsored network coverage from July 14 to July 27” (Television Obscurities, 2009).

Apollo 11’s journey to the moon created great interest in the space program and audiences widely followed Apollo launches on television during the 1970s. However, with the advent of special effects in movies, especially those like Star Wars and Star Trek, viewers became desensitized to the incredible achievement that the first moon landing represented. “The one-time lunar explorer claims that the fantastical promises of space-themed science fiction has left consumers of sci-fi media disappointed with the real thing” (Davis, 2008). This is an important aspect to examine when looking at sensationalism because it illustrates how one event, no matter how grandiose, can lose its sensational factors after repeated exposure leading audiences to become desensitized to that particular kind of content.

The Day After

The Day After premiered on ABC on November 20, 1983. The 2 hour 26 minute long made for television movie depicted a fictional war between the Warsaw Pact and NATO forces in which tensions between the two quickly escalate into an unrestrained nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the article, "The Day After: Rhetorical Vision in an Ironic Frame," Karen A. Foss and Stephen W. Littlejohn (1986) write,

An estimated 100 million Americans watched the film, which depicted a Soviet nuclear strike on Kansas City and the aftermath for survivors in nearby Lawrence. The program was widely advertised by the networks before the showing and stimulated extensive discussion in newspapers and magazines, in schools and at community forums about the nuclear issue. (p.317)

This movie caused such discourse because it was the first portrayal of what can happen in a nuclear war. Audiences of the time knew of nuclear war, but they had never actually seen the devastating effects that it can have on a society first hand. Although this was a fictional movie depicting such sensational events, placing it in a setting such as Kansas made the American audience feel that this devastation was hitting a little too close to home.

Foss and Littlejohn (1986) go on to explain that being presented as a made for television movie was an important factor of the mass discourse caused because, "it was widely accessible to a large audience that may not have gone to see a film about nuclear war in any other setting. In fact, many viewers of *The Day After* may not have seen any other depictions of nuclear war" (p.317). Because it was broadcast on television, the general public had much easier

access to it and more people were able to watch. This is an important example of sensationalism to examine because it was viewed by such a large audience. This was the first movie of its kind viewed by a large audience that showed the ramifications of a nuclear war. A study entitled “The Effects of Television on Large-Scale Attitude Change: Viewing ‘The Day After,’” findings indicate that,

Overall, the present research indicates that the film, 'The Day After' had a significant effect on the attitudes, concerns, and beliefs of the college students who viewed it. These changes were consistent with the themes of the film and with dimensions found within the literature on psychological effects of the threat of nuclear war. (Kulman, 1988, p. 1130)

These are significant findings because they demonstrate that sensational content can have great and lasting effects on audiences. ,

Technological Advancements of the Media

The industries of film, radio and television would not have developed the way that they have without the technological advances that happened simultaneously. These industries used the advancing technologies to push the barriers of their field, astounding the audience with the continuous flow of stimulating visuals found on screen. Raymond Fielding (1970) writes, “in the course of its erratic 75-year history, the motion picture has surfaced continuous technological experimentation in its owners’ attempt to achieve maximum realism in the production and exhibition of its products” (p. 34). Audiences are mesmerized with the realism that they can find on screen, and they keep coming back to see what new barriers are being pushed in our constantly-evolving technological world.

Vernone Sparkes and Namjun Kang discuss the diffusion of television in their article, "Public Reactions to Cable television; Time in the Diffusion Process." In this article Sparkes and Namjun (1986) argue, "Critical to intentions to adopt are perceptions by the target public of that attributes of an innovation" (p. 215). To explore this idea further they outline the five dimensions that scholars have agreed are the most important when evaluating how audience perceptions are formed when adjusting to technological developments. The concept of audience perceptions will be explored independently in greater detail later in this paper. Sparkes and Namjin (1986) list the following as the five dimensions that should be considered.

The relative advantage of the innovation will be weighed. The innovation's compatibility with existing factors such as other equipment, social values, or self-image will be judged. How difficult the innovation is perceived to be, or how complex and demanding of special learning it is will be influential to adoption, as will the possibilities of trial without full commitment. And finally, the existence of observable characteristics will be important (you cannot evaluate what you cannot see). (p. 215)

It is important to understand that audiences' perceptions can be influenced by the medium that they are receiving the information from. Although the audience reaction to both was substantial, audiences reacted much differently to *The Great Train Robbery* on screen than they did after hearing the *War of the Worlds* broadcast on the radio because of the type of medium used.

Media Influence on Audiences

How the audience perceives content is a key aspect of this research. Because television is a limited medium it can distort audience perceptions and

influence them in great ways. “What people – whether they be researchers, media critics, television executives, or the local bartender – do question is if the distortion has any effect, and if so, why and how” (Shrum, 2002, p.69). It is important to examine the audience perceptions because audiences use television greatly as a source of information gathering. Audiences take in the information that they receive from the media and use it to formulate their opinions of the world around them. Understanding how this process occurs allows for the media to more accurately relay essential information and create a more informed society.

In the book *Media consumption and perceptions of social reality: Effects and underlying processes*, author L.J. Shrum states that scholars agree that there are two principle critiques when analyzing media effects on audiences. Shrum (2002) explains, “that the evidence accumulated to date has provided little indication of sizable media effects on viewers’ thoughts, feelings, or actions in spite of a generally held ‘myth of massive media impact’ by many researchers” (p. 12). The media does have a profound effect on audiences. It helps to spread the flow of information and shape personal opinions, but there are many other factors that have an impact on this process as well. Taking all of these factors into account, many media scholars have theorized that it is not possible to accurately conclude how great of an impact media have. Scholars agree that the media have great potential to influence society, but the impact cannot be measured. It is important to understand this concept when continuing research

because one must understand that there is no absolute right answer in this area of study.

Shrum (2002) goes on to explain,

The second criticism of media effects research is that it, for the most part, has lacked any focus on explanatory mechanisms. That is, media effects research has been primarily concerned with relations between input variables (e.g., media information and its characteristics) and output variable (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors) with little consideration of the cognitive process that might mediate these relations. (p. 69)

It is beneficial to understand how past research was conducted and what was being sought through this research when moving forward in this area of study.

Understanding this baseline will allow further research to expand beyond this and further the understanding of the subject matter.

This research deals particularly with audiences perceptions of crime on television so it is important to examine this area in particular. Kenneth Dowler discusses this in his article, "Media Consumption and Public Attitudes towards Crime and Justice: The Relationship between Fear of Crime, Punitive Attitudes, and Perceived Police Effectiveness." Dowler (2003) discusses the expanding knowledge on the relationship between fear of crime and media consumption, stating, "The public's perception of victims, criminals, deviants, and law enforcement officials is largely determined by their portrayal in the mass media. Research indicates that the majority of public knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media" (p. 109). Because society is basing its opinions on what is being portrayed through the media it is an essential part of study to

examine when furthering research in this area. Gary Cavender and Lisa Bond Maupin (1993) elaborate on this, explaining, “researchers suggest that the ‘meaning’ of media crime depictions should be addressed prior to evaluating the effects these depictions have on the public” (p.306).

