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Robert E. Gutsche Jr.

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ZOMBIES, DRUGS, AND FLORIDA WEIRDNESS

“Imaginative power” and resonance in coverage of Miami’s “Causeway Cannibal”

Robert E. Gutsche Jr.

On a steamy May 26, 2012 in Miami, Florida, police officers found Rudy Eugene viciously eating another man’s face. Police shot Eugene at least four times, killing him, to stop the attack. Over the next month, the story of the “Causeway Cannibal” (a.k.a. the “Miami Zombie”) fueled debate about what spawned the attack. News explanations included synthetic drugs, cannibalism, Voodoo, and zombies. This textual analysis of immediate news explanations to the attack explores and speculates on why some explanations, such as mental illness, were ignored. By distinguishing between journalistic sensationalism and Ettema’s journalistic “imaginative power,” this paper presents possible cultural reasons to explain why news media all but excluded mental illness as a dominant explanation for Eugene’s actions.

KEYWORDS mental health/illness; Miami; news narratives; qualitative textual analysis; resonance; violence

Introduction

On a steamy May 26, 2012, police responded to a fight between two men who appeared to be wrestling on the city’s MacArthur Causeway just outside *The Miami Herald* building. One of the men was said to be “acting like Tarzan” (Associated Press 2012). When officers arrived, they found that man, Rudy Eugene, naked and viciously eating another man’s face. Eugene, a dark-skinned, 31-year-old Haitian man, had spent 18 minutes tearing into the face of Ronald Poppo, a 65-year-old New Yorker with light skin who had been homeless in Miami for 30 years. As a police officer yelled for Eugene to stop, Eugene turned to face the officer, with skin in his teeth, and growled. Police shot Eugene at least four times, killing him, to stop the attack. In the end, Poppo would lose some 70 percent of his face in what police and local news media would later call a “cannibalistic attack” by a “zombie” (N. Griffin 2012; Grimm 2012).

Over the next month, the story of the “Causeway Cannibal” (a.k.a. the “Miami Zombie”) fueled a movement by local city governments to restrict the production and use of “bath salts,” a synthetic drug suspected by media and experts to have spawned the attack (Haughney 2012). At the same time, however, news media paid equal attention to other explanations for the attack, reporting on pleas from the citizenry to end cannibalism and to fight against Voodoo curses that were thought to have motivated Eugene’s behavior. News articles also turned to local experts and even the nation’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to comment on the possibility that Eugene was, in fact, a zombie (Grimm 2012). After a medical examiner’s report on June 8, 2012 revealed

Eugene's stomach did not contain any remnants of human flesh—destroying explanations that he was, in fact, a cannibal (his girlfriend also held a press conference to persuade the public that he was a Christian)—news articles continued with the explanation that “bath salts” were to blame. However, explanations for Eugene's behavior became even more complicated when on June 27, 2012, media reported that only marijuana—not “bath salts”—was in Eugene's system (Hiaasen and Green 2012). Media, then, were left with two fewer acceptable explanations for the mauling.

News scholarship often deals with how news uses resonant narratives and archetypes to explain the unexplainable in everyday life (Bird and Dardenne 1997; Gutsche and Salkin 2012; Lule 2001). This study, however, explores when news media avoid seemingly evident explanations—in this case, that mental illness may have caused Eugene to act the way he did. Whether mental illness, such as a non-drug induced psychotic break, sparked Eugene's attack is not the focus of this paper; instead, I am interested in how news media turned to explanations that carried more cultural resonance. Through this analysis, therefore, I wish to distinguish between journalistic sensationalism and cultural resonance, or in Ettema's words, journalism's “imaginative power” (Ettema 2005), to speculate about the possible cultural reasons why news media all but excluded mental illness as a dominant explanation for Eugene's actions. This paper is specifically interested in how local journalists responded in immediate news coverage of breaking news to explore the cultural work of journalism.

I begin this paper with literature on how news media operate as cultural storytellers, specifically in terms of how they tend to explain issues of mental health in times of crisis and events that involve violent behavior. After a qualitative textual analysis of news articles from the *Miami Herald*, *Orlando Sentinel*, and the Fort Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* that explores the concept of journalistic resonance (Ettema 2005), I offer a discussion and implications of examining social issues through news explanations that are not just marginalized, but are ignored.

