Article

Journalism
2016, Vol. 17(4) 456–473

DOI: 10.1177/1464884914566195
jou.sagepub.com
SAGE

Who lost what? An analysis of myth, loss, and proximity in news coverage of the Steubenville rape

Robert E Gutsche Jr
Florida International University, USA

Erica Salkin
Whitworth University, USA

Abstract
This article extends previous research on the application of mythical news narratives in times of great community loss, death, or destruction by taking into account the role of perceived dominant news audiences. This article analyzes 6 months of coverage surrounding the 2012 rape of a 16-year-old girl by two teenage boys in Steubenville, Ohio. The article argues audience proximity to news events contributes to the mythical archetypes used to explain everyday life.

Keywords
Archetype, audiences, local news, myth, narrative, proximity, social media

In the early hours of 12 August 2012, two teenage boys in Steubenville, Ohio, raped a 16-year-old girl who had passed out at a house party. Photographs from the assault and subsequent discourse from fellow high schoolers about the rape spread across Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging. News of the assault attracted the attention of local, regional, and national press (Dissell, 2012b; Macur and Schweber, 2012). Controversy about how local police, parents, and school officials responded to the alleged crime grew

Corresponding author:
Robert E Gutsche Jr, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Florida International University, 3000 NE 151 St, Academic 2, North Miami, FL 33181, USA.
Email: rgutsche@fiu.edu

throughout the rest of 2012 as social media users – including hackers connected to Anonymous – pressured local authorities to investigate the rape (Macur, 2012; Miller, 2012a).

News coverage over 6 months – from the moment the crime was reported to the time of the teenage boys' convictions – discussed the personal and community loss associated with debate surrounding the rape. However, newspapers at the local, regional, and national levels each described the types of loss via three sets of distinctly different mythical explanations (Eko, 2010; Eliade, 1998; Lule, 2001) – from applying traditional archetypal characteristics of 'victimhood' to casting the powerhouse football players accused of the crime as 'Anti-Heroes' to 'vilifying' social media as an 'outsider' who attacked the community's collective sense of vulnerability.

Through this qualitative thematic analysis of 169 news texts from nine newspapers, we argue that such distinctions in the construction of loss and archetypal design exemplify how proximity of a news outlets' perceived dominant news audience to news events influences the use of mythical archetypes. This article builds upon work that calls for a greater understanding of how mythical news explanations and corresponding archetypes are formed based upon local cultural needs rather than being informed solely by universal, dominant 'Master Myths' (Gutsche and Salkin, 2013; Lule, 2001). In this case, we argue news outlets from the national, regional, and local levels each explained loss as distinct to their own audiences. Furthermore, we suggest outlets formed the necessary mythical archetypes to explain the accusations of rape, the legal charges against local teen heroes, and the influence of social media as a type of moral observer.

In the end, this article complicates current understandings of mythical news archetypes by examining the influence of local culture and audience needs in the appearance of myth in journalistic storytelling (Bird, 2002, 2003). To be clear, this analysis is not to critique the news coverage of the rape nor the actions of the athletes, the girl, or community members involved in this case. Rather, we wish to examine this case's application of mythical archetypes to provide meaning to particular news audiences. We begin this article with a conceptual framework related to journalism as a form of ritual communication within which mythical news narratives and archetypes are applied. Following a discussion regarding our methodology, we provide a thematic textual analysis of news texts to address perceived news audiences in the construction of mythical news explanations. The article concludes with a discussion of its major findings and suggestions for future research.

Explaining the everyday with news narratives and archetypes

Among its many social and cultural functions, the press serve as a moral guide for its audiences (Barnett, 2006). News reiterates dominant meanings of life to maintain systems of order (Chesebro and McMahan, 2006; Ettema, 2005; Kitch and Hume, 2008). Two concepts represent how news constructs explanation to maintain a collective's cultural cohesion. *Mythical news narratives* are overarching cultural stories that guide both journalists and audiences to proper interpretations placed within a society's larger

acceptable dominant values and norms (Barnett, 2013; Gutsche, 2014; Kitch, 2007; Riegert and Olsson, 2007). *Mythical archetypes* work in conjunction with such narratives, serving as a story's characters that appear in communication about everyday life over time in the literature, cultural histories, faith stories, and the press. Their features, personalities, past experiences, and aims are often applied to a story's actors to help audiences work their way through conflict, solutions, and moral lessons (Darnton, 1975; Ettema, 2005; Schudson, 2005).

Archetypes of the 'Victim', the 'Scapegoat', the 'Hero', the 'Good Mother', 'The Other World', the 'Trickster', and 'The Flood' have been identified as seven 'Master Myths' that appear in journalism across the world (Lule, 2001). Increasingly, however, recent studies have called for placing a greater emphasis on explaining nuanced characterizations of myth. These studies seek to explain mythical needs of local audiences (Berkowitz, 2005; Garner and Slattery, 2010; Winch, 2005), which we discuss below.

Examining community identity, audience, and local myth

At the core of this call is the need to conceptualize the interaction of news myth, news audiences, and the respective communities around which particular myth is formed (Gutsche, 2013; Gutsche and Salkin, 2013). The term *community*, however, requires deeper explication. Dominant uses of 'community' tend to ignore the existence of multiple communities – and multiple ideologies and identities – in that same space (Anderson, 1983; Epkins, 2012; Kaniss, 1991; Kumar, 2012; Robinson and DeShano, 2011). For this article, our definition of community holds less to geographic groups of people than to more of an ideological *collective identity*, a group of people who share an ideology that guides a coherent and consistent interpretation of particular issues and events that may span multiple geographies (Eyerman, 2004).

