

'It's better than blaming a dead young man': Creating mythical archetypes in local coverage of the Mississippi River drownings

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Abstract

This study provides a glimpse at myth within newswork created at the local level during a time of death. Through an analysis of news coverage of the drownings of 10 young men in Wisconsin over 13 years, we examine how myth and narrative are used not just for larger, national or global moments, but within the local newspaper, in news stories that may be influenced by the needs of the local community.

Keywords

archetype, death, local news, myth, ritual of communication, story

Between 1997 and 2010, 10 bodies were recovered from the Mississippi River and connected waterways near La Crosse, Wisconsin. The victims shared certain traits – each was male, between the ages of 19 and 29, and in good physical condition with no known mental health problems. While each victim had been seen drinking prior to his disappearance and death, alcohol alone didn't seem to be enough to explain to this Midwestern community of 50,000 how a string of healthy, likeable, and, in some cases, athletic young men could drown so easily in one area.

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Confusion surrounding the deaths led to the community's persistent search for answers, ranging from the simple – the victims were drunk and unaware that they were dangerously close to the river's edge – to a more sinister theory that a serial killer lured the young men to the water and drowned them. Area professional and collegiate newspapers turned to myth and archetype (Bird, 2005; Campbell, 1968[1949]; Lule, 2001; Tuchman, 1978) to help their readers find meaning in the loss of these young men. Early coverage of each disappearance and recovery was somewhat consistent in its depictions of the men, first as 'victims' and then well-loved 'heroes'. After the victims' bodies were recovered, however, the community looked to news coverage to explain the unexpected deaths. In this final stage of storytelling, the depictions lost their consistency: some storylines moved the men from recovery to redemption and remembrance. Others ended with recovery and a quick reconciliation.

This study of a 13-year stretch of reporting on death and loss within one community opens an exploration of localized myth and archetype. While myth in the news has been well established (Darnton, 1975; Eliade, 1988; Lule, 1993), this article examines the use of myth in coverage of a series of tragic events impacting a smaller community. Findings reveal that despite the strong factual similarities behind each disappearance and death, the use of myth and archetype in explaining the deaths of the 10 men varied. The reason behind these differences is not automatically clear. However, our findings suggest that local needs may impact use of news myth and archetype in ways that have not been explored as thoroughly as they have in national media.

The river deaths

The Mississippi River starts in Minnesota headwaters that are about three feet deep, and empties into the Gulf of Mexico at New Orleans with a depth of 200 feet. At its widest point – a span of about a mile – the Mississippi pushes south at about three miles an hour. La Crosse, Wisconsin, is among the dozens of river towns and cities that hug the Mississippi's edges, built in an expanse of a free-flowing river and tributaries that attract boaters and sunbathers. While residents are well aware this is no 'lazy river', that this powerful force of nature may claim the unwary, yet La Crosse's 13-year string of drownings stands out because of the similar profile of its victims.

Starting in 1997, with the disappearance and death of Richard Hlavaty, a total of 10 young, healthy men were last seen alive in downtown La Crosse and were later recovered from the Mississippi River or its tributary, the Black River. All the victims were in or near their early 20s (see Table 1). Eight of the men were college students visiting from out of town or attending one of the three post-secondary institutions in the city: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UW-L), Viterbo University (a private Catholic school), and Western Technical College.

UW-L's weekly student newspaper, *The Racquet*, and Viterbo University's weekly, *The Lumen*, covered the deaths, as did the *La Crosse Tribune*, the city's daily newspaper. The *Tribune* covered each incident from the initial missing report (when available) to the recovery of each man's body and subsequent autopsy. It also covered an FBI investigation conducted to address the rumor that the deaths were actually the work of a serial killer (Gutsche Jr, 2006). Investigators found no evidence to support the notion that a

Table 1. List of the men who drowned in the Mississippi River at La Crosse, Wisconsin, between 1997 and 2010. Source: *La Crosse Tribune*

Name	Age	Reason for being in city	Disappeared	Found after	BAC
Richard Hlavaty	18	To visit brother	12 July 1997	1 day	0.27
Charles Blatz	28	To visit college friend	27 September 1997	7 days	0.31
Anthony Skifton	19	Lived in city	5 October 1997	5 days	0.23
Nathan Kapfer	20	College student and athlete	22 February 1998	41 days	0.22
Jeffrey Geesey	20	College student	10 April 1999	42 days	n/a
Patrick Runingen	23	Regional resident	1 March 2001	7 days	0.24
Jared Dion	21	College student and athlete	10 April 2004	5 days	0.27
Luke Homan	21	College student and athlete	30 September 2006	3 days	0.32
Christopher Melancon	24	For local event	30 September 2007	same day	0.24
Craig Meyers	21	College student	14 February 2010	2 days	0.19

killer was preying on college men. Still, the FBI's finding did not debunk the myth, and public discourse, media coverage, and police investigations of river drownings continued to fuel the belief, in part because no women had disappeared and drowned in ways similar to the men (James, 2004).