News as Explanation

News is a source of cultural explanation for the everyday world that relies on a dominant and grounded cultural context to explain the unexplainable (Lule 2001). News media are a primary source with which to conduct research about “how people explain social events” (Sotirovic 2003, 122). How news stories provide information to readers about social issues has been shown to be critical to how the readers may perceive blame for the social issues. To do so, journalists tend to tell stories that would “resonate” with audiences. As Ettema writes:

Scholarly conventional wisdom holds news to be realities constructing within frameworks that emphasize certain facts while suppressing others and thereby promote certain political and moral evaluations while hindering others. But if these frames are to construct reality effectively . . . they must resonate with what writers and readers take to be real and important matters of life. (2005, 134)

Ettema distinguishes between the concepts of resonance and salience, arguing—with the support of Entman (1993)—that salience is the connection between a current event, dominant moral positions, and shared histories to make issues of the current day more relevant to the public while also providing causal explanations and to propose

solutions. Ettema (2005, 134) writes that resonance, on the other hand, “elevates news to myth and deepens it into ritual” by relating news to our imaginations that build upon a society’s fears, collective memories, and shared wishes for the future. In this way, issues of today become “normalized” to fit into a world of imagined realities that relate to dominant moral narratives and that connect to our own lived experiences.

Newswork’s immediacy is especially important in that initial information about and explanations of news events cast the public’s understanding and discussions about everyday life (Carey 2009). The effect of news stories—and which ones journalists tell—has also been explored. News stories that focus on the individual through personal stories and anecdotes, for example, tend to lead audiences to blame the individuals themselves for their problems, which has especially been the case in discussing mental health, poverty, and racial conflicts (Iyengar 1991). Though quotes and comments from sources, not journalists themselves, fuel what reporters write, journalists select which comments, quotes, and perspectives appear in their publications that fit with dominant cultural values (Berkowitz 2011). In her study on news coverage of mothers who kill their children, for example, Barnett (2011) argues that news stories tend to demonize mothers who kill their children by comparing the women to the cultural expectation of the “good mother” (Lule 2001), supporting dominant cultural values that expect women to bear children and to love them instead of encouraging society—particularly women—to explore potential social and psychological effects of motherhood.

Generally, audiences tend to blame structural influences for social conditions when news stories focus on those structural factors, such as governmental or institutional influences upon social issues (Sotirovic 2003). For example, F. Durham (2008) suggests that news coverage of dramatic scenes of disaster and inequalities in the response (or lack thereof) by the federal government to Katrina wreckage in 2005 served as political commentary on governmental failure. Through its reporting, journalists “found a newly de-centered form of media ritual as they appealed directly to the people in the voice of the people, but in a way that was also intended to get the attention of the absentee government” (112).

Because news articles in this study discussed Eugene’s Haitian background, research on how US news media explain social conditions and individual behavior based on perceptions of race and ethnicity becomes important (Omni and Winant 1994). Lule’s (2001) work on “The Other World,” for instance, demonstrates how newswriters characterize “the other” as social subordinates, often seen as different and culturally primitive. Lule suggests that when journalists fail to understand the cultural context of someone from another place, reporting tends to cast members of that community as operating outside dominant culture.

In terms of Haiti, which was specifically mentioned in Lule’s work, journalists were shown to characterize a country and its people that they did not understand as primitive, savage, “feared,” and to be “avoided.” In both of these cases, casting the “others” positions, actions, or geographies as counter—or threatening—to dominant ideology released journalists from having to explain or explore alternative explanations that may undermine the dominant position (Meyers 2004). Campbell (1995) also maps a history of how US news media depict racial and ethnic minorities—particularly those with dark skin—as criminal, primitive, savage, and dangerous by telling stories that highlight danger and that rely on sources that confirm racial stereotypes.

In sum, this paper subscribes to a cultural approach to news—in particular, that news stories are told through particular vantage points, fueled by sources of journalists' choosing, and told in ways that fit dominant social and cultural mores (Berkowitz 2011; Darnton 1975). In this sense, news is not found and reported, but is constructed by journalists' attention to dominant values, contributing to journalists' cultural authority (Berkowitz and Gutsche 2012).