Chapter 3 Method

This study has analyzed cultural artifacts to illustrate that media audiences of today are desensitized to sensational content because they have been overexposed to an excess of lurid content. This research has been conducted as a historical analysis which analyzed milestone works of media that exemplified the use of sensationalism, beginning in the late 19th Century and continuing through the 20th Century, to examine how the successional use of this ultra-real content has progressively led audiences to become desensitized to this type of content in today's media. The historical analysis approach was chosen for this particular research because sensationalism is a phenomenon that has developed over a long period of time. Following a historical analysis approach of examination has allowed the researcher to look at previous data and trends over time to formulate conclusions about the research.

This cultural history thesis explored content produced by the news media as well as radio, movies, and television to show that sensational content is being used in all aspects of the media. To further analyze this phenomenon, various examples of sensational media content were explored including *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, *The Great Train Robbery*, coverage of the Hindenburg disaster, the "War of the Worlds" broadcast, footage of the Vietnam War, the first moon landing, and the made for television movie *The Day After*. This study analyzed the previously mentioned examples of sensational content within the

media to better understand how each one has exposed the audience to something new and illustrate that sensational forms of media have slowly built upon each other to create a world in which the thrill of this astonishing content has been lost. To do this, research for this study used both primary and secondary sources of information to analyze sensational examples of media, starting with the very early days of media.

Analysis of cultural artifacts was conducted using the online research database available to San Jose State University students through the Dr. Martin Luther King Library as well as books that were relevant to the topic that were also found within the library. The research databases most frequently used for this research were JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Web of Science and Questia. The researcher utilized archives of trade publications such as *Variety* and *Time* Magazine to collect previously published articles about the individual examples of the source materials listed above. Google Scholar was vastly utilized for this research as well. Key search terms included, but were not limited to: sensationalism, ultra-realism, 'media influences on audiences,' and 'audience perceptions of media.' Online resources such as YouTube were also utilized to examine video clips of the media being discussed as well. Research was conducted over the course of a year, allowing three weeks of extensive research on each individual topic, and then a month of compiling and analyzing this research before formulating conclusions.

This research analyzed past examples of sensational media content to demonstrate that audiences of today are desensitized to the progression of use of this ultra-real content in today's media. In looking at these examples, trends will be identified to conclude whether this hypothesis holds true. Audience's reactions to past and present media were also examined to help conclude if there has been a change in the way audiences react to sensational content. Using the historical analysis approach for this research will illustrate that the desensitization within audiences holds true because the process of learning and understanding the background and growth of this area of study offered insight into the way that society has organized throughout time, helped aid in understanding current trends, and provided the foundation to ruminate future possibilities. A plethora of research has been previously conducted by scholars regarding each individual example used by the researcher, but no research has been found that analyzes the nexus between them and the collective influence these examples have had on society and the way that they experience the media. Piecing together these various works provided for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of sensationalism throughout the history of the media and shapes the foundation of the current media state.

Chapter 4

Findings

*Good evening ladies and gentlemen,
we interrupt this report to bring you a special bulletin...*

The media world today is inundated with a constant stream of infinite information. One can flip through the channels on television, surf the web, listen to the radio, or check our always handy phones and be bombarded by the limitless amount of information offered by the media. Because we live in a world filled with a constant flow of information, audiences are now processing content in a much different way than they previously had, and sensationalism has played a major role in this new interpretation. The media industry has gone through many changes since its early days over a century ago, the effects of which are one of the most relevant changes in our society today.

The early days of the media utilized technological developments to cultivate the concept of sensationalism, which drew in mass audiences.

The word “sensationalism” was invented in the 19th Century as a pejorative term, to denounce works of literature or journalism that aimed to arouse strong emotional reactions in the public. Focusing on the senses as the key site of stimulation, the word emphasizes bodily and non-rational reactions. (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1378)

This phenomenon has advanced throughout the years and is used by all media. Sensationalism is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionaries as, “the use of shocking details to cause a lot of excitement or interest” (Sensationalism,

2016). This is clearly a common theme throughout all of the examples that have been used for this research, but does that mean anything? Has the growing use of this kind of content had any effects on our society? One can infer that a growing phenomenon such as sensationalism has had growing effects on media and our society and will continue to influence the structure of society the more that it is utilized.

Feigned Reality

Audiences have always been drawn to film; it has been a booming, lucrative industry from its very beginnings. For over a century, watching movies has been a favorite pastime in our society, one that creates public discourse and forms a kindred bond within audiences near and far. But why are viewers so drawn to this form of entertainment? Donald A. Norman studies this inclination in his book, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. Norman (2005) states that there are many things that collectively appeal to a viewer's psyche, including sounds, colors, and lighting, claiming that, "they heighten the experience without conscious awareness" (p. 128). This research has largely focused on the heightened experiences of the viewers, in the form of sensationalism, and what effects that this has had on audience perceptions of media, both conscious and unconscious.

Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat is listed as one of Time Magazine's Top 25 Horror Movies (Corliss, 2007, p. 1), standing as the oldest work on the list. But this film choice may leave one wondering how an early film, made in 1896,

featuring a train simply pulling into a station could ever be considered a horror film? In his article, "Zombies in the Time of Ebola," Daniel Edelstein (2014) explains that,

...unlike earnest, realistic films with Good Housekeeping Seals of approval, horror movies--with their sadism, unapologetic sensationalism, lack of nuance, and avid gratification of pathological impulses--offer sharper, more acute versions of our worst-case scenarios, brilliant metaphors for what haunts us. (p. 110)

Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat looks vastly different than a film that would be categorized as a horror movie by modern standards, but it illustrates the emotions described by Edelstein. While watching *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*, audiences were put directly in the path of a moving train, a worst case scenario that became extraordinarily realistic in that moment. Stephen Bottomore (1999) writes that, "This fearful or panicky response has been called 'the train effect'" (p.178), which refers specifically to the reaction elicited by an oncoming means of transportation. This has also been called the "reality effect" by many scholars, referring here to the broader notion that the images that are appearing on screen emulate real life situations and draw out the audiences emotions, as if they are experiencing the scenario that is unfolding on the thinly veiled screen before them firsthand. Joel elaborates on the concept of the reality effect in his book, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative*. Black (2002) explains, "in its standard uses, film imparts a realistic effect to its viewers; this is no more a psychological effect whereby film gives the impression of reality narrating itself; film causes an illusion of reality; or film appears natural" (p. 3).

Horror films are, by definition, made to be sensational within a realistic world, to tug at all of those menacing fears we hide in the back of our minds.

According to a 2004 paper in the *Journal of Media Psychology* by Dr. Glenn Walters, the three primary factors that make horror films alluring are tension (generated by suspense, mystery, terror, shock, and gore), relevance (that may relate to personal relevance, cultural meaningfulness, the fear of death, etc.), and (somewhat paradoxically given the second factor) unrealism. (Griffiths, 2015)

In the early days of the media, audiences were startled by the simple illusion of a train barreling towards them because that scene elicited all of the emotional responses discussed by Dr. Waters. As the years went on, however, the sensationalism that filled the seats at the early shows had faded. The audience needed more sensational stimulation and the media delivered by raising the bar. Although the sensational aspects of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* have faded since it debuted over a century ago, the film is still considered a major milestone in the history of film and it opened the creative doors for many productions that followed, including the gruesome, bloody horror films of today. This film has stood the test of time and has been referred to by various scholars to illustrate the immense effects that one piece of media can have on audiences.