Journalism scholars have explored notions of collective identity through the function of collective memory as meaning-making (Berkowitz and Gutsche, 2012) and by the organization of a collective's social movements (Gitlin, 1980). Scholars have also examined collective identity within minority groups operating among and against mainstream social and cultural explanations of everyday life (Rauch, 2007), and even among journalists, themselves (Berkowitz and TerKeurst, 1999; Carlson and Berkowitz, 2013; Gutsche and Salkin, 2011; Zelizer, 1993). Still, news scholarship largely refers to those who interact with the news and those influenced by its agenda as *audience*, once articulated as a passive group being *spoken to* (or transmitted to) rather than *engaged with* (Ettema and Whitney, 1994). Debate continues about the degree to which digital and mobile media have created more interactive means for audience participation in press discourse (Carey, 2009; Hindman, 2009), although technological advancements have continued to expand audience access to news (Singer et al., 2011). In that sense, then, *news audiences* are considered as complex a concept as that of community. Ours, certainly, is not a traditional audience study that explores the attitudes and behaviors of media users. However, we argue much is to be learned about media–audience interaction in terms of mythical explanations in the news – what Bird (2003) calls the 'fluid participatory quality of myth' (p. 160) – and by examining the 'relational context' that myth provides (p. 2).

In this way, we wish to add to understandings of how news myth is formed and applied during times of loss based upon the perceived needs of the audience each news outlet believes it serves (Burd, 1977; Funk, 2013; Gans, 2004; Hough, 1994; Kaniss, 1991; Le, 2006; Ross, 2007; Zelizer, 1993). This 'perceived dominant news audience' (hereafter referred to as audience) consists of the readers that the media outlet identifies as its main priority or interest, even in a web-driven world. This article seeks to expand understandings of how news uses tools like myth to support its communities through times of loss other than loss due to death. Certainly, much research examines news explanations of loss in terms of death and of rape (Harp et al., 2014; O'Hara, 2012). Yet, just as Kitch (2007) examines how news myth operated to address maintain dominant local identities following a mine collapse in Sago, West Virginia (USA) in 2006, this study explores how news myth appeared in news coverage of loss in terms of local identities following charges of rape against small-town heroes. For the purposes of this article, therefore, we refer to *loss* as moments of crisis and confusion involving local values and identities, what Alexander (2004) refers to as *cultural trauma*, such times when a collective (or community) is 'subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity' (p. 1).

One study of coverage of cultural trauma, in particular, explores depictions of loss related to 10 college-aged men who drowned in a Wisconsin river city over a 13-year period. Despite the similarities in how the men died – each had been drinking in the city's bar district, had wandered away from their friends, and later found in the river – local journalists presented archetypes of the dead young men in two distinct ways, depending on the influence of each man on the community. Men 'from' the geographic region who had 'held significant status within their communities' as athletes or college students rose to a 'Pseudo-saint' (Gutsche and Salkin, 2013, p. 74) archetype throughout news coverage. This 'sub-archetype', a combination of Lule's (2001) 'Hero' and 'Good Mother', served to depict the men as those with faults that may have contributed to their deaths but who were ultimately 'forgiven' and fondly remembered for their local status. Men who had 'contributed less' to the local community – those who 'lacked the attention of many friends and admirers' in local news – were cast as 'Fallen Angels' (p. 74). This 'sub-archetype' was constructed by the combination of Lule's 'Victim', 'Scapegoat', and 'Trickster' to explain how news coverage presented the faults of these men (i.e. coming from low-income families; non-athletes) as being more paramount to their deaths.

This article, therefore, builds upon the above conceptualizations of the cultural needs of a media outlet's audience based upon a news event's proximity to that audience. It is guided by three research questions. First, 'What types of losses were expressed in news outlets' coverage of public discourses surrounding the rape?' Second, 'What differences, if any, appear in news outlets' applications of news narratives and mythical archetypes to describe and explain the various forms of individual and community loss?' Third, 'What cultural meanings can be culled from a comparison of applied news archetypes based upon the news outlets' proximity to the news event?'

Reading news as cultural messaging

To explore news for its ideological qualities and meanings, we turn to qualitative thematic analysis (Lindlof and Taylor, 2010) – an approach frequently applied within

journalism studies (Berkowitz and Eko, 2007; Jackson et al., 2007; Pauly, 1991). Textual analysis allows the researcher to identify specific cultural themes and meanings associated with a particular set of texts and in a particular space and time (Barnett, 2013). As Tonkiss (1998 [2004]) writes, textual analysis serves as 'a study of language and texts as forms of discourse, which help to create and reproduce systems of social meaning' (p. 245). In this way, the researcher trades the generalizability of her findings for a greater conceptual awareness of how culture is embedded in news texts.

In this study, we selected three daily newspapers within three proximities to the news event – local, regional, and national – with which to perform a deep reading of the stories' mythical descriptions and explanations of public discourse surrounding the Steubenville rape. We also wished to conduct this reading by considering the make-up and potential needs of the publications' audiences. We recognize that each national, regional, and local newspaper in this study operates a website that broadens its potential audience beyond those who access the print version. That said, we turned to each newspaper's published marketing and advertising material online that identifies the newspaper's geographic market for print editions in terms of both readership and advertisers (Figure 1).