According to local news reports, almost all of the men disappeared after leaving the downtown bar district, the nearby annual Oktoberfest celebration, or another kind of party after dark. City, college and university officials claimed alcohol was the primary explanation for the deaths. The area where many of the men were last seen is close to the campus-favored Third and Fourth Streets, known for bars, drink specials and easy access to the river. Officials surmised the men were downtown with friends, broke away from their groups and walked to a nearby city park, which featured an unfenced 18-foot dropoff into the Mississippi River.

Since 2004, the river community in La Crosse has debated the risks that come with unobstructed access to the river (Gutsche Jr, 2006). Wishing to maintain a natural vista, La Crosse citizens and city officials have resisted building a fence or other barrier along the levee or lighting the park at night to alert people to the river's edge. That debate became more heated as the names of the victims began to grow in number. The *La Crosse Tribune* began to treat the drownings collectively with the disappearance and death of Nathan Kapfer in spring 1998. A story about the mothers of previous drowning victims who had 'disappeared in the same manner as Kapfer' (Gardell, 1998c) appeared near an article detailing the search for Kapfer. Coverage of the next victim, Jeffrey Geesey, added Hlavaty to the list, noting:

Between July 1997 and February 1998, four men – each with blood-alcohol levels above the legal levels of intoxication – have disappeared and recovered [*sic*] from the river. They are Richard Hlavaty, Charles Blatz, Anthony Skifton and Nathan Kapfer. (Hannahs, 1999a)

Coverage of subsequent deaths at some point referred to the previous victims, always beginning with Richard Hlavaty.

Communication as ritual during times of loss

The La Crosse community struggled to find meaning and purpose behind these deaths, and its media sought to provide storytelling that would help La Crosse process the combination of sudden, unexpected loss, death and grief. Research on the ‘culture of grief’ suggests the La Crosse river deaths would be particularly difficult as they involved the unexplained, apparently purposeless death of young adults (Kitch and Hume, 2008). To explain the deaths – what happened and why (Chesebro and McMahan, 2006) – to the community, area media needed to take on both the role of transmission, or imparting information, and of ritual communication, or communication that not only informs but also imparts meaning (Carey, 1992). Such ritual communication may employ drama and storytelling (Caldiero, 2007) to become more of a social process than social descriptor, imparting value preferences and meaning about how the world does – and should – work (Zelizer, 2008).

Using archetypes to explain the news

News stories of death rely on familiar archetypes and characters, which allow the media to present to the public conditions of the human environment that may defy conventional explanation (Darnton, 1975; Kitch and Hume, 2008; Schudson, 2003). Myth also helps media present characteristics of an individual involved in a news story by casting them within already set, culturally familiar archetypes (Lule, 2001). Campbell’s (1968[1949]) work on archetypes of heroes, villains, parents, children, gods and man from the earliest recorded mythologies shows that the use of myth has long been a fundamental component of ritualized storytelling.

More recent examination of myth in newswork relies heavily on Lule’s seven ‘Master Myths’: the ‘Victim’, ‘Scapegoat’, ‘Hero’, ‘Good Mother’, ‘Trickster’, ‘The Other World’, and ‘The Flood’. Specifically, the archetypes that form the master myths of the ‘Victim’, ‘Scapegoat’, ‘Hero’, ‘Good Mother’, and ‘Trickster’ are most crucial to this study. Viewing the world and the news through archetypes – the collected cultural constructions of people, places and ideas – makes sense of news events and experiences that are difficult to explain (Ettema, 2005).

Through the news and the approach of a story, *the news story*, the audience understands life not just as a reality, but life as a form of drama (Kitch and Hume, 2008; Lule, 2001). For example, drama was at the center of the journalistic storytelling of racial tensions and complex social conditions in one block of Harlem that appeared in a series of 10 stories in the *New York Times* (Parisi, 1998). In his analysis, Parisi found journalistic storytelling focused on personal stories from residents within the block and lent itself to the use of myth and stereotypes through ‘compelling, riveting’ stories that ‘grievously misrepresented the neighborhood’s social vitality, human inventiveness and significant civility’ (1998: 249). While the stories may have ‘misrepresented’ the neighborhood, stories of decline and crime ‘made sense’ to the reader, because the stories connected to larger, cultural beliefs of racially diverse neighborhoods.