One short film had a particularly lasting impact; yes, it caused fear, terror, even panic....It was the film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat (Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat Station)*....Although the flickering black and white (not in natural colors and natural dimensions), and although the only sound accompanying it was the monotonous clatter of the projector's sprockets engaging into the film's perforation, the spectators felt physically threatened and panicked. (Loiperdinger, 2004, p. 89)

Another milestone film that stands out when researching sensationalism is the 1903 movie *The Great Train Robbery*. This film has been studied by many scholars for its various film merits, but this research has focused on the sensational aspects of this piece, particularly examining the last scene of the film. Audiences are taken on an epic journey that follows a group of bandits high jacking a train at gunpoint. This 12-minute long film is filled with exhilarating scenes of pilfering, horse chases, shootouts, and train stunts, but the most memorable scene takes place in the final seconds of the movie. An armed gunman appears on screen, aims his gun directly at the camera, and takes fire. This last scene left audiences noticeably shaken after watching the film when first viewed in 1903. Just as *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* had quavered audiences by putting them directly in the face of danger 7 years earlier, *The Great Train Robbery* created the illusion of danger to elicit the sensational reactions of the audience.

A reprise of the last shot in *The Great Train Robbery* was included in the 1990 crime film *Goodfellas*. Director Martin Scorsese included this scene as a tribute to the original film. “Goodfellas ends with an exhilarating shot of a resurrected Tommy contemptuously firing a gun directly toward the camera, to the sound of the Kid Vicious cover ‘My Way,’ and implicitly at every ‘average nobody’ – at every worthless ‘schnook’ – in the audience” (Verevis, 2007, p. 216). It is important to look at the effects of this shot in the 1990 film because it illustrates the perceptual growth of audiences since the original 1903 viewing.

This scene symbolized a powerful message to the audiences, much like the original scene did, but it focuses more on story development rather than the ultra-realism effect created by the original content. “Martin Scorsese proved that even something now thought of as tired and old-fashioned could be revitalized, and that it was the context, rather than a superficial effect, that really gave the shot its power” (Berger, 2009, p. 29).

Although both of these examples were made near the turn of the 20th century, they have had lasting effects on the world of film. After extensively studying both examples, one can infer that they not only embody the traits of a horror movie, but also encompass the characteristics of a three dimensional film as well. Also known as a 3D movie, this category of film dates back to as early as 1838. In his TIME Magazine article, “3-D or Not 3-D: That Is the Question,” Richard Corliss (2009) explains, “Experiments in depth simulation go back to the first years of movies. At the end of the 19th Century, British inventor William Friese-Greene secured a patent for a 3-D movie process” (para. 4). 3D movie utilize sensationalism completely to provoke the heightened effects that they target from the audience. From this research you can deduce that early films were not trying to create three dimensional movies, but rather trying to provoke emotional responses from audiences. Success with this technique drove filmmakers a step forward into the realm of three dimensional work. “In 1915 Edwin S. Porter, whose *The Great Train Robbery* had stoked the first great movie sensation a dozen years before, presented a series of 3-D documentary

shorts to a New York City audience, who viewed the short documentaries through anaglyph (red-green) glasses” (Corliss, 2009, para. 4). One can surmise that filmmakers in the early days of movies became inspired by the great responses of the audience and utilized the technological advancements happening at the time to further this effect, progressively turning into modern day 3D film and even virtual reality today. Just like the case of horror films discussed previously in this section, these early examples of film no longer hold the same sensational clout as modern three dimensional films do, but they certainly opened the doors for contemporary movies to develop. “Everything about going to the movies has changed, except for one vital, enduring quality that has always defined the experience: a collective suspension of disbelief that is indistinguishable from wonder” (Gosgrove, 2013, para. 12). These two examples of early film illustrate the powerful and lasting effects that sensationalism has had on the world of film and audience perceptions of them over the last century.

This Cannot Be Happening!

Thus far, this research has scrutinized sensationalism within movies, which were made with the primary intent of entertainment. Transitioning now into the world of radio, this research will examine how sensational content has differed when used for news reporting purposes. To accomplish this, news coverage of the Hindenburg disaster and the “War of the Worlds” broadcast will be reviewed. Lucas Kavner (2011) explains that, “Radio is a kind of ‘lifestyle support system’... which helps people feel better as they go about their days. Many respondents

didn't realize how important radio was in their lives until they had participated in the exercise" (papa. 5). When radio technologies were first developed they were primarily used for entertainment, just as the movies before them had been. Print media was the primary carrier of information, and many people still doubted radio's capabilities, especially when used for anything other than entertainment purposes. Joseph G. Wolfe expounds on this further in his article "War of the Worlds' and Its Editors." Wolfe (1980) states,

As late as 1938, the print media still harbored doubts about radio which were brought about, at least in part, by the unsettling knowledge that it was competing for time and attention, as both an entertainment and a news source. The press had what might be termed as a "love/hate" relationship with radio. (p. 39)

There were many major news events that occurred in the 1930s, however, that substantiated radio news and the great benefits that came from utilizing this medium for more than just entertainment purposes. One can deduce that this volte-face was aided by the growing technologies of the time. Radio news was now able to break the dynamics of traditional print media by bringing the listeners to the scene of an event, incorporating them in real time. Miller (2003) affirms this postulation, stating, "Radio could break the news of national import far faster than the print media and began to center on having reporters on the scene transmitting by shortwave or phone to stations... reports of disaster and intrigue increasingly begin to move into the home via the radio" (p. 50). Radios were becoming more advantageous to the disbursement of information during the 1930s, and use of this medium for news reporting quickly grew. Statistical data

supports this notion and elucidate- the growth of this medium during the 1930s, reporting that “At the start of the decade, radio was relatively news free; less than 6% of airtime was devoted to news. By the decade's end, however, news took up 13% of programming, with hourly updates and frequent interruptions of broadcast by live reports” (Miller, 2003, p. 50).

The previously-recorded live radio broadcast detailing the Hindenburg's tragic landing attempt by Herbert Morrison is significant piece of radio history for many reasons. “The reporting of the explosion of the Hindenburg was the first example of a ‘live’ eyewitness broadcast of a major disaster” (Miller, 2003, p. 48).