As a first set of coverage, we selected *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post* as national agenda-setting press (Gans, 2004). These newspapers' advertising material identifies three geographic dominant news audiences – those in their respective cities, statewide or multi-state readers, and national audiences.[1] As a second set of newspapers, we identified the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, the *Columbus Dispatch*, and the *Dayton Daily News* as regional ones (Barnhurst, 2002). These newspapers mainly cover issues in and around the state of Ohio. The papers presented their audiences as being among those in the cities where the newspaper was located, as well as statewide audiences detailed by specific counties and neighboring regions. Finally, we selected the Steubenville *Herald-Star, The* (Lisbon) *Morning Journal News,* and *The* (East Liverpool) *Review* to represent local newspapers (Kaniss, 1991). Dominant audiences for each of these publications included those in their respective cities and within a several-county radius identified by place names (i.e. the 'Upper Ohio Valley region').

We then searched electronic databases for the terms 'Steubenville and rape' and 'Steubenville and assault' within each of the nine newspapers between the dates of 12 August 2012, the morning of the rape, and 24 March 2013, 1 week after the two teenage boys were convicted of the crime.[2] Such a range allowed us to trace the application of mythical explanation from immediate coverage through the court trial that ended in a conviction of both teenage boys. ProQuest and LexisNexis Academic searches of national newspapers provided 29 articles; searches of regional newspapers in the NewsBank database yielded in 34 articles. Because local newspapers were not accessible in library databases, we used the newspapers' online archives to collect texts.[3] Removing redundancies from the total local articles resulted in 106 unique texts. In sum, 169 articles from all newspapers were read for this study.

Once all articles were collected, we adopted a process identified in previous scholarship to recognize cultural meaning embedded within news. First, because journalistic explanation is built upon lasting stories (narratives) and characters (archetypes) (Bird and Dardenne, 1997; Schudson, 2005), we examined news texts to identify news storytelling characterizations of actors (the girl who was raped, the boys charged with

Newspaper	Circulation (Daily)[i]	Published Description of Dominant Audiences	Article Totals
		National Press	
Los Angeles Times	573,000	"…their source for the very latest developments in Southern California and beyond."[ii]	8
The New York Times	1.1m	"…Times readers have expected their newspaper to provide the most thorough and uncompromising coverage in the world."[iii]	14
Washington Post	507,000	"Our U.S. and international audiences come to us to understand Washington, D.C. … As a news organization rooted in the greater D.C. metro area, we also serve readers who come from the District, Virginia and Maryland …"[iv]	7
			National Total: 29
		Regional Press	
Cleveland (OH) *Plain Dealer*	243,000	"The Plain Dealer is Ohio's largest daily newspaper … Since its founding in 1842, it has been a part of the Cleveland landscape."[v]	27
Columbus (OH) *Dispatch*	135,000	"To inform you about what's happening in Central Ohio …"[vi]	4
Dayton (OH) *Daily News*	93,000	"Founded in 1898, the Dayton Daily News is the cornerstone of the Dayton newspaper market and is distributed in 12 Ohio counties."[vii]	3
			Regional Total: 34
		Local Press	
(Steubenville, OH) *Herald-Star*	11,000	"serving Steubenville, Jefferson and Harrison counties and the Upper Ohio Valley region…"[viii]	101 (101 unique)
The (Lisbon, OH) *Morning Journal*	10,000	"…to the attention of the residents of Columbiana County and southern Mahoning County"[ix]	19 (3 unique)
The (East Liverpool, OH) *Review*	7,000	"…the latest news, sports, weather and feature stories to the Upper Ohio Valley"[x]	21 (2 unique)
			Local Total: 141 (106 unique)
			Total Articles: 169

Figure 1. Newspapers that supplied data for study and descriptions of respective 'dominant news audiences'.

1. 2011 circulation data from Editor and Publisher International Data Book, 2012
2. http://mediakit.latimes.com/portfolio/los-angeles-times
3. http://nytmediakit.com/newspaper
4. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ask-the-post/post/editors-note-new-choices-for-washingtonpostcom-readers/2011/11/18/gIQAm03DZN_blog.html?hpid=z4
5. http://www.neohiomediagroup.com/products/the-plain-dealer/
6. http://www.dispatch.com/content/sections/services/about.html?footpid=footer
7. http://www.cmgohio.com/?q=newspapers
8. http://twitter.com/HeraldStar
9. http://www.morningjournalnews.com/page/category.detail/nav/5038/How-to-advertise.html
10. http://twitter.com/TheReviewOnline

the crime, etc.) and the construction of Steubenville's 'community identities'. Second, because news sources operate as much as characters in a drama as they do in providing information and perspective (Durham, 2008; Lule, 2001), we were interested in how sources were used to personify the effects of conflict at the center of coverage. Finally, we applied our interpretations of audiences to examine intersections of or deviations from applied mythical news archetypes in relationship to the news outlets' proximity to the news event.

Analysis and discussion: Articulating audience loss

Here, we address the study's first two aims – to identify the types of loss expressed in news coverage and to explicate the use of mythical archetypes to construct specific interpretations of events for outlets' dominant news audiences. A simultaneous discussion examines the cultural – and conceptual – meanings associated with the construction of sub-archetypes and the role of proximity in news storytelling.