Myth and archetype in newswork help standardize cultural understanding and ultimately can offer a simplified interpretation of complex social issues. For example, myth's definition of motherhood, either as a 'Good Mother' or as a 'bad mother', has tended to oversimplify coverage of infanticide (Barnett, 2006). By turning to mythical constructions of what makes a 'good mother', journalists who covered news of infanticide in the 1980s and 1990s told stories of mothers as troubled souls, ignoring social and cultural dimensions of motherhood, such as stress, that may have said more about why the crimes occurred (Barnett, 2006).

However helpful Lule's archetypes in the form of the master myths may be, they provide a limited understanding of the cultural understandings of myth in newswork. The 'Master Myths' do not answer every question regarding the use of myth in news, but may be viewed as a foundation for deeper exploration of archetypes, their characteristics and cultural roles. Myth, as presented separately by Lule, Eliade and Campbell, has been critiqued for failing to incorporate the culture of local audiences in the creation of culturally resonant narratives and mythical archetypes, while highlighting the cross-cultural and international elements of myth (Bird, 2003). Instead, Bird states, myth performs a 'cultural work' (2003: 160) that reflects the space, time, ideas and people involved in a news event in which archetypes are at play. In this spirit, this study looks at how space, time, culture and people reshape larger mythical archetypes to tell stories locally.

News myth and unexpected loss

Myth is especially helpful in communicating meaning behind disasters, wars, and death as it appears in the news (Riegert and Olsson, 2007). While death is never an easy concept to address in any kind of communication, attempting to explain the senseless death of a young, healthy person is a particular challenge for media because the loss 'seems a terrible aberration' (Kitch and Hume, 2008: 96). Media help provide meaning by using blame and 'dramas with a victim/villain storyline' (Connor and Wesolowski, 2004: 149). From a normative perspective, such storytelling helps guide the community in understanding the lessons to be learned from the death (if there are any) and the basic information behind what happened, when, where and how.

Exploring the cultural meaning behind the news storytelling of death reveals a deeper set of themes. For example, news coverage of teenage death through reckless behavior, such as speeding, car surfing or drinking and driving, tends to blame the victim (Connor and Wesolowski, 2004; Kitch and Hume, 2008). When teenagers' 'sudden deaths' occur outside of risky behaviors, however, the teenagers are lauded for their achievements, their personalities, and their character (Kitch and Hume, 2008: 103). These characterizations of youth who had been 'taken before their time' fit already constructed archetypes – they were either categorized as 'good' teens who avoid trouble or as risk-takers who seek trouble out.

Such characterizations of dead youth rely on broad archetypes – such as the 'good' and the 'bad', the 'victim' and the 'villain'. This study attempts to examine how (if at all) those archetypes appeared in localized coverage of repeated community loss such as the

Mississippi River drowning deaths. Our analysis of archetype and myth in community and college or university newspapers was guided by the following research questions: 1) 'What similarities existed in explanatory concepts used by newswriters in their coverage of the drowning victims?', and 2) 'What were the building blocks of the creation of the stories?'

Revealing cultural meanings in the news

Because this study attempts to understand the cultural meanings of news coverage, it utilizes an interpretive textual analysis using a grounded approach, which, while not intended to be generalizable, contributes to our understanding through an examination of themes, meanings and concepts (Berkowitz and Eko, 2007; Jackson et al., 2007; Pauly, 1991). In this study, we employ textual analysis as 'a study of language and texts as forms of discourse, which help to create and reproduce systems of social meaning' (Tonkiss, 1998: 245) to identify the meanings and messages within news text. By approaching news in this way, one understands that 'the way we use language is rarely innocent, and discourse analysis can help to reveal how talk and texts are ordered to produce specific meanings and effects' (1998: 247).

Though limited in scope, deep study of specific cases such as this one raises thoughtful questions and engages researchers with new perspectives. Such was the case in the study of metaphor and description news coverage of crisis (Lule, 1993), or in the construction of a neighborhood through mythical representations in the *New York Times*' 'One block in Harlem' (Parisi, 1998). This approach calls for several readings of the source material to determine running themes and guidelines for analysis based in the cultural perspective of news (Berkowitz, 2010).

Articles from the daily *La Crosse Tribune*, the weekly UW-L *Racquet*, and the weekly Viterbo *Lumen* supplied data for this study. The study reviewed the first 14 issues (or to the end of the academic year, whichever came first) following both the date each man went missing and the date his body was recovered. *Tribune* articles were gathered on microfilm. Student newspaper articles were located from their campus archives.

Because the Meyers death occurred at the beginning of the study, stories about his disappearance and recovery were found through the Access World News electronic database and *The Racquet*'s online database. In all cases, articles about the men's drownings and recoveries were collected together. Then, we read all of the stories independently and took notes about the language and themes in the coverage, recording our thoughts in a spreadsheet that we shared to compare insights and examine themes in the context of this cultural framework.