Although this broadcast was not aired until the next day, you could hear the pain and confusion in Morrison's voice, and this emotion made the tragic event seem even more real to listeners. “Morrison's professional demeanor as he described the landing gave way to an emotional outburst of exclamations after the Hindenburg caught fire. Shaken and horrified, Morrison continued to record, struggling to compose himself as a hellish scene of fiery death unfolded before his eyes” (Scenes from Hell, n.d., para. 2). Listeners were in awe, spellbound by Morrison's depiction. Morrison's emotionally shaken voiced added an emotional element and brought the tragedy into the homes of the audience. Scenes of the chaos subjugated the minds of the audiences, transporting them to the scene. “The disaster, like radio, brings the far away near; it is space travel, a conquering of distance” (Miller, 2003, p. 49). Since this broadcast was not aired until the day following the tragic events in New Jersey, listeners already had some knowledge

of the disaster when they first heard Morrison's broadcast. Miller (2003) explains, "Images from the Hindenburg disaster arrive quickly to the public through newspapers and movie theater newsreels" (p. 62), but it was Morrison's broadcast that left lasting impressions on the audience. Miller (2003) continues, "Audiences gasped and screamed...Although it was not live, listeners felt that they had heard 'an actual on-the-spot broadcast of the tragedy'" (p. 62). Morrison, as the eye witness, acted as a portal to the audience eagerly listening at home. They were transported to New Jersey through Morrison's words and saw the events as he described them. Miller (2003) elaborates on the vital role of the eyewitness reporter further, stating,

The eyewitness has a particular and peculiar relationship with knowledge; however, this knowledge is neither empirical nor learned. It is a knowledge of proximity, a knowledge of history as it is happening, a purported liveliness. The listener is in the audible presence of the eye witness, whose voice surmounts distance. This voice transmits earth shattering events into language, knowing that he is in the presence of history being made. This voice trusts the words and the medium can succeed and survive any event even the most disastrous. (p.62)

Morrison's radio broadcast was later edited to video captured that day and was broadcast on television to the masses, but the original broadcast has still been greatly remembered. "It was radio news at its finest; news events reported as they happened. The description is brought home to radio's listeners and we in turn grieve for the dead and injured," (Widner, 2016, para. 6). The powerful emotion of Morrison's broadcast will forever be remembered as a great moment

in radio history and his famous statement that depicted the terrifying events unfolding before him will never be forgotten... *OH THE HUMANITY!*

One can extrapolate from this research that the increased use of radio for broadcast news reports grew rapidly because of the sensational events that were happening at this time. Unlike print media, radio had the ability to transport the listener to the scene of the event in real time and, aided by the advent of the eyewitness reporter, created a scene unlike anything that the printed word could conjure. The listener could hear the scene unfolding and feel the raw emotions roused by the eyewitness and bystanders at the scene. In that moment, the radio broadcast allowed the listeners to both travel to the scene of the event and to stand still, safe from harm in the comfort of their own homes while still being engaged with the event taking place. The Hindenburg disaster illustrates the profound effect that the media, in this case a radio broadcast, have on the disbursement and assessment of information. This event was sensational simply because it was an extraordinary event, regardless of how the media presented it. Utilizing the capabilities of radio at that time heightened audience responses but this tragedy would still have provoked emotional responses because it was such a cataclysmic event. This tragedy gave radio news broadcasting great control disseminating the information that society was using to formulate their ideals of the world around them. Retaining this kind of power, however, could easily make way to pandemonium.

Just over a year after the Hindenburg tragedy, citizens of New Jersey and the surrounding areas were alarmed yet again by another radio broadcast. This time, the veil of the radio could not save audiences from impending disaster because the events described were said to be happening right outside their homes. The “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast depicted an ersatz alien invasion and was presented as an emergency report during evening radio programming. Because this fictional broadcast was presented in such a manner, audiences were unaware that it was merely part of a radio show - an outlandish and sensational story with the intent to entertain radio listeners. Paul D. Skalski, James Denny, and Ashleigh K. Shelton (2010) explain that, “the immersion component of presence may...elicit greater fright responses in audience members” (p. 174), suggesting that audience members are more inclined to have an emotional response, in this case fear, to something when they feel that they are a part of it. “In the case of the War of the Worlds broadcast of 1938, no visual immersion could be achieved; however, many listeners were no doubt immersed into the medium of radio, perhaps like never before” (Skalski, Denny & Shelton, 2010, p.174). Radio listeners in the New Jersey area were familiar with similar emergency radio broadcasts, so when the “War of the Worlds” was presented in that way, the audience assumed that it was a real emergency; and, since it was said to be happening right outside their homes, they panicked. One can surmise that the amplified reactions to this broadcast were due in part to Adolf Hitler's recent declaration of war on Europe, thrusting an already nervous

nation into a panic at the thought of yet another impending threat. The broadcast was not remarkable because of the subject matter, the vivid accounts of alien appearances or the talented actor portrayals, all of which were considerably sensational pieces in this extremely sensational narrative. Rather, one can deduce that audiences were stirred into a panic simply because of the threat of an impending fantasy invasion; the story unfolding on the radio that created the illusion that their world was in jeopardy. The news at this time was already filled with a constant flow of unfolding warfare so it was easy for audiences to misconstrue this fictional tale of invasion with reality because so much of their reality was already consumed with conflict. After extensive research regarding this topic, it can be surmised that had listeners known that this radio broadcast was simply for entertainment purposes they would not have panicked at all, but rather enjoyed the peculiar program and the eerie tone that it set on that Halloween Eve. The radio broadcast did include a brief disclosure stating that the program was a fictional story but many listeners who turned in to the programming a bit late had missed this caveat. At this time, there were a limited number of radio stations in a particular region so it can be surmised that every program had a much higher audience penetration than you would ever see today. Because of the limited exposure, it is logical to reason that each program had a greater potential for impacting audiences. Contrary to the media marketplace of today, which is filled with a seemingly endless amount of entertainment and information options, one individual movie, program or piece of

content during the 1930s was much more likely to have a major impact on audiences because there was a limited amount of access to information.

The mass media have the ability to spread information over a vast area in a short amount of time, but that is not always a good thing, as the “War of the Worlds” broadcast demonstrates. All forms of media have the potential to be used for good as well as evil, and with that ability comes great responsibilities. The media play the role of agenda setters for society, meaning that they do not tell the public what to think, but instead, what to think about. In this example, the audience was already occupied by World War II, with the German invasion of Austria and the signing of the Munich Pact both happening earlier that same year. Paul Heyer discusses the effects of the “War of the Worlds” broadcast and the state of military action at that time in his article entitled, “America under attack I: a reassessment of Orson Welles’ 1938 war of the worlds broadcast.” Heyer (2003) elaborates on the mindset of the audience during this time of warfare, stating,

As the world stood on the threshold of the Second World War, so convincing was Welles’ use of the medium that even some listeners who found the idea of a Martian invasion ridiculous nonetheless assumed the attack (which we would today unhesitatingly label terrorist) to be the result of German military aggression. They reacted to the broadcast with equal horror to those who took it at face value, believing that either the announcer had made an interpretive mistake or the invading German forces themselves were disguised as Martians! (p. 150)