The loss of control

News coverage at each level of proximity characterized the 16-year-old girl as a 'Victim', an archetype Lule (2001) defines as 'innocent' in her or his sacrifices, controlled by the actions of others, and whose experiences represent the cruelty and consequence of harm.

From coverage of the initial assault to trial, national newspapers focused on the girl's inebriation at the time of the rape as an explanation of her loss of self-control. One of the first *New York Times* articles said that at the time she was assaulted by teenage boys she was 'too drunk to resist' (Macur and Schweber, 2012). *Los Angeles Times* coverage of the trial referred to her as 'falling-down drunk' and that she 'never said no' (Susman, 2013b). Additionally, the *Washington Post* detailed the girl's condition at the time of the assault in passive voice, as 'drunk and vomiting and was unresponsive at points' (Bey, 2013). National news also focused on the effects of photographs taken by eyewitnesses to the night's assault and spread – without her consent – through social media (Susman, 2013b). Characterizations of the girl and teenage boys in national coverage also contributed to her position as a victim. National reporters regularly included in the attribution for players' quotes that the speaker was, for example, 'No. 2 on the Big Red's career rushing list' and, in one case, one of the football team's 19 coaches (Macur and Schweber, 2012). Such overt characterizations of the boys at the national level (and the opposite treatment of the girl, whose identity did not receive positive characterization for her potential community contribution and will be further explicated below) exemplify Lule's (2001) 'Master Myth' of the 'Victim' – in which one's 'plans, careers, dreams and lives can be shattered in an instant' (p. 22). In other words, the girl was victimized, in part, as news coverage cast the players as 'known' and 'respected' in the community, while she, herself, was cast aside as a character with no control over her own actions and identity.

Characterizations of the girl-as-'Victim' are best represented in regional coverage, which presented the girl's victimhood as partially self-inflicted. *The Columbus Dispatch*,

for example, described the girl 'as an honor student [who] went to a party without her parents' permission and got drunk enough to black out' (*Columbus Dispatch*, 2013). *The Plain Dealer* wrote of 'conflicting narratives' in the case against 'two popular high school football players'. Meanwhile, the victim – referred to in the story as simply 'the 16-year-old girl' – was described as being 'from tipsy to buzzed, drunk, passed out and unconscious' (Dissell, 2013b). Additionally, regional articles from *The Columbus Dispatch, The Plain Dealer*, and the *Dayton Daily News* mentioned that the victim stumbled into the street to vomit as proof of both her ability to think clearly (and therefore consent) and her extreme level of intoxication (Dissell, 2013a; Ludlow, 2013). The *Daily News* (McCarty and Grieco, 2013), for instance, continued throughout its coverage to focus on conflicting stories of the rape and the role of social media in what the newspaper called 'a tangled moral tale'.

While regional coverage questioned the legitimacy of the girl's 'victimhood' – her loss of control having been a shared loss between herself and her peers – local newspapers were far more critical of the girl's seemingly voluntary passing of control, pairing a discussion of youthful indiscretion with 'victim blaming/shaming' (O'Hara, 2012). In local coverage from the *Morning Journal*, for instance, the girl's memories were said to be shaken out of an uncertain haze by the harsh reality of Facebook posts, Tweets, photos, and videos that created a loss she could not ignore (*Morning Journal*, 2013). In this storytelling, the 'Victim' is shown to be lesser-than, a hybrid of Lule's (2001) 'Victim' and 'Trickster'. The girl, in this way, is shown to have experienced difficulty, yet cannot fully remove herself from the blame of that loss due to her conscious choices to engage in risky or thoughtless behaviors. More than anything in local coverage, however, is acknowledgement of debate surrounding the community's reaction to the guilt or innocence of the local 'Heroes' – the football players – than the girl's recovery, innocence, or guilt. Indeed, the girl is relegated to a secondary role; local newspapers focused on the character of the accused boys, noting they faced charges of sexual assault, but not of whom.

A January 2013 article in the *Herald-Star*, for instance, refers to the teenage boys as 'student-athletes', while the 'Victim' is merely 'a 16-year-old girl' with no mention of her qualities, personality, or role in her community (Renard, 2013). One of the accused's former guardians, however, told the *Herald-Star* about the boy's charges: 'It's completely out of (Malik's) character. That's not the type of person that he is' (Renard, 2013). That no such testimonials were given to support the character of the girl unbalanced the power of characterization in news storytelling in ways that personified the boys but presented the girl as faceless and person-less.[4] As local coverage of the charges and impending case progressed, the 'Victim' did gain a minor title role – as a '16-year-old Weirton female'. Such characterization overtly cast her as an 'outsider', using her residency in nearby Weirton, West Virginia, as a further indicator of her secondary role. Such coverage is not unexpected, as research reveals a history of media messages that tend to blame female rape victims for their own abuse by either placing direct blame on the woman or marginalizing her victim status (Meyers, 1996). That said, a rare mention of the girl's loss did appear in one *Herald-Star* article, in which the school district's superintendent says he 'feels empathy for a 16-year-old Weirton female who was the victim of an alleged rape in August'. He also stated that 'the district was planning educational programs in our

curriculum to raise further awareness' of sexual violence (Gossett, 2013b). However, these varying (and competing) press explanations of the girl's loss of control – seemingly in terms of both her actions and her public identity – served as an overarching narrative in coverage that was further complicated by debate about the loss of Steubenville's community 'Heroes'.