Death as a progression of archetypes

Throughout the coverage of each drowned man, we found the storytelling followed a three-stage path that utilized archetypes corresponding with several of Lule's master myths. In stage one, when the man was missing, the storytelling went through a stage we characterized as 'Victim'. In stage two, as the man's body was found and his death

acknowledged, the storytelling transitioned into a type of 'Hero', celebrating the goodness of the person lost. Stage three offered resolution to the unexpected and unexplained loss, utilizing two different collections of archetypes to determine if and how the man would be remembered.

This mythical succession is similar to Campbell's concept of the hero 'monomyth', in which the main character journeys through stages of separation, initiation and return (1968[1949]: 30). *Separation* represents the character's journey from 'common day to a region of supernatural wonder' (1968[1949]: 30). The stage of *initiation* has the character battling and championing over 'fabulous forces' from which he emerges in the *return* as a hero for overcoming the unknown or powerful. The hero 'comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man' (1968[1949]: 30).

In the following sections, we describe the three stages, beginning with 'Victim', in which the men disappear into the unknown; 'Hero', in which they conquer the uncertainty of their disappearance through recovery of their bodies; and 'resolution', in which the community reconciles how the men's deaths are explained, understood and resolved.

Stage one: The missing as victim

Language and storytelling initially characterized each man as a victim or an innocent at the mercy of circumstances beyond his control. An undercurrent of submissiveness in this early characterization matches a key archetype newsmakers use in an attempt to find meaning in death – especially if that death is considered meaningless or accidental (Kitch and Hume, 2008; Lule, 2001). Newswriters turn death into sacrifice, and the loss of the person as one to be 'marked and mourned' (Lule, 2001: 22) to construct the first stage of archetype.

Newspapers in this stage often referred to the young men either in passive tone or as passive recipients of others' actions. Charles Blatz 'became separated' from his friends and 'wound up in the Mississippi River' (White, 1997b). Nathan Kapfer 'was escorted out' of a bar (Gardell, 1998a), rather than simply leaving or being ejected for his violent behavior.

The mythical victim does not seek death, and early news stories highlighted this idea by consistently describing the disappearances as out of character for each man. Newswriters were then able to question how the young men disappeared, since a deliberate abandonment was not in line with their usual behavior. Nathan Kapfer was 'never a problem kid, not the type to disappear' (Gardell, 1998b). When Patrick Runingen disappeared without notifying friends or family, the *Tribune* quoted the police chief as saying Runingen 'has never done this (disappeared) before' (Magney, 2001). Jared Dion was 'a social person and not the type to leave town without telling anyone' (Mercer, 2004b).

Once the victim archetype was established for each man, news stories heightened the drama of the unexplained disappearance. Several stories across the range of victims included parents, family members, friends and lovers offering some variation of the phrase: 'I/We really don't know what happened.' While it was confirmed that many of

the victims had been drinking the night they vanished, news stories did not offer drunkenness as an explanation for the disappearance. Police labeled those young men who were missing for more than a few days as 'missing persons'. La Crosse police went further with Luke Homan, classifying him as an 'endangered missing person' (Schott, 2006a). The *Tribune* did not offer an explanation for the heightened concern or describe the difference in the terminology.

Dramatic storylines maintained their energy by hedging authoritative autopsy reports with caveats that maintained an aura of mystique surrounding the deaths. For example, a story on the Geesey death noted, 'An autopsy cannot re-create the final minutes of life' and that the community may never know exactly how or why he died (Hannahs, 1999a).

Such drama surrounding the unexplained led community members to create their own explanations, the most popular of which was a rumor that a serial killer was leading young, intoxicated men to the river, pushing them in, and carving a smiley face into a tree nearby (Rinzel, 2008). While somewhat fantastic, the idea of a roving murderer gave the community someone else to focus on other than the bar district, the city's planners or the victims themselves. These answers were an attempt to try to reconcile the victim without blaming him. As one columnist noted, 'It's human nature to believe in urban legends. Somehow, it feels better than blaming a dead young man for putting himself in danger' (James, 2004).

Stage two: The found as 'hero'

When news coverage of missing men became coverage of bodies found, the stories turned victims into 'heroes'. As common an archetype as the victim, the hero is typically celebrated when alive as an example of greatness achieved. Heroes' character and physical abilities raise and honor ordinary people by measuring their successes against a 'humble birth', an 'early mark of greatness', a 'quest' and a 'triumph' (Lule, 2001: 23). And even though this study deals with men-as-hero, the hero archetype crosses gender lines. Characteristics of bold ambition, idealism, physical strength, and selflessness have been attributed to women in literature and popular culture (Peixoto Labre and Duke, 2004; Polster, 1992; Wilson Smith, 2010).