This broadcast illustrates the great power that the media holds when distributing information, as well the influence that this information has on audiences. The

radio was still a relatively new tool being used to distribute information at this time, so it is logical to conclude that when a sensational story such as the "War of the Worlds" broadcast was presented the ultra-real effects of such a broadcast were immense. Since information about the warfare was just starting to become accessible to the masses they were not yet desensitized to this type of content. They were being overloaded with such subject matter, which is where the process of desensitization begins, but they had not yet entered the area of anesthetize. Counter to the media marketplace of today, the limited amount of access to information heightened audiences reactions to the sensational content. They had not built up a desensitization to content such as this and since they could only access information from a limited amount of sources, they were more inclined to believe what they were hearing, outlandish as it seemed. Dorothy Thompson, a renowned columnist for the New York Tribune during the 1930s, commented that this production exhibited the great effect that the mass media can have on influencing public perceptions. She was quoted by Dieckmann (2008) as writing,

"All unwittingly, Mr. Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater of the Air have made one of the most fascinating and important demonstrations of all time...They have proved that a few effective voices, accompanied by sound effects, can convince masses of people of a totally unreasonable, completely fantastic proposition as to create a nation-wide panic...They have demonstrated more potently than any argument, demonstrated beyond a question of a doubt, the appalling dangers and enormous effectiveness of popular and theatrical demagoguery....Hitler managed to scare all of Europe to its knees a month ago, but he at least had an army and an air force to back up his shrieking words...But Mr. Welles scared thousands into demoralization with nothing at all." (para. 3)

Orson Welles did not need weapons or an army to cause a panic in audiences. He was armed simply with a microphone, some sound effects, and airwaves. Although the broadcast was never made with the intention to cause panic in the listeners but it illustrates how a single program had profound effects on the masses and just how influential the media can be on society.

Blurred Lines; Fact or Fiction?

“Television struggled to become a national mass media in the 1950s, and became a cultural force – for better or worse – in the 60s” (Granzel, 2007, para. 1). During this time period, the medium of television had undergone many significant transformations, and it became arguably one of the most utilized and influential media of the generation. Statistical data shows that between the years of 1949 and 1969, “the number of households in the U.S. with at least one TV set rose from less than a million to 44 million. The number of commercial TV stations rose from 69 to 566. The amount advertisers paid these TV stations and the networks rose from \$58 million to \$1.5 billion” (Granzel, 2007, para. 4). After doing extensive research regarding this topic, one can deduct that there were many factors involved in the immense upraise of the television industry. As with the other mediums that were discussed earlier in this research, there were great technological advancements at that time that aided in the development of television as well as the networks that were broadcasting on them. Cover of the many remarkable media events happening at this time in history also attracted mass audiences. Three sensational examples in particular have been chosen for

this research. This research will further analyze media coverage of Apollo 11 and the first moon landing, the Vietnam War, and the made-for-television movie *The Day After* to explore the effects of sensationalism during this time.

“Despite the sheer isolation of space, astronaut Neil Armstrong was far from alone when he took the first fateful step on the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969. Hundreds of millions of people watched and listened in awe as he descended the lunar landing module Eagle and became the first man to walk on the moon” (This Day In History, 2016, p. 1). 240,000 miles away, the media was busy covering what is now known as one of the greatest milestones in history, and audiences everywhere were tuning in to see the cosmos affair. According to a September 1st, 1969 article in *The Journal of Broadcasting*,

93.9% of television households (53.5 million in total) in the United States watched an average of 15 hours and 35 minutes of network coverage of the Apollo 11 mission between July 14th and July 27th, making it the most-watched television event at that time. Some 125 million viewers in the United States watched the Moon walk [and] an estimated 600 million watched worldwide. (Harney and Stone, 1969, p. 181)

Despite all of the television coverage, many of the millions following the intergalactic events of July 1969 were in disbelief that a man had just walked on the surface of the moon. LIFE magazine spent two weeks to accurately compile stories and photos of the moon landing, and audiences waited patiently to see the evidence of the valiant journey into space for themselves. In an article commemorating the LIFE Magazine’s Special Edition dedicated to the moon landing, Ben Cosgrove (2014) writes,

Today, in the age of 365/24/7 media consumption, learning that any publication had the confidence—or the audacity—to wait for two hours, much less two weeks, before publishing its take on arguably the signal event of the 20th Century might strike some as close to unbelievable. (para. 2)

In today's media world, news needs to be instantaneously available to the masses so that the story meets the prompt demands of the audience, despite these times constraints often deterring from a full understanding of what is being reported. Cosgrove (2014) continues,

...but for a magazine like LIFE, which had earned its reputation as the de facto chronicler of the Space Race not through dumb luck, but through years of hard work, phenomenal photography and inspired reporting, waiting two weeks was simply the price one paid for getting it right. (para. 2)

This event is arguably one of the most sensational events that has happened in the last century, regardless of how it was portrayed by the media. There was no need for the media to rush the story or hype it up like many stories are today; the raw content of the journey of Apollo 11 was already an amazement.

Armstrong's feat was, to put it mildly, a big deal, and the historic nature of the event was reflected in the way the media covered it at the time. The New York Times, for instance, has only used 96-point type on four occasions in its history: the resignation of President Nixon, the 9/11 attacks, the election of President Obama, and the moon landing. (Mirkinson, 2012, para. 2)

Doing something as minuet as changing the size of the font for the headlines of a newspaper can add sensational effects to the story, because it draws on the viewers unconscious emotions, but in the case of the moon landing it was already a monumental event. There is not a font size big enough to encapsulate what spectators where feeling that summer in 1969 when man actually walked on

the moon. Until this point in time, this was a far off land, one considered to be unattainable unless mimicked in a Hollywood sound study. And here audiences were watching it play out before their very eyes. This was not a movie, this was real life; a man, someone just like them, was literally walking on the surface of the moon.

It was man's first landing on another world, the realization of centuries of dreams, the fulfillment of a decade of striving, a triumph of modern technology and personal courage, the most dramatic demonstration of what man can do if he applies his mind and resources with single-minded determination. (Wilford, 1969, para. 26)

But was it? There has been much speculation about this sensational feat of both man and the media, which has led to various conspiracy theories. "Doubters say the U.S. government, desperate to beat the Russians in the space race, faked the lunar landings, with Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin acting out their mission on a secret film set" ("Conspiracy Theories", 2009, para. 1). Despite what you choose to believe about the mission of Apollo 11 and the moon landing, one thing cannot be argued. This event was truly sensationalism at its finest, stirring the audience's already fragile emotions, and it continues to be one of television's greatest moments. Author Jonah Goldberg (2009) elaborates on this moment in history, stating, "I think America could use more moments like the moon landing, when everyone—young and old, black and white, rich and poor—is equally compelled to watch an event in awe and wonderment" (p. 6).

Damage and destruction, war machinery, explosions, deprivation, and grieving for absent loved ones - all representations of war that we have seen time

and time again in movies. The Vietnam War, however, brought all of those images a bit too close to home and forever changed media news as well as society's outlook on war. Beginning in November 1955, the Vietnam War was happening simultaneously with the rise of the television industry. Author of the article, "Medias Role in the Vietnam War," Alan Rohn (2014) maintains, "Along with the rise of television, new record technologies such as video camera and audio recorder also arose. Journalists and reporters were now able to take much more photographs and record video materials" (p. 1). These developing technologies opened the doors for much more sensational news content to be exposed, and brought the effects of combat directly into homes across the country. Aided by these developing technologies, many scholars have coined the Vietnam War as the first conflict portrayed by the news media as it unfolded, and the first time audiences directly witnessed the corollary of war. "With inadequate government controls, the media was now able to publish uncensored pictures and videos showing the brutality of the war in Vietnam and, thus, vastly influenced American public opinion in unprecedented proportion"(Rohn, 2014, p. 1). This new, uncensored content was greatly sensational to audiences because it was a real life depiction of the brutalities of war. They were no longer watching a movie; the images before them were being played out miles away but audiences could feel the pain and turmoil unfolding before them. All of the fears that dwindled in the back of their minds after hearing about the existing conflict

were now right in front of them, with only a thin glass television screen to separate them.