The loss of community heroes

As photographs from the night of the assault spread across social media and continued to fuel accusations against both the teenage boys and the girl, newspapers at each level of proximity questioned how the local 'Heroes' fell from grace and to what degree the girl was to be blamed.

National newspapers suggested the boys did not fall from grace but were rather pushed off their 'Hero' pedestal by 'others' – namely, those who debated the case on social media, which gained national news attention. One *New York Times* article acknowledged this battle by noting that residents were 'shocked by what happened to the young woman' but that 'the online furor has tarnished the city and the football team for the actions of a few' (Goode and Schweber, 2013). In another article, the *Times* highlighted the boys' role as 'rising stars in the football program'.[5] The article also presented residents as taking sides between blaming a culture that protected the football team and blaming 'the girl, her supporters and the news media [who] have blown the episode out of proportion' (Oppel, 2013a). The *Los Angeles Times* also presented a town in conflict over the heroes they had created – a 'decorated varsity football team, a source of pride in a struggling Rust Belt town with little to brag about'. The story's actors had been involved *not in sexual violence*, the newspaper stated, but in a 'night of parties [that] led to *sexual encounters* with a girl from neighboring Weirton, W.Va., who was so intoxicated that she could barely walk or speak' (Susman, 2013a, emphasis added).

At the regional level, newspapers removed the boys from the 'Big Red' football collective and focused on them as individuals capable of rising or falling on their own merits. Although regional newspapers highlighted the support offered to the two boys by Steubenville athletic officials, specifically the football coach, the boys become a sort of 'Trickster/Victim' (Benedict, 1992; Lule, 2001; Scheub, 2012) – a classless and crude personae that needs rescuing from itself. This mixed archetype comes out most in coverage of the boys' cellular text messages to friends and the girl in days immediately following the assault. News explanations were that the boys and their peers did not stop or intervene to help the girl because they did not know what rape looked like. This claim suggested that the boys acknowledged the events surrounding the assault but were unaware of the criminal nature of their actions (Dissell and Pinckard, 2013b). For example, one regional newspaper quotes one of the accused boys as texting: 'I should have raped because now everyone thinks I did' (Dissell and Pinckard, 2013a). Earlier coverage points out concerns whether the possible punishment fit the crime (Dissell, 2012b). Regional coverage of those who advocated punishment suggested the boys' actions were more than simply crudeness or classlessness. Coverage suggested a reversal of the standards to which the boys were held – an opposite representation of the 'Hero', namely, the 'Anti-Hero', an archetype not represented among Lule's

(2001). The 'Anti-Hero' is not a villain but rather a central character whose weakness, cowardice, poor decisions, or lack of action has caused him to fail in the eyes of others (Buck, 1986; Lott, 1997; Roberts, 2013; West, 2001; Winch, 2005). 'As protagonists, antiheroes display qualities of both heroes and villains … acting in morally ambiguous, and at times unjustifiable ways, if even to reach noble goals' (Shafer and Raney, 2012: 1030).

While the 'Anti-Hero' appeared in regional coverage to complicate the boys' otherwise clear 'Hero' status, local coverage skipped the 'Hero to Anti-Hero' stage and focused on multiple sources of blame for the boys' fall. Local coverage explored the boys' personal actions as being separate from the collective of the highly prized football team. The press also covered the disruptive role of outsiders led by 'the shadowy Internet hacktivist group' Anonymous (Miller, 2012b). Charging the social media group with creating rumors of the boys' guilt and inadequate police investigations into the crime (Gossett, 2013a), Anonymous was portrayed as a dangerous force that threatened a small community's identity as a tight knit, traditional place. The *Herald-Star*, for instance, published the exact text of the group's destructive claims, which appeared on a local 'Big Red' football team website hacked by Anonymous:

> Greetings Citizens of the world, we are Anonymous, we are KnightSec. On Dec. 23, 2012, we released a video detailing the story of a young rape victim in Steubenville, Ohio, who was attacked by the Big Red High School football team and raped and kidnapped, carried party to party unconscious and intoxicated. Only two members were charged with the actual crimes, *when everyone present was guilty* … We ask the proper authorities *do not allow the cover-up* of this potential criminal ring, and the victims do not go unprotected. (Miller, 2012a, emphasis added)

While local coverage acknowledged such suggestions that the community failed to hold the boys accountable for their actions, news storytelling cast social media claims as further harmful results of the boys' actions. In a post-trial editorial, for instance, the *Herald-Star* lamented the boys' actions and claimed 'their actions would lead to their community to be portrayed in the harshest possible light across countless mainstream media outlets and the Internet' (*Herald-Star*, 2013). In this respect, local coverage presented the boys' being not only responsible for the sexual crime, but of damaging Steubenville's sense of 'community identity' by attracting public scrutiny and the wrath of 'outsiders', which is further examined below.

The loss of community identity

News stories of Steubenville as a broken steel town that persevered through a single shining light – its champion high school football team – cast the community as being slow-paced, modest, and of traditional American values, traits of the 'small-town pastoralism' news trope (Gans, 2004). Yet, despite such similar news coverage at each level of proximity, mythical applications to explain what happened during and after the rape, but also descriptions of the community in which the violence occurred – and *who* was involved – varied.