News Coverage of Mental Health

The National Institute of Mental Health reports that 26 percent of Americans suffer from some form of mental illness (Bialik 2011), though this number is hard to confirm. More importantly, however, mental health continues to be rejected as a social explanation for a person's behaviors and actions in the United States. Mental health continues to be associated with weakness, laziness, or punishment from God or another higher power (Knifton et al. 2010). Stigma has been shown to affect people in very personal ways, attacking their personality, intellect, and identities as being a cause for their behaviors. For example, the effect of mental health stigma on men in the US military, one study shows, was viewed as a direct assault on men's masculinity (Greene-Shortridge, Britt, and Castro 2007).

News coverage of mental illness in the United States tends to connect mental health to violent or "negative" consequences, such as death, anti-social behavior, and violence (Slopen et al. 2007). In his study of news coverage involving mental health in the late 1990s, Wahl (2003) found that articles tended to focus on the "negative" aspects of mental illness, ignoring stories of "recovery" and "accomplishments" among people reported to have a mental illness. "Even when newspaper articles did not focus on violence or crime, they tended to emphasize dysfunction and disability," Wahl writes (1597).

However, interest in the "Miami Zombie" story gained international media attention—including from Al Jazeera—broadening the story's audience (Clary 2012e). Therefore, several studies of how international media cover mental illness—on quite similar ways to domestic US media—offer a more complete picture of how mental health is discussed in the news. For example, in a project on two psychiatric patients who escaped from a Brisbane, Australia hospital, Blood and Holland (2004) turned to another study of the Australian press (Hazelton 1997), which argues that news media cast mental health as "bizarre and curious, medical-scientific marvels, moral tales, disorder, crisis and risk (especially depicting the mentally ill as dangerous others) and lay wisdoms and commonsense remedies" (Blood and Holland 2004, 327).

And in Italy, Silvia Bencivelli (2005) reveals how news media depicted killers thought to "suffer" from mental illness as being more prone to commit a violent crime and unable to deal and treat their disorders. News stories, Bencivelli found, frequently explained the killer's actions by calling them "loonie" or "mad" and referring to their actions in the most dramatic ways, such as having acted "in a fit of bloodthirsty cruelty" (4).

This particular study is interested in how news articles focused on explanations such as zombies, cannibalism, and Voodoo in reporting Eugene's attack on the MacArthur Causeway, while seemingly ignoring what may have been another valid explanation—that of mental illness. This leads to two research questions: First, I ask, "What narratives did journalists use in initial coverage of the attack to explain why Eugene mangled his victim?" Second, I am curious about what possible explanations were not explored—particularly

that of mental illness—and ask, “What meanings can be derived from exploring the explanations that journalists seemingly ignored?”

Method: Qualitative Textual Analysis

This study is based on data provided by 39 news articles in three major daily newspapers within a close geographic proximity to Miami that covered the attack consistently throughout the story’s first month. The papers are: the *Miami Herald*, the *Orlando Sentinel*, and the Fort Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel*. My analysis of these texts followed a form of grounded textual analysis, which “allows themes to emerge from the content through multiple readings and discussions of the text” (Berkowitz and Eko 2007, 784). Grounded theory relies on “an ongoing process of comparing units of data with each other” that become defined and categorized as the process continues (Lindlof and Taylor 2010). While a grounded approach allows the researcher to cull themes without a predetermined conceptual approach, I did conduct my readings with an interest in identifying news explanations about how and why this crime occurred. I was particularly interested in determining the extent to which mental health was considered a possible explanation for the crime. Other possible explanations were marginalized in the coverage, such as possible environmental and structural forces that could have caused Eugene to act as he did, but this article is less concerned with the absence of those explanations than the lacking coverage that may have focused on ones’ chemical imbalance, the effects of stress, or suggestions of psychotic breaks in addition to the more outlandish explanations, such as Zombism.

To see how news articles interacted to present dominant explanations for Eugene’s behavior, I performed multiple readings of news stories as they were published, taking notes about how journalists were explaining possible causes for the attack. Using the Access World News database, I searched the terms “Miami” and “face” between May 26, 2012 when the attack occurred and the second medical examiner’s report that appeared on June 28, 2012, which showed Eugene had not been under the influence of “bath salts” when he died. I selected the period of one month following the attack for this study because I am interested in journalists’ immediate explanations for social conditions, particularly in events of local breaking news.