During the beginning of the war, when the television industry was still on the rise, there was little interest in reporting on the Vietnam War. The few reports that were made mostly discussed the rise of communism in the United States and abroad but focused little on the fighting overseas. At this time many viewers were still in great support of the war efforts. This changed drastically, however, as the media coverage of the war started to increase, bringing to light the many factors of war that were not being discussed publicly. It was not until audiences started becoming aware of such events as, “the death of many civilians in a coup against President Diem [that they] started to change their views on Vietnam. Soon after that, the New York Times sent their first reporter to Saigon” (Rohn, 2014, p. 1). Other News agencies followed suit by sending numerous reporters overseas, all trying to get as close as possible to the front lines and deliver their eyewitness accounts back to the audience at home. Much like Herb Morrison’s report on the Hindenburg disaster, audiences could feel the raw emotion and chaos in the voices of these onsite reports and it brought the warfare right into the living rooms of the viewers. Governmental regulations no longer had total control of the dissemination of the media, and reporters seized this opportunity to follow their journalistic principles: to deliver to the public newsworthy information that is honest, accurate, and unbiased. Warfare is gruesome, and that is exactly what they reported. Correspondence at this time was considerably different from

that of World War I and World War II because it focused more on investigative journalism and the colloquy regarding the ethics surrounding the war as well as America's role in it. The media were not only reporting on what was going on, but questioning what they saw in the process. Reporters worked alongside soldiers in the field, so they were able to report their firsthand experiences to the public. Unlike the coverage of the war in Iraq today, Deepti Hajela (2006) explains, "soldiers in the field welcomed reporters, [and] would transport them around the country and respected them for facing the hardships and dangers in battle zones" (para. 6). As audiences started to see more and more what the war was really like with each developing story, their opinion of the war began to change. The Tet Offensive, which occurred in 1968, illustrated a major turning point in media involvement in the Vietnam War. Author Alan Rohn (2014) discusses this event further in his book *Media Role in the Vietnam War*, explaining,

After the Tet Offensive, media coverage of the war became predominantly negative. Images of both civilian and military casualties were increasingly televised. The percentage of victory stories reported by journalists decreased from 62 before to 44 after the Tet. Additionally, many iconic pictures of the war such as The Execution of a Vietcong Guerilla or The Napalm Girl exerted a negative and lasting influence on the public feeling. As the war became uglier on screen, its public support also declined significantly. (p. 1)

One can deduce that audience opinions of the war started to change after being exposed to the uncensored content because of the sensational nature of this kind of subject matter. Audiences were seeing firsthand what was going on with the

war and many of the images made their skin crawl. These images gave the audience the framework needed to ponder the ethical questions about war that many journalists at the time were asking. Actually seeing these images provoked great emotional responses within the audience and invoked the gut feeling that one gets when they know they are witnessing something morally unethical. This emotional factor allowed citizens to formulate their own opinions about the war instead of solely relying on what the government had chosen to disclose. Jonathan Mermin (1999) writes, “Journalists were said to have generated public oppositions to the war with stories that encouraged Americans to question the wisdom and the creditability of their government” (p. 4).

After thoroughly examining the research surrounding the media’s involvement in the Vietnam War, it is logical to conclude that media’s role in the dissemination of information grew significantly during this time. The media were no longer just the carriers of information; they now had the freedom and ability to gather information and pose questions about what they were seeing. This inquisitive approach allowed the opportunity for society to question what was going on as well, and to formulate its own opinion about the government’s actions. Before this development, governmental actions were rarely questioned. One can surmise that the growth of media coverage during the Vietnam War created a more practical checks and balances system between the government and the public, with the media playing the role of the facilitator of information. It can also be deduced that the drastic change in support for the war can be attributed to this

as well. “According to a Gallup poll in March 1968, 49% of respondents felt that the US involvement in Vietnam was an error. In August, the number increased to 53%” (Rohn, 2014, p. 2). Inferring from the extensive research done for this analysis, one can recognize the great role that sensational media content had on not only the political landscape of the nation, but on the way all information was disseminated. The public no longer wanted to hear a cleaned up narrative of what was going on. They now wanted to hear the nitty gritty details, despite how unpleasant they may be, because that was the truth. Sensational content had opened audience’s eyes to what was actually going on in the world around them.

It is now clear that the media had a huge influence on the war in Vietnam politically. In fact, American public so depended on the media to know and understand the war that as the war was depicted as a failure on screen, it also became their perspectives. (Rohn, 2014, p. 2)

This change in perception was made after audiences were exposed to content that showed the realities of the warfare that were occurring. But, following this same logic, how did audience perceptions differ when the content of a production was fictional? To explore this further, this research focused on the sensational example of *The Day After*.

When the made-for-television movie *The Day After* debuted in 1983, war had been a constant in the lives of Americans for the last few decades. The Vietnam War was a not-so-distant memory and the Cold War was still raging on. Nuclear warfare was an extensive topic of conversation because of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Authors Roger N. Johnson,

Lea Pulkkinen, Mikko Oranen, and Soili Poijula conducted a study shortly after this movie was released entitled, "Attitudes concerning nuclear war in Finland and in the United States" which surveyed residences in a selected part of the United States and presented them with questions regarding nuclear warfare. The study (Johnson, Pulkkinen, Oranen, & Poijula, 1986) found that, "20% of the Americans said a nuclear incident was almost certain...and 50% of Americans felt it was moderately certain...If there was a nuclear war, only...6% of the Americans thought they would survive...78% of the Americans said they would probably die" (p. 157-158). At this point in time, audiences had already seen the damaging effects that nuclear warfare can have. Nuclear weapons had been in effect since World War I and there were already many examples of them being used so this type of content was not unfamiliar to viewers. In the article "Fallout from 'The Day After.'" Jon Niccum (2003) explains,

The Day After -- billed as a starkly realistic drama of nuclear confrontation and its devastating effect on a group of average American citizens -- was viewed by half the adult population of the United States, which was the largest audience for a made-for-TV movie up to that time. (para. 3)