National coverage focused on a loss of harmony between media perceptions of small-town community and the reactions of Steubenville and its 'hero-worshiping culture built around football players who think they can do no wrong' (Macur and Schweber, 2012). The *Times*, for instance, writes that while the players' success contributed to a sense of community unity, their 'protected status' also held potential dangers. The newspaper cited that 'more than a dozen people interviewed last month … did not want their names used in connection with [critical] comments about the team, for fear of retribution from Big Red football fans' (Macur and Schweber, 2012). National news also acknowledged the complicating factor of social media and online advocacy in addressing issues of football favoritism and the challenge to Steubenville's community identity that surrounded its high school athletes. Indeed, national media celebrated the role of Anonymous in discussing local events. As the *Los Angeles Times* writes, 'if it weren't for the flurry of text messages, tweets, pictures and videos shared among teenagers on social media, the case might never have reached a courtroom' (Susman, 2013c).

Regional coverage of the community's response to the girl's assault and the impact of that response on its 'identity' as a small town also addressed the preferential treatment of the football team and its players. However, this level of coverage paid homage to Steubenville's slow, thoughtful, and intentional 'small town' response to the accusations and trial. The *Plain Dealer*, for example, noted that while the town's initial response may have been to protect its star players, the 'tenor of the conversation changed when site users said they began to see some of the jaw-dropping and sexually explicit posts on local Twitter accounts' (Dissell, 2012b). The *Dayton Daily News* wrote that '[s]tudents [had] tweeted "rape" and "drunk girl" as casually as reporting what they had for breakfast' (McCarty and Grieco, 2013). The story focused more on the method of the conversation than on the content and its implications for a community that embraced its 'small town' identity (Ludlow, 2013). The *Columbus Dispatch* reported that community members were 'horrified' and that Steubenville 'deserves a break' for its initial responses because of the complications of the case (Ludlow, 2013). The paper continued: 'This has been a long ordeal for the victim and the victim's family. It also has been a long ordeal for the community'. By marrying social media activity with the characterization of the rape as 'the incident', as one newspaper did (Dissell, 2012b), the seriousness of rape was undermined to be characterized as simply something that happened. Social media was thereby presented as a denigrating force and one that complicated the community's identity as a caring and devoted small town.

Local coverage approached Steubenville's loss of a clear and consistent dominant community identity as though the press itself were a participant in setting the community's collective values. Early coverage highlighted the decisions by local social authorities – attorneys and judges – who recused themselves from the case to avoid a conflict of interest, a public message of responsibility applied to ensure no stain of favoritism touched the investigation or trial (Gossett and Law, 2012; Law, 2012). Local news storytelling had a tone of frustration about the actions of teenagers involved – especially the teenage witnesses to the assault (Miller, 2013). As the *Herald-Star* wrote, 'why seemingly a vast swath of youth in town knew about the rape, shared pictures and texts about it and sadly didn't quite see it as a crime that happened' (*Herald-Star*, 2013). Local newspapers also offered an alternative actor responsible for the community's identity loss – the hacktivist

National Press Characterization	"Victim" unable to prevent attack; was "unable to walk," "was violated" when raped	Football players presented as "Heroes"; "rising stars" became "Fallen Angels" in "swift downfall"	Community "vilified" for "hero-worshiping culture" in response to rape
Regional Press Characterization	"Victim" partially responsible for attack; attended party "without her parents' permission"	Football players move from "Trickster/Villains" to "Anti-Heroes"; "community" shares in responsibility	Community "deserves a break"; questions identity through social media discourse
Local Press Characterization	"Victim" cast as disturbance to local community values; identity as "outsider," football players as "student-athletes"	Hero status loss self-inflicted, influenced by social media discourse	Community violated by its own; cast as questioning "morals"; social media cast as "Villain" for exposing internal conflict

Figure 2. Coverage of 'loss' related to proximity of perceived dominant news audiences.

organization, Anonymous. Local coverage addressed the role of Anonymous as influencing both internal and external publics about the facts – and interpretations – of the assault and Steubenville's response. Anonymous was presented as complicating the investigation and trial by intimidating witnesses against testifying, threatening to release the personal information such as Social Security numbers of those involved in the case, and turning Steubenville into a platform for the organization's own promotion, regardless of its impact on the local community (Miller, 2013). In the end, the presentation of actors that attacked the community's dominant identity varied at levels of coverage in ways that – when combined with the above approaches of storytelling – contribute to a complex case of audience-focused mythical construction.

Conclusion

This article explored how the proximity of audiences to news events may shape the mythical news archetypes applied as a means to explain the types – and degrees – of loss in coverage of the Steubenville rape and its aftermath (Figure 2). Here, we explicate the study's major contributions.

Through our analysis, we argue that an audience's proximity to news events contributes to the mythical archetypes used to explain everyday life. For example, we explain how national papers described the Steubenville community as having 'Villain' qualities for upholding the 'Hero' status of the boys accused of rape, while regional press provided a more nuanced interpretation. Indeed, those papers recognized the 'community' as conflicted and confused about how to respond to the charges. Even more interesting,

however, in this example, is the role of the local press in this line of storytelling, wherein the Steubenville 'community' is the 'Victim' of villainous social media users that cast the small town as morally questionable. Whether that change in the use of archetype comes from varying levels of intimacy with the news event or a perceived membership in the community (and therefore shared status as Victim), we see the use of archetype addresses the ritual role of news. More specifically, as audiences change, so do their needs and thus does the use of myth and archetype.