'Heroes' in terms of this study received the adulation traditionally assigned to the archetype: their positive traits were emphasized, their negatives forgotten, and the news stories, at least temporarily, came together to celebrate whatever they could of the victims out of that desire to avoid 'blaming a dead young man'. In the river deaths, each young man was temporarily given a hero's recognition once his body was pulled from the river. By being found, the men had already passed through Campbell's (1968[1949]) *initiation* phase and its 'decisive victory'. Even though they had died, they were no longer missing and thereby had conquered the mystery of their whereabouts. Their return sparked opportunities to recover stories of the men themselves.

In celebrating their recovery, news media began to cast the victims as heroes with the help of those who knew the men the best. In each case, family members and friends told reporters that their man had been good, kind and worthy of praise. Patrick

Runingen was a good kid who helped his mom (Magney, 2001). Nathan Kapfer was 'a good student, a good baseball player and a good friend' (Gardell, 1998b). Jeffrey Geesey 'was raised in Sunday school, accepted Christ in the second grade' (Hannahs, 1999b). Homan 'was just a tremendous breath of fresh air into our [athletic] program. He is a great role model on our team, for all our players' (Schott, 2006). Chris Melancon was 'an outstanding young man' who joined the Marines after 9/11 (Springer, 2007b).

Stories told of men who were great athletes and team players. The *Tribune* highlighted the achievements of UW-L wrestler Jared Dion:

'Dion was so dedicated to his sport and teammates he once wrestled in a tournament while sick with what he thought at the time was just a cold,' Zwaschka (Dion's friend and wrestling teammate) said.

'He'd cough and cover his mouth while he wrestled,' Zwaschka said. 'That day he was wrestling the defending champion in his weight division, and won.'

Later, Dion learned he had had bronchitis (McAlpine, 2004).

A more active style of and approach to writing fueled the transition from victim to hero. The young men were no longer passive recipients of actions or things *done to them*, but they, themselves, were *active actors* in their own lives. Richard Hlavaty, who along with his brother had been chased to the river by a group of men throwing rocks, no longer was 'jumped' by a group of men (White, 1997a). Instead, Richard Hlavaty 'leaped' (1997a) into the river in an attempt to swim away from his attackers.

In the hero stage, men were given the trappings of honor. Tales told by friends and family members reached back through the men's lives to highlight their struggles and their successes, to validate their decisions, and to set the agenda of what and how the community should remember their loved ones. As the bodies were recovered, journalists relied on updated information from law enforcement about what may have led to the men's deaths. This information helped determine the final stage of the news story path and the archetypes that best represented the legacies the men left behind. As facts emerged that rebutted the idea of 'hero', media had a choice between maintaining the praise or curtailing it – between the 'happy ending' or simply an end.

Stage three: Split personalities

Each man's hero stage led to the return or the resolution in which the hero awards gifts to his friends and family that he had gathered from his journey, leaving his mark on the community (Campbell, 1968[1949]). In this final stage, characterizations of the young men were shaped into two sub-archetypes, created by combining several 'master myths'. In these sub-archetypes, some of the men were preserved as heroes while others were not.

Sub-archetype 1: Fallen Angel

For six of the 10 young men, their stories came to an abrupt halt, with no discussion of the memories or legacies they left behind. These endings coincided with the publication

of their blood alcohol content (BAC) levels as released by the medical examiner. In all but one case (Geesey), the men's BAC levels were well above the legal limit for intoxication (see Table 1).

Richard Hlavaty's experience of being chased into the river with his brother and jumping into it in an attempt to swim to safety was described as a brave action in the hero stage. But when news reports began focusing on his BAC of 0.271, which at the time was 'nearly three times the legal limit' (Gardell, 1998c), the story no longer focused on his efforts to protect his brother and himself, but rather his state of intoxication.

Anthony Skifton had been praised as a mentor during his hero stage, but when the area resident's BAC information was released, one article discussed his intoxication in four different ways in the first four paragraphs:

A La Crosse man who drown in Isle La Plume Slough two weeks ago had a *blood-alcohol level higher than the legal limit*, a toxicology report showed Monday.

La Crosse County Medical Examiner John Steers said Anthony D. 'Tony' Skifton, 19, of 820 Caledonia St., had a *blood alcohol concentration of 0.23 percent*. A level of 0.10 percent is proof of intoxication under Wisconsin law.

The autopsy report last week said Skifton drowned and no foul play was involved in his death. The report also said *Skifton was intoxicated*.