The fictional portrayal of a nuclear attack happening in Kansas, was filmed on location in Lawrence, Kansas with the intent to be more relatable to the audience. At the time, many fictional portrayals of nuclear invasion happened in large cities, but most of the nation's population did not live in that type of setting. Nicholas Meyer, director of *The Day After*, was quoted as saying, "Other movies that had attempted to deal with the subject of nuclear holocaust had always been

set it in big cities. But a great number of people in the United States do not live in big cities, so they were witnessing an event that seemed to bear scant relation to them" (Meyer, as cited in Niccum, 2003, para. 5). One can infer that changing the setting of this film to resemble the surrounding of much of the audience aided in the heightened sense of ultra-realism. Much like the examples discussed earlier in this research, choosing a location that was very familiar to audiences, something they could look out their window and identify with, drew audiences into the storyline. They felt more involved in the narrative simply because the setting created the illusion that the events unfolding were happening around them. While many could argue that Kansas alone is far from sensational, adding extraordinary circumstances into a familiar setting becomes sensational to the audience. It is logical to reason that the groundbreaking special effects that were used in this film also aided in producing an ultra-real image of nuclear war. Following the trend outlined previously in this research, the advancing technologies at this time allowed film makers to stretch the boundaries of the screen and draw in the audience with a vivid account of events. In the article, "Beyond apocalypse: Recent representations of nuclear war and its aftermath in United States narrative film," author Toni A. Perrine discusses medias utilization of nuclear developments. Perrine (1991) writes,

The development of nuclear weapons and their destructive potential influences human consciousness and cultural production including U.S. commercial narrative films which deal with the idea of nuclear war. Such films can be read to reflect and mediate cultural attitudes about nuclear war and the increasingly technological future. (para. 1)

Because films such as this have the potential to influence human consciousness, one can reason that *The Day After* also made a lasting impression on audiences because it was dealing with relevant cultural issues. The movie depicted the rising tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, which resulted in nuclear explosions on American soil. While there was never any actual nuclear warfare happening in the United States, the arms race between the two countries was very real. There had been many missile attack false alarms involving both parties at the time this movie was released. Just two months before *The Day After* debuted, author Erik Adams explains one such incident. Adams (2016) writes,

On September 26, 1983, five inbound American ICBMs were detected by the USSR's early-warning satellites. Our fraternizing Soviet diplomats are still alive because those nukes were properly identified as a false alarm. Because the officer on duty defied his training, "sunlight reflected off clouds" failed to start World War III. Today we know that officer's...reasons for ignoring the warning (if the United States intended to wipe the Soviet Union off the map, it would've done so with more than five missiles), but in the fall of 1983, he was merely the subject of questionably appropriate pillow talk. He was just one unknown person, doing what he knew to be right. (para. 3)

Reports such as this were common at this time, so it can be deduced that audiences were almost waiting for the day something would actually happen. While *The Day After* was a fictional account of a possible nuclear scenario that could play out, it seemed intensely real due to the many cultural reference that it used. "Nuclear war is represented in quite a number of entertainment films

recently which suggests our societal preoccupation with the possibility” (Perrine, 1991, para. 1).

The effects of sensationalism can be studied much clearer when looking at the effects that this type of media have had on young children. The book *Fundamentals of Media Effects: Second Edition* cites a 1986 study conducted by Cantor, Wilson and Hoffner, pertaining to the way children react after witnessing various types of violence on television. The study, conducted by Jennings Bryant, Susan Thompson, and Bruce W. Finklea (2002), maintains that “after watching a television movie called *The Day After*,...young children were the least frightened while teenagers were more disturbed and their parents were the most frightened” (pg. 202). These findings seem to conclude that young children are less bothered by the graphic content featured in this movie because the child does not yet understand the emotional impact of the content that they are witnessing. Furthermore, Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (1994) noted that, “the visual depictions of injury in the movie were quite mild compared to what most children have become used to seeing on television” (p. 296). One can infer from this study that the children surveyed have been desensitized to the graphic content because that level of violent content has been the norm for them growing up, and they do not yet tie these violent actions to emotions. The older generations may have been a bit more effected by the content because they had not been as readily exposed to that level of sensational content throughout their lifetimes. They are still being desensitized by repeated viewings of this level of sensational

content, but at a slower pace than the children. The level of sensationalism that the adults have been exposed to would not have been as high as the children so it will take longer to condition them into thinking that this type of content is the norm.

The research done regarding television has been particularly interesting for many reasons. Television is an integral part of most people's lives today, whether audiences are watching the old fashioned way or are accessing it through one of the many devices that offer this feature today. We watch television for everything from information gathering to entertainment, and escaping the grips of television is nearly impossible. This codependent relationship with television that has developed within our society has created a world in which television both raises questions and answer questions simultaneously. "TV addresses people in the midst of the confusion, isolation, and passivity that it has created in their minds" (Mander, 2005, p. 1). This entrenched relationship with television illustrates why it is so crucial to examine the effects that it is having on society. Through this research, one can infer that televisions sensational portrayal of culturally significant events has vastly shaped the media landscape. In the article entitled, "Television during the 1950s and 60s," Bill Granzel (2007) explains,

Common national carriage of popular TV shows, news and sports events meant that there was a shared national experience. The day after major televised events, researchers found that almost everyone was talking about the event. They weren't saying the same things, but there was a sense of national dialog. (para. 4)

Chapter 5 Conclusion

The twentieth century is on film. It's the filmed century. You have to ask yourself if there's anything about us more important than the fact that we're constantly on film, constantly watching ourselves. The whole world is on film, all the time. Spy satellites, microscopic scanners, pictures of the uterus, embryos, sex, war, assassinations, everything. (DeLillo, 1982, p. 200)

This research illustrates the exponential growth that the media industry has gone through since the earliest work chosen for this analysis. In the 87-year timespan of media development that was chosen for this examination of sensational content, it is logical to conclude that sensational content aided in the growth of the media industry as a whole. It is also plausible to reason that as audiences were exposed to a greater amount of sensational content, they became desensitized to it, which in turn raised the level of shock value a piece of work must possess in order to elicit a response from the audience. You can see this demonstrated when comparing the first and last examples of this research. To elicit a grandiose response from audiences in 1896, it took just one continuous shot of a train pulling into a train station. Juxtaposing that with *The Day After*, audiences were rattled at the thought of nuclear warfare happening outside their homes. While both situations can have harmful effects, the comparison is not calculable as the shock value of one instance greatly outweighs the other.

All of the examples discussed in this research can be considered sensational content because they all drew the audience in them. This heightened

experience, disputably creating in essence a virtual reality for the viewer.