My initial search yielded 594 news articles, many of which did not pertain to the case at hand. I cast a wide net in this initial search to capture any and all stories related to the Causeway attack, including less-detailed breaking news and more general coverage on the event and its aftermath. I then filtered the stories by selecting those that dealt with the attack, identifying relevant stories by their initial paragraphs that appeared in search results. This filtering resulted in a total of 55 stories. In a final filtering, I read and selected articles that included explanations for the Causeway attack, removing articles that may have dealt with a profile on police officers involved in Eugene’s shooting or public policy debates on synthetic drugs that did not have explicit mention of the attack. This final filtering resulted in 39 articles from all three newspapers—19 from the *Miami Herald*, 13 from the *Sun Sentinel*, and 7 from the *Orlando Sentinel* that I used for the analysis. While this dataset is not adequate to provide generalizable results about news explanations, it does represent a census of news coverage about the “Miami Zombie” that allows for deep,

cultural readings about a particular case at a particular time, a process that has proven valuable for critical studies of newswork (for example, see M. G. Durham 2012).

Analysis and Discussion: Imaginative Power in Journalistic Explaining

In the analysis below, I argue that stigma associated with mental illness and a lack of public policy that supports treatment for and awareness of mental health in the United States made mental health an unhelpful and confusing explanation on a par with providing no explanation at all.

Removing Mental Health as a Viable Explanation

By and large, news stories cast Eugene as anything but having experienced mental illness. A headline to an Associated Press article that appeared in the *Orlando Sentinel* about a press conference held by Eugene's girlfriend, Yovonka Bryant, and her celebrity attorney, Gloria Allred, explicitly removed mental illness as an explanation for his behavior: "Girlfriend: Face-chewing attacker was religious, had no signs of mental illness" (Clary 2012a). The story's first paragraph states that "[t]here was no indication the man who chewed off the face of a homeless man had a history of mental illness or was using drugs other than marijuana . . .," and Eugene's girlfriend told reporters that she thought "someone may have slipped Eugene a drug."

Two other stories—another in the *Orlando Sentinel* and one in the *Miami Herald*—hedged the possibility that mental illness caused Eugene to lash out. Appearing the day after a local medical examiner reported that Eugene's system was void of "bath salts," an *Orlando Sentinel* article included a single comment from a police union source that identified a mental condition as being a remote possibility for the attack. In fact, the quote likened mental illness with notions of insanity, thereby avoiding mental illness as a valid medical condition: "There is no doubt in anybody's mind the guy was on something or he was *totally insane*" (Clary 2012d, emphasis mine). *Miami Herald* journalists quoted Eugene's ex-wife as telling reporters about her thoughts on mental illness, avoiding the potential explanation as though the thought of it was unspeakable: "*I wouldn't say he had mental problem [sic] but he always felt like people was against him*" (Moskovitz and Ovalle 2012, emphasis mine).

The only time mental illness was explicitly mentioned in news coverage during this time period appeared in an article about the recovery and experiences of Eugene's victim, Poppo, noting that mental illness is common among the homeless (Mayo 2012) and that Poppo will likely require mental health treatment following this experience (Burch 2012). That news coverage cast mental illness as (1) "insanity," (2) a cause or consequence of homelessness or violence, or (3) that the possibility was meant to be "unspoken," characterized Eugene as naturally mentally healthy or as living a stable enough life that he avoided what might cause mental illness.

News articles did mention Eugene's flaws, however. One *Miami Herald* article, in particular, discussed the lives of both Eugene and his victim, Poppo (Brecher and Green 2012). Both men were described as "troubled men, one who was struggling to get his life on track, another who had given up trying." Poppo, the story says, became homeless 30 years ago and had recently been in trouble with police; Eugene is cast as a marijuana-smoking

Bible reader who also had “run-ins” with police, including for a domestic dispute and for possessing marijuana.