Acute alcohol intoxication was a contributing factor in the death, Steers said. (White, 1997c, emphasis added)

News coverage shifted to suggest the deaths of six of the 10 young men were examples of what can occur from excessive drinking, which could be considered a deviation from social norms as seen in Lule's (2001) 'Scapegoat'. News stories also suggested that risk-taking, which led to their own destruction, meant that the men had brought their fates upon themselves; they were deserving not of death, but merely consequences for their actions, a sign of Lule's (2001) 'Trickster'. The element of 'Victim' also remained with these men in their stories. They may have been unaware (having been intoxicated) of what actions they were taking and the possible consequences, or they were foolish (to become intoxicated) in their risk-taking. Regardless, the men were presented as innocents with dangerous elements, thoughtless and uncaring about the possible results that their actions might have.

The complexity of the archetype that comes out of the storytelling of six of the 10 victims suggests the use of a blend of master myths to bring their stories to a swift and final end. This study suggests a sub-archetype named the 'Fallen Angel', appearing at a conjunction of Lule's (2001) master myths of the 'Victim', the 'Scapegoat', and the 'Trickster' (see Figure 1). Purely a secular concept for the purpose of this article, the idea of an 'angel' – one who is pure, who contributes at a time of need, an innocent who could do no harm – has been attributed to characters in entertainment and celebrities in popular culture (Gardella, 2007). The term 'fallen angel' has long been a part of common vernacular ascribed to those who once held public recognition, or had the potential to, and tumbled from the heights by their own actions (for example, see Ridlon, 1988).

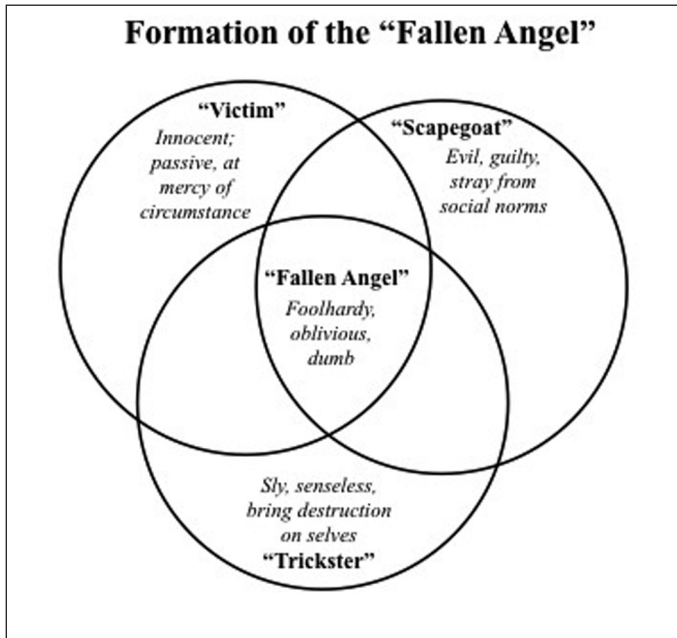


Figure 1. Formation of the ‘Fallen Angel’ sub-archetype

The ‘hero’ stage overlooked any possible negative traits the men may have had. The ‘fallen angel’ archetype revisited the negatives about the dead men during the resolution stage. News coverage mentioned Geesey’s past suicidal thoughts. Runingen was framed in simplicity – articles emphasized that he was a high school graduate from a nearby small town, worked at an IGA grocery store, lived in an apartment above a business and did not own a working car. Neither had the glitz nor the glamour that would be expected in a hero.

‘Fallen angels’ also had their positive traits diminished. Chris Melancon, the ninth victim, served his country as a Marine and had recently returned from a deployment in Iraq. In his ‘Hero’ stage, the *Tribune* shared reflections from Melancon’s friend Anthony Triplett:

Triplett called Melancon more of a brother than a friend. He said the two met at church while still in middle school, and joined the Marines together after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. (Springer, 2007a)

But, in the resolution phase, the deference shown to Melancon’s military service is gone. Instead, he became the ‘ninth heavily intoxicated college-age male to drown in area waters since 1997’ (Springer, 2007b). The *Tribune* quotes the city’s police chief as saying, ‘We don’t know if he was tempting fate. We don’t know ... [sic] whether or not he committed suicide. We’ll never know’ (Springer, 2007b).

The resolution stage dealt more with remembrance than with death. While news stories never suggested that the ‘fallen angels’ were unwanted or unloved by friends and family, the men did not seem to make such an impact on the La Crosse community that the news stories felt the need for an extended resolution. Once the men’s bodies were recovered, the temporary bandage of hero was enough to allow the community to move forward after their losses. For heroes-turned-fallen angels, their resolution appeared to be that they somehow brought their fates upon themselves. They were honored, because their drowning was sad and unexpected, but in the quest to explain their deaths, it appeared that there were not more stories to tell. The pedestal on which these six men were placed was removed.