Such differences, we argue, are not based on journalistic challenges to the 'facts' of the story, but rather a result of different meanings being assigned to the story's plot, conflicts, and characters. In this way, we suggest a way that mythical news archetypes are influenced as much by local culture – and the cultural needs of particular audiences – as by larger, more general 'Master Myths'. This idea offers new opportunities for the broad field of journalism studies, as we seek to better understand the role media play in community life. Future research, then, should attempt to clarify the relationships among media outlets, perceived audiences, and event proximity to explore the implications of myth and archetype in the press, especially in smaller markets.

From this study, we also suggest research on mythical news archetypes explore elements of invisible influences and actors – those that may not appear as tangible characters in a story. In this case, newspapers struggled to explain the cultural force of social media. Was Anonymous to be treated as an individual force, despite its collective's potentially wide membership? Is news coverage of the group's actions challenging the community's identity to be identified and explained through one of the already standing 'Master Myths' – such as 'The Flood' or is there need for understanding the invisible omnipresence of social media in the world of news myth?

Finally, we argue studies such as ours can help evaluate non-geographically based, participatory media messaging occurring through such venues as social media, blogs, and through mobile devices in terms of who media creators believe their primary audiences to be. Such an understanding, through the lens of mythical news narratives – and perhaps a secondary palette that we have described above – can continue to complicate the cultural storytelling of an increasingly participatory and expanding media system.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. *The New York Times* also presents itself has having an international audience, through the *International Herald Tribune*, which in 2013 became the *International New York Times.*
2. Electronic databases present challenges in terms of gathering a news outlet's complete news coverage (Deacon, 2007); for example, *Washington Post* articles were collected via LexisNexis

Academic to include blogs, which provided the majority of the paper's Steubenville coverage. Additionally, some news articles' headlines and publication dates differed between what appeared on news websites and in the electronic databases.

3. All three newspapers are owned and operated by the same publisher, which resulted in redundant articles that were repurposed across the publications' news coverage and contributed to a large number of texts (p. 141). Therefore, while we acknowledge the cultural value, each news text holds within the publications' individual coverage, for the purposes of the analysis, redundant articles were included in text counts of the newspaper that originated the reporting, identified as such by tracing the reporter's byline to her home newspaper.
4. It should be noted that boys were tried in juvenile court without a jury. While most juvenile defendants are referred to by initials, extensive pre-trial social media chatter had identified the boys by name. In an effort to present their clients in a sympathetic light, the boys' attorneys actively courted media attention for them. As the girl was under the age of 18 at the time of the attack, her identity remained unpublished. That said, however, there is meaning inherent in how the girl was presented and identified in terms of her contested 'victimhood' in terms of how she was represented in ways other than by name.
5. According to the *Times*, the team represents a 'bright light' to an economically depressed area of Ohio: 'People live and die based on Big Red because they usually win and it makes everybody feel good about themselves when times are tough' (Macur and Schweber, 2012).

References

Alexander JC (2004) Toward a theory of cultural trauma. In: Alexander JC, Eyerman R, Giesen B, et al. (eds) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 1–30.

Anderson B (1983) *Imagined Communities*. London; New York: Verso.

Barnett B (2006) Medea in the media: Narrative and myth in newspaper coverage of women who kill their children. *Journalism* 7(4): 411–432.

Barnett B (2013) Toward authenticity: Using feminist theory to construct journalistic narratives of maternal violence. *Feminist Media Studies* 13(3): 505–524.

Barnhurst KG (2002) News geography and monopoly: The form of reports on US newspaper internet sites. *Journalism Studies* 3(4): 477–489.

Benedict H (1992) *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Berkowitz D (2005) Suicide bombers as women warriors: Making news through mythical archetypes. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 82(3): 607–622.

Berkowitz D and Eko L (2007) Blasphemy as sacred rite/right: 'The Mohammed cartoons affair' and maintenance of journalistic ideology. *Journalism Studies* 8(5): 779–797.

Berkowitz D and Gutsche RE Jr (2012) Drawing lines in the journalistic sand: Jon Stewart, Edward R. Murrow and memory of news gone by. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 89(4): 643–656.

Berkowitz D and TerKeurst JV (1999) Community as interpretive community: Rethinking the journalist-source relationship. *Journal of Communication* 49: 125–136.

Bey J (2013) Steubenville rape trial begins. *The Washington Post*, 14 March. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/03/14/steubenville-rape-trial-begins/ (accessed 10 August 2013).

Bird SE (2002) It makes sense to us: Cultural identity in local legends of place. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 31(5): 519–547.

Bird SE (2003) *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World*. New York: Routledge.

Bird SE and Dardenne RW (1997) Myth, chronicle and story: Exploring the narrative Qualities of news. In: Berkowitz D (ed.) *Social Meanings of News*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 333–350.

Buck DC (1986) Juan Salvo y Vela and the rise of the *Comedia de Magia*: The magician as anti-hero. *Hispania* 69(2): 251–261.

Burd G (1977) The selling of the Sunbelt: Civic boosterism in the media. In: Perry DC and Watkins AJ (eds) *The Rise of Sunbelt Cities*, vol. 14. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 129–149.