Eugene’s friends and family, however, argued that he had turned to God to better his life and wanted to rid himself of his marijuana addiction, whereas Poppo had been said to be caught in a cycle of poverty and homelessness. Showing Eugene’s resiliency, strength, and family values, a *Miami Herald* article described that he had played high school football and that, despite his past troubles, was working to open a mobile car-wash business (Brecher, Hiaasen, and Robles 2012). As one of Eugene’s high school classmates told the *Herald*:

This [Eugene’s behavior during the attack] is not his character . . . This type of behavior is very unexpected. He was a good person, a true friend. He was a nice, outgoing ready-to-help-anybody kind of guy. I’m not just saying that; he really was that person.

Eugene’s stepfather agreed, telling the *Herald* that Eugene “is not the kind of devil who goes out and kills people like they are showing on the news. He’s a fine boy. He was raised in the church. He was in the choir” (Brecher and Green 2012).

News articles cast Eugene as an average person—maybe one who uses illegal drugs, such as marijuana, but who was well-liked, a Christian, and who did not suffer from mental illness. These character traits normalized Eugene and made him like “one of us” as the beginning of a process to later dehumanize him. While mental illness may have been discussed in passing (for example, that Eugene never suffered from it), issues of mental health were cast as an after-thought and marginalized while sources argued for his sanity. Further, while other explanations discussed below warranted multiple stories in each newspaper, no story focused solely on mental illness.

Explanation Through Dehumanization

Details that Eugene forcefully attacked Poppo, stripping both of their clothes, growling at police officers, and taking several bullets before dying (Brecher 2012; Guzman and Moskovitz 2012) connected Eugene to the archetype of a zombie. Popular in mass culture for generations, zombies experienced resurgence in the 2000s with movies and television shows. Boluk and Lenz (2011, 3) write that by surviving catastrophe and death, zombies represent a resiliency of the human being and construct a mythical narrative of “the return of the return.”

In coverage of Eugene’s attack, zombie-as-explanation was treated with such legitimacy that it warranted comment from a CDC official, which initially appeared on the Huffington Post website and was republished in the *Miami Herald*. The official told reporters that “CDC does not know of a virus or condition that would reanimate the dead or one that would present zombie-like symptoms” (Grimm 2012). And, journalists paid such attention to the zombie explanation that Eugene’s mother also responded to journalists’ reporting: “Everybody says that he was a zombie, but I know he’s not a zombie; he’s my son” (N. Griffin 2012).

As the zombie explanation seemed to be challenged by officials and Eugene’s family, news articles continued to explore the possibility of Voodoo or other “curses” to explain Eugene’s actions. A *Sun Sentinel* article about an increase in sales of zombie merchandise clarified Eugene’s classification: “That guy was a cannibal, not a zombie,” the owner of a locally owned shaved ice truck called Zombie Ice, told reporters (J. Griffin 2012).

While the *Sun Sentinel* story tongue-in-cheeked the notion that Eugene was a cannibal, other news articles took the explanation more seriously.

For example, a news conference held by Eugene's girlfriend—which may have been more about creating publicity for her "story" than providing information to the public—had news media treating the notion of cannibalism as a real possibility. Celebrity attorney Allred told reporters that "[w]e are hopeful that . . . [Eugene's girlfriend] Yovonka can help the public understand the dire consequences of cannibalism for its victims" (Clary 2012a). Allred continued: "Jokes are being made about this issue on late-night television . . . but cannibalism is a serious issue and is very dangerous to the health and well-being of both the cannibal and the victim."

News articles about cannibalism, zombies, and even Voodoo (Gonzalez 2012) held cultural authority, in part, because they racialized Eugene, tapping into a public psyche that is familiar with tales of dark-skinned primitives and foreign cannibals (Lutz and Collins 1993). Racial discourse in news coverage about Eugene's attack was presented in subtle ways. For example, photographs of Eugene—a dark-skinned Haitian man—often appeared in newspapers beside his light-skinned victim.

Explanations that dehumanized a story's subjects place the blame on their non-human—and inhumane—behaviors, excluding external influences (Iyengar 1991; Lule 2001). When news organizations branded Eugene as the "Miami Zombie" and the "Causeway Cannibal," he no longer was characterized as a human with friends and family who sang in the church choir and who struggled with a marijuana addiction. Instead, Eugene was typecast as a dark-skinned zombie released from "real-world" influences—or valid psychological explanations—who could easily be associated with archetypes with similar behaviors.