Archetype 2: Pseudo-saint

The stories of four victims of the river drownings were not brought to quick resolutions. Rather, the men were extended into a more significant resolution focusing on the legacy left behind in an archetype we call the ‘pseudo-saint’, a blend of Lule’s (2001) ‘Hero’ and ‘Good Mother’ (see Figure 2). News stories portrayed these men as individuals who were beyond good and brave. They were shining examples of love and kindness, caring and compassion, good deeds and lasting impact. The pseudo-saint was displayed by the news stories’ choices of quotes, use (and quoted use) of superlative language and examples of remarkable, heroic feats.

Coverage of the ‘pseudo-saints’ still included some negative traits, such as the men’s levels of intoxication, but the news stories did not focus on the deviant nature of alcohol as it did with the fallen angels and their high BACs. For example, on the night of his disappearance, police cited ‘pseudo-saint’ Nathan Kapfer for underage drinking and violent behavior. Yet through the news coverage, journalists discussed his strengths,

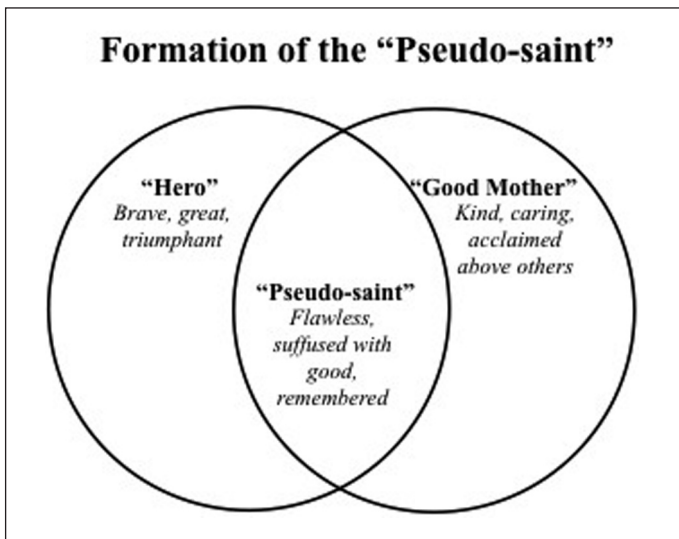


Figure 2. Formation of the ‘Pseudo-saint’ sub-archetype

popularity, and boyish innocence. A sidebar to an article discussing the search for Kapfer's body questioned whether police had followed standard procedures in ticketing and releasing him, rather than taking him into custody and potentially averting the tragedy (Gardell, 1998d). Another article (White, 1998) questioned the validity and accuracy of laboratory tests that suggested he died with a high BAC, implying that unlike the fallen angels, there was some reason to question how intoxicated he was.

An article on Meyer's toxicology report also raised questions about conflicting BAC readings (both, however, were above the level of legal intoxication), shifting the focus from the role of alcohol in his death to the reliability of the civil servants involved (Jungen, 2010). Jared Dion's BAC was listed in news coverage, but articles distanced the impact alcohol might have had on his ability to escape death by drowning, noting 'even a well-conditioned swimmer under the most ideal conditions would find it difficult to make it to the shore in that water' (Springer, 2004).

Besides remembering athletic abilities that somehow reached out from the grave to overcome high BACs, pseudo-saints' strengths and characters were spoken of in superlative terms. Dion, an athlete, was 'a fierce competitor, a perfect gentleman, the funniest person in the room' (*Racquet Staff*, 2004). An article on Luke Homan began:

Whether they knew him for one year or 20, the friends and family who shared stories Monday night about Lucas 'Luke' Homan repeated many of the same phrases.

Best friend. Like a brother. Always cracking jokes. Awesome listener. Hero. (Schott, 2006b)

Notions of the athletic and successful hero meshed with stories of personality traits that resemble Lule's (2001) 'Good Mother', one who is always there for others, selfless and kind. It is important to note that Lule describes the 'Good Mother' in both a feminine sense, as a literal mother, and in a figurative sense, as a caring individual who deserves to be raised above all others for his or her dedication to others, selfless giving and remarkable kindness. Lule offers examples of politicians, social activists and community figures of both genders that fit the archetype of the 'Good Mother'.

News reports turned to sources to highlight the men's 'good' and 'motherly' traits as creating a permanent or lasting legacy. Kapfer 'will forever remain in our thoughts and in our hearts' (*Lumen Staff*, 1998). Dion 'will forever remain a memory that will never fade' (*Racquet Staff*, 2004). Homan 'is somebody we won't forget. He'll always be a part of us' (Jungen and Springer, 2006). One person said of Craig Meyers, 'some people wait a lifetime to meet a person like Craig' (Lang, 2010).