Michael A. Shapiro and Daniel G. McDonald (1992) write,

Virtual reality has the potential to involve users in sensory worlds that are indistinguishable or nearly indistinguishable from the real world. In addition, virtual reality may even merge with the real world...as the distinction blurs the physical and computer environments, people will need to make increasingly sophisticated judgements about what is 'real' and what is not. (p. 95)

While none of the examples analyzed for this research were intended to be what we would call modern virtual reality experiences, they all successfully transported the audience to another place and encapsulated them in that moment. In the article entitled, "The place of media power: Pilgrims and witnesses of the media age," author Nick Couldry (2000) explains,

There is a weakening of the once strong relationship between the physical place and social 'place'. It remains true that we sense the world from a locality, but the sense we make of it may not be 'local'. Our perceptual horizons are 'electronically extended' at all levels so that the locality is simply subsumed in a national or global sphere; rather it is increasingly bypassed in both directions...Experience is unified beyond localities and fragmented within them. (p. 29)

With the ability to influence the masses in this way, this research shows the great power that the media hold, and with this power the great responsibility that the media have to use their influence in the most ethical way possible. Extrapolating from this research, one can surmise that there are both pros and cons of sensational content. The examples of the Hindenburg disaster, Apollo 11 and the moon landing and the Vietnam War all illustrate how sensational content can bring people together and start a dialog about what is going on in the world. The

media have the ability to bring to light information that in turn shapes our society by creating discourse about it. What the media are talking about is what society is talking about. Couldry (2000) discusses the role that television in particular plays in the dissemination of information further, explaining that television,

alter[s] the pattern of information flow available to people between and within situations. By allowing us to see into distant situations previously only available face-to-face, television collapse what were previously segregated set of encounters (in politics and social life generally) into translocal mediated 'situations'. As a result, new information flows occur between social groups (genders age-groups, the powerful and the powerless). (p.29)

Sensational content is exactly what it is described to be: sensational. That can make it easy for content to get misconstrued or overwhelming as seen in the example of the "War of the Wars." This broadcast caused an unintentional panic in response to a very extraordinarily sensational dialog.

It is reasonable to conclude that the largest trend throughout this research has been the relationship between technological advancements and the utilization of sensational content. Since technologies are continuously developing, this research leaves many questions about the current state of sensationalism within the media. Sensationalism is still extensively used across all media, and more and more ways to utilize and disperse this kind of content are continuously developing. One area of sensational content that sparked more questions after compiling this research is the portrayal of crime on television. Crime today is portrayed by both the news media and entertainment programs, and content seems to be getting progressively more gruesome and sensational.

Audiences have been fascinated by the depiction of crime for ages, and there are many shows on television today that reflect this. The cable television station Investigation Discoveries is an entire network devoted to such programming, and features almost 100 programs portraying depictions of actual criminal cases. True crime shows such as these often use reenactments to depict criminal events, but because these events are being portrayed by actors on television they do not seem like real events. While these shows are based on real life events, the medium of television does highlight the sensational aspects of a story, because, after all, it is an entertainment medium. Nadine Friedman (2013) expands on this idea, stating, "When 'truth' is buried in bias, sensationalism, and comforting mythology and then delivered with cinematic finesse, it's tempting to embrace reality as fiction" (p. 30).

The common trend throughout this analysis of sensationalism has been the technological advancement helping to blur this line between reality and fiction. As technologies develop, audiences become exposed to more and more content without any kind of buffer to regulate this content. As this research illustrates, as audiences are repeatedly viewing subject matter that contains sensational content, it gets increasingly hard to see the shock value in this type of material and harder yet to reach the threshold of shock for audiences.

Authors of the article, "Explicating Sensationalism in Television News: Content and the Bells and Whistles of Form" argue that sensational content

elicits such a reaction from audiences because sensational content counteracts what is considered socially exactable. They explain,

Sensational news stories are “underdistanced” – that is, they violate a comfortable physiological distance between audience members and their perceptions of events in the physical world. Thus, sensational stories provoke more sensory and emotional reactions than what society has deemed proper to desire or experience. (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001, p. 637)

When television broadcast news began in the 1960s the world was a much different place than it is today. New technological advancements such as the internet and social media have created a world where we as a society are constantly connected to an infinite amount of information. “Although the American psyche has probably always been just as obsessed with violence as today, viewers before the Vietnam era wouldn’t be able to get their fix of it from film and television then like they can now” (Nunnally, 2009, para. 3).

Media news has long been a place where people turn to get information, and crime is always a highly discussed issue. In the article, “Violence and Suffering in Television News: Toward a Broader Conception of Harmful Television Content for Children” author J.W. Van Der Molen discusses how media news is utilized by audiences. Van Der Molen (2004) explains, “Local news, which is widely used by Americans, is often found to overemphasize brutal crime and to rely heavily on sensational presentations of violence. In addition, analyses of the major network newscasts have shown that crime and violent world events are among the most frequently covered topics.” Technological advancements in the last few years have allowed for a new trend to immerse in media news. Many news stations are

now using consumer footage to air in broadcasts of events that are currently unfolding. Since almost everybody has a phone capable of capturing video, bystanders of events are now capturing this footage. Social media outlets have also allowed for the mass sharing of this content extremely fast. There have been many events on the news the past few years that have used content of the event as it happened, most shot by bystanders. The deaths of Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray were all caught on tape. These were deaths of real people, but the footage looked identical to something that you would see in a true crime show reenactment.

NYU Journalism Professor Mitchell Stephens, explains in his book *A History of News*, that, "sensationalism is unavoidable in news - because we humans are wired, probably for reasons of natural selection, to be alert to sensations, particularly those involving sex and violence." These kinds of stories need to be reported but now since audiences can watch the tragic events unfold, it is hard to distinguish the real life events from the reenactments made for entertainment purposes.

News media have been integrating more and more live footage into their news stories, and this content continues to get increasingly gruesome. Videos showing people getting brutally beaten and killed are becoming standard material used on broadcast news, and audiences do not seem to have the emotional responses that they once did to unfolding current events, even when the brutality is unfolding in real time on their screens. With assistance of the advancing

technologies over the last century, the medium has cried sensationalism too many times. Audience of today seem to be unmoved by the tragic events that they see on television. One might conclude that they have become desensitized because they have seen the same scene play out on screen numerous times before, so the shock value of the content has withered away, even when the content is no longer being played by actors.

It sounds cliché to say that our society is becoming ‘desensitized’ to the content that we are viewing but there have been many great changes in the way audiences react to content from the early days of the media. “If the latest mass shooting doesn’t move you to cry or to protest, that’s probably because you may be losing a normal emotional reaction to an event that is growing more common every day, according to psychological experts, who call this feeling desensitization” (Niller, 2015, para. 1). Although the content is still shocking, audiences are becoming more and more disconnected with the content that they are viewing because they are being overwhelmed with too much content. In 1999, the online digital media company and news satire organization The Onion published an article entitled, “Brutality-Desensitization Process Nearly Complete.” This article discusses how the process of desensitizing audiences is nearly complete. The article (1999) reads,

Within a short time, the sight of a blood-soaked man fleeing in terror, a hysterical woman begging for her life as she is beaten by attackers, or even a tight close-up of a shotgun-blasted, sucking chest wound on the evening news will no longer provoke any response beyond a dismissive yawn...What we had long considered a normal reaction of panic, fear or sorrow—the negative

emotions traditionally elicited by such horrific displays—is very nearly a thing of the past. (para. 3)

It has been nearly 17 years since this article was originally written and a lot has changed since that time. The satirical aspects of this story, which originally made it funny may not be so amusing anymore. The reaction described is becoming more and more common in our society because of the amount of content that we are exposed to each day. Like the old fable tells, the media have cried sensationalism for years with no real threat of danger to the viewers. Now, with the help of new media, the sensational content that we are seeing is becoming increasingly dangerous to viewers, since these events are actually happening to real people in real time. The effects of which, however, have already been lost on the audience.

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