Explaining Behavior Through "Craze-inducing Drugs"

In addition to cannibalism and zombie curses, news stories explained Eugene's brutality by suggesting he may have been under the influence of "bath salts" or "craze-inducing drugs" (Clary 2012b). News coverage commonly characterized Eugene's attack as a "drug trip" (Haughney 2012), a "drug-fueled psychotic episode" (Mayo 2012) and a "drug-induced craze" (Gonzalez 2012). These drugs were defined by a *Sun Sentinel* article as street drugs that "are touted as fake cocaine, a potent hallucinogen not to be confused with synthetic marijuana . . ." and are "snorted, swallowed and sometimes smoked" (Bryan and Barkhurst 2012). The story continued with a discussion that the drugs are highly addictive:

They [addicts] don't care if the bath salts, continually altered by street chemists, might turn them into psychotic face-eaters.

"When they see reports about people running down the street naked and eating someone's face, addicts think that's funny," [a drug treatment center owner, Joe] Giordano said.

While other explanations for Eugene's behavior may have been challenged by some sources, including health experts and Eugene's family members, drugs seemed to escape scrutiny. For instance, one *Sun Sentinel* article quoted Eugene's high school friend as saying, "Drugs did this to him. Drugs took over a person we knew as a beautiful person" (Olmeda and Rodriguez 2012a). Another *Sun Sentinel* article headlined "Danger Lurks

behind Counter” blamed other “bath salts”—the type that people actually use for bathing—for Eugene’s attack (Olmeda and Rodriguez 2012b).

Within days of Eugene’s attack and explanation of drugs, news articles started discussing efforts in the state Legislature and in local communities to ban “bath salts.” One *Orlando Sentinel* article summed it up in its lead paragraph:

It’ll be weeks before anyone knows for sure whether Rudy Eugene was on drugs—traditional or synthetic—when he viciously attacked a homeless man on the MacArthur Causeway Saturday, chewing on the victim’s face before being gunned down by a Miami police officer.

But some South Florida cities aren’t waiting for the Miami medical examiner to tell them what they have already surmised—so called “bath salts” are dangerous drugs that must be taken off the streets. (Olmeda et al. 2012)

Explaining Eugene’s behavior in terms of drugs provided a solid “real-life” and believable explanation that was told with the cultural power of officials and authorities who placed blame for the attack on “bath salts” that then helped them lead their own attacks on local drugs in a public and institutional arena. For example, one day after Eugene’s attack, a *Miami Herald* article stated that “police theorized that the attacker [Eugene] might have suffered from ‘cocaine psychosis,’ a drug-induced craze that bakes the body internally and often leads those it affects to strip naked to try to cool off” (Guzman and Moskovitz 2012). Once a toxicology report was released that showed Eugene had not been using “bath salts” at the time of his death, however, police denied that they said synthetic drugs may have been a cause (Clary 2012e).

In the end, news articles removed notions of mental illness by explaining how drugs—not natural chemical imbalances—could cause a mental break or bizarre behavior, a common explanation (Denham 2008). Though stigma continues to be associated with illegal drug use (Neale, Nettleton, and Pickering 2011), this paper argues that an avoidance of mental illness as explanation reveals how it continues to fail to be a resonant explanation in news.

Explanation through “Local Legends” of South Florida

While previous news explanations in this case relied on recognizable narratives and archetypes, news articles also attempted to write the “zombie attack” as a “local legend.” Bird writes that “[l]ocal narratives tell us less about ‘history’ and more about how people construct their sense of place and cultural identity” (2002, 526). These narratives explain place, its people, and provide a sense of togetherness. In this case, journalists wrote about other Miami “legends” that they considered as uncanny as Eugene’s attack.

One *Miami Herald* article related Eugene’s weirdness to a Miami culture that, for some reason, may breed strangeness:

All of us who live in Florida struggle to explain this bizarre place to distant friends and family.

However, a zombie-like face-eating attack would be major news in any city. And had it happened in Des Moines or Spokane, the worldwide reaction would have been one of plain revulsion.