To further stress how the young men cared about their families, friends and communities, the student newspapers published letters and emails from friends, students and faculty – often in multiple-page spreads – to reinforce the feeling that those who knew the young men were fortunate to have had that experience and their communities were poorer for their losses. This sense of permanence and impact best represents the characteristics of ritual communication, in which media present not only information, but also meanings of the news. By turning the men into 'heroic good mothers', news stories enabled transcendence through the conscious or subconscious decision to cover a disappearance and death in a way that not only informs but also comforts a community in distress and grief.

Discussion and future directions

This study provides a glimpse at myth within newswork at the local level during a time of death. We examine how myth and narrative are used to reflect local concerns and culture in the local newspaper, not just during larger, national or global moments, which have been the focus of much of the recent literature on news myth. Our findings confirm an active use of myth and archetype to fill a similar purpose as has been studied at a larger cultural level. We were intrigued to find a blend of major myths utilized, creating a sub-stratum of archetypes that may appear in news stories tackling the inexplicable.

We were also curious about the split nature of the resolution stage within the storytelling. To recap, coverage of these deaths spanned a 13-year period and involved not only 10 different victims, but also numerous reporters and editors. We could not attribute the approach to these stories to the particular style of one reporter or editor. The consistency of the three-stage path suggested the stages served a specific need – storytelling would be incomplete should coverage skip, for example, the ‘hero’ stage and go directly to ‘resolution’. The divergence in the third stage suggested that variations within each stage may be reflective of the local community, rather than an abstract concept of death or grief.

By revealing the split that occurs in the archetypes used to personify these young men after victim to hero, this analysis suggests that the archetypes needed to explain their progression do not fit neatly into one or another of Lule’s master myths, but rather where a blend of those myths created the appropriate tool. The men emerge from the hero stage into a combination of two or three master myths that result in the sub-archetypes of the ‘Fallen Angel’ or the ‘Pseudo-saint’ (see Figure 3).

But why did four of these young men become ‘pseudo-saints’ while the others ‘fallen angels?’ The answer to that question seems to lie not in the person, but in his legacy, or the hole he left behind in his communities. The men constructed as pseudo-saints held significant status within their communities by attending area universities and playing on local university athletic teams, over which their communities felt a certain level of ownership and pride. These were ‘large men’, and having them ripped away left a serious injury that needed to be filled with the appropriate archetype in order for the community to heal.

On the other hand, fallen angels, at one point celebrated as heroes, had contributed less to the La Crosse community. Several of these men grew up outside the region. They did not play in college sports. They lacked the attention of many friends and admirers.

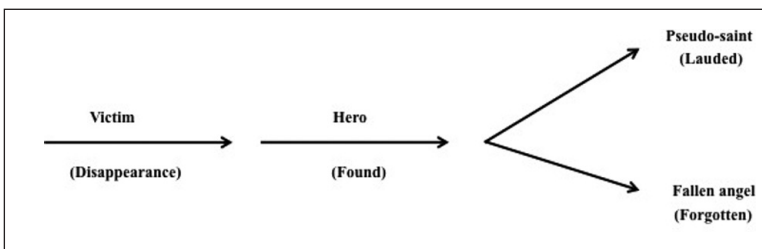


Figure 3. The progression of archetypes for the river drowning victims

One man worked at a grocery store and did not have a car. Another, though a military veteran, was merely in town for a festival. He, like the others, did not mean much, if anything, in the city, or to its people. In effect, the loss wasn't as large, and thus the archetype used to resolve his story reflected a willingness to move on from the death without leaving a mark on the community.

While broader mythical stories may cross continents and centuries, forever resonating with the human condition, there is significant value in examining how these grand ideas have been subtly altered to reflect the small, yet not insignificant needs of the communities dealing with the inexplicable. When tragedy strikes and local daily news needs to both inform and explain, it may conform its message to the precise needs of a smaller, focused audience.

From this study, then, we suggest that future research explore how the construction of archetypes and characters within the news may be shaped by the values of a given community at a given time and within specific circumstances. To better understand myth in news, scholars should not rely solely on larger mythical stories and characterizations that tend to be shaped by larger, cultural ideologies of a region or nation. In order to make local news meaningful and to address the needs of community and audience, those in the business of news need to alter dominant and larger myths by finding a secondary palette of myth. Exploring myth at the local level over time, such as this study does, provides perspective for a rich discussion through which to enter into a more expansive conversation about how news myth and archetypes are constructed.

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