The initial response to the MacArthur Causeway bloodbath was the same kind of horror, but then—after the dateline was noted—almost a sigh of relief.

Oh, this was in Miami? Well, that explains it. (Hiaasen 2012)

Another *Herald* article talked about the attack as “just one more weird Miami tale”:

You’d think a face-eating naked man shot dead along the postcard blue landscape of the MacArthur Causeway would be bad for tourism, but not in our steamy Magic City.

We’ve developed crocodile skin when it comes to police news, no matter how dehumanizing, and now we embrace our wackiness. (Santiago 2012)

The story went on to list past Miami-specific crazy news stories:

Decades ago there was the rude man who died hungry, shot by a security guard after he slugged the cashier who told him they had run out of chicken, and the naked man who threw the severed head of his girlfriend at a young cop—classic only-in-Miami crime stories . . . (Santiago 2012)

News articles made further fun of Miami—and Florida in general—by reporting on jokes that were being made about the face-eating (Clary 2012c), including a *Sun Sentinel* article that told of a “[m]orning radio show host [who] played the opening theme of ‘The Waking Dead,’ the popular zombie gore show” when discussing Eugene (Rodriquez and Todd 2012). The article also listed related Twitter accounts and republished a Gawker.com headline about the event: “Grab Your Broomstick: The Zombie Apocalypse May Actually Be Upon Us.” Though this particular news article also quoted experts who say that “[m]aking fun of horrific events has always been a human defense mechanism,” news coverage across all three newspapers cast Eugene—and thereby others with aberrant behavior—as being cursed by otherwise unexplainable craziness or weirdness that somehow seem to be more acceptable than a medical discussion about mental health as a possible explanation.

Conclusion

This study explores how news media relied on even the most bizarre causes—but those that had the most “imaginative power” and “resonance” (Ettema 2005), such as zombies—to explain a gruesome attack, while other valid explanations, such as mental illness, were not presented by physicians and other experts as a possibility. This paper does not attempt to find fault with the media for its coverage, nor does it suggest that journalists truly believed fictional creatures such as zombies were roaming Miami streets. Rather, this study speculates about why mental illness was all but ignored, thereby exploring an instance of local journalists selecting news stories most likely to resonate with the audience. In other words, I argue that the appeal of zombies through popular culture and the resonance of racialized discourse that involved Voodoo and foreign cannibalism overpowered the cultural familiarity of mental illness—a stigmatized explanation—as a legitimate and accepted medical explanation for behavior.

Through Ettema’s definition of news resonance and the analysis above, I argue that news stories of zombies and cannibals were associated with more positive public characterizations, however mystic and mythic. Mental illness, on the other hand, continues to be stigmatized and categorized as “insanity,” “weakness,” or caused by illegal drugs or a person’s character flaws and does not hold a mystic allure or legitimacy when compared to the walking dead, possibly explaining its absence in all coverage.

One could argue that the news articles included in this study may just be reflecting what journalists had been told by police, witnesses and other sources. However, this study agrees with literature from above, that news holds cultural meanings and messages that resonate with audiences in order to explain today's events, people, and ideas. Again, as Ettema (2005, 147) writes: news resonance is about a "goodness of fit to our past. It is also a matter of empirical credibility—goodness of fit to what we know of the current moment." Therefore, I do not argue that journalists willfully ignored mental illness as an explanation, but that dominant cultural values regarding the validity of mental illness as an explanation for behavior demanded that such an explanation be overlooked, other than appearing as side-comments by Eugene's friends and family who were adamant about his lucidity.

Indeed, journalists from three different local and regional newspapers covered stories of the "Miami Zombie" in similar ways, connecting to the same narratives, and—more importantly—awarded entire stories to the most bizarre explanations, while ignoring the same one. Therefore, this paper suggests two veins for future research. First, scholarship may benefit from exploring missing narratives in news media. Explaining what was missing in news coverage—just as much as what appeared—can uncover an effect of social stigma in public storytelling that maintains dominant news explanations of deviations from the expected and the "normal." Second, enhancing our understanding of journalism's imaginative power and storytelling further exposes subtle cultural processes of how journalists explain everyday life and human behavior.

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