Carey JW (2009) *Communication as Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Carlson M and Berkowitz D (2013) 'The emperor lost his clothes': Rupert Murdoch, News of the World, and journalistic boundary work in the UK and USA. *Journalism*. Epub ahead of print 17 February. DOI: 10.1177/1464884913477280.

Chesebro J and McMahan DT (2006) Media constructions of mass murder-suicides as drama: *The New York Times*' symbolic construction of mass murder-suicides. *Communication Quarterly* 54(4): 407–425.

Columbus Dispatch (2013) Decency deficit. *Columbus Dispatch*, 12 January, p. A8.

Darnton R (1975) Writing news and telling stories. *Daedalus* 104(2): 175–194.

Deacon D (2007) Yesterday's papers and today's technology: Digital newspaper archives and 'push button' content analysis. *European Journal of Communication* 22(1): 5–25.

Dissell R (2012a) Accusers in Steubenville rape cases get support. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 15 September, p. A1.

Dissell R (2012b) In football-crazy Steubenville, players at center of rape case. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 2 September, p. A1.

Dissell R (2013a) Players' rape trial to begin this week. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 10 March, p. A1.

Dissell R (2013b) Rape trial in Steubenville offers conflicting narratives. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 14 March, p. A1.

Dissell R and Pinckard C (2013a) Text messages reveal teens' concerns as word spread around Steubenville. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 15 March, p. B1.

Dissell R and Pinckard C (2013b) Three witnesses testify seeing sexual acts on teen girl. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 16 March, p. B1.

Durham F (2008) Media ritual in catastrophic times: The Populist turn in television coverage of Hurricane Katrina. *Journalism* 9(1): 95–116.

Eko L (2010) New technologies, ancient archetypes: The *Boston Globe's* discursive construction of Internet connectivity in Africa. *The Howard Journal of Communications* 21: 182–198.

Eliade M (1998) *Myth and Reality*. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.

Epkins HD (2012) Working the 'front lines' in Washington, DC: Digital age terrorism reporting by national security prestige press. *Media, War & Conflict* 5(2): 22–36.

Ettema JS (2005) Crafting cultural resonance: Imaginative power in everyday journalism. *Journalism* 6(2): 131–152.

Ettema JS and Whitney DC (1994) *Audience Making: How the Media Create the Audience*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Eyerman R (2004) Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the formation of African American identity. In: Alexander JC, Eyerman R, Giesen B, et al. (eds) *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 60–111.

Funk M (2013) Imagined commodities? Analyzing local identity and place in American community newspaper website banners. *New Media & Society* 15(4): 574–595.

Gans H (2004) *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Garner AC and Slattery K (2010) The World War II patriotic mother: A cultural ideal in the US press. *Journalism Studies* 11(2): 143–157.

Gitlin T (1980) *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley, CA; Los Angeles, CA; London: University of California Press.

Goode E and Schweber N (2013) Case already tried across social media heads to courtroom. *The New York Times*, 13 March, p. A13.

Gossett D (2013a) City officials announce new website. *Herald-Star*, 6 January. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/581803/City-officials-announce-new-website.html?nav=5010 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Gossett D (2013b) McVey talks about case. *Herald-Star*, 11 January. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/582018/McVey-talks-about-case.html?nav=5010 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Gossett D and Law M (2012) Charges filed against two juveniles. *Herald-Star*, 12 August. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/577202/Charges-filed-against-two-juveniles.html?nav=5010 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Gutsche RE Jr (2013) Zombies, drugs, & florida weirdness: 'Imaginative power' & resonance in coverage of Miami's 'Causeway Cannibal.' *Journalism Studies* 14(4): 555–567.

Gutsche RE Jr (2014) *A Transplanted Chicago: Race, Place and the Press in Iowa City*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Gutsche RE Jr and Salkin ER (2011) News stories: An exploration of independence within post-secondary journalism. *Journalism Studies* 5(2): 193–209.

Gutsche RE Jr and Salkin ER (2013) 'It's better than blaming a dead young man': Creating mythical archetypes in local coverage of the Mississippi River drownings. *Journalism: Theory, Practice, and Criticism* 14(1): 61–77.

Harp D, Loke J and Bachmann I (2014) Spaces for Feminist (re)articulations: The blogosphere and the sexual attack on journalist Lara Logan. *Feminist Media Studies* 14(1): 5–21.

Herald-Star (2013) It will take time to change attitudes. *Herald-Star*, 19 March. Available at: http://heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/584394/It-will-take-time-to-change-attitudes.html?nav=5005 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Hindman M (2009) *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Hough GA (1994) *Newswriting*. Independence, KY: Houghton Mifflin.

Jackson RL, Drummond DK and Camara S (2007) What is qualitative research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* 1: 21–28.

Kaniss P (1991) *Making Local News*. Chicago, IL; London: The University of Chicago Press.

Kitch C (2007) Mourning 'men joined in peril and purpose': Working-class heroism in news repair of the Sago miner's story. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24(2): 115–131.

Kitch C and Hume J (2008) *Journalism, in a Culture of Grief*. New York: Routledge.

Kumar S (2012) Transgressing boundaries as the hybrid global: Parody and postcoloniality on Indian television. *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 10(1–2): 80–93.

Law M (2012) Juveniles facing charges. *Herald-Star*, 23 August. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/577128/Juveniles-facingcharges.html?nav=5010 (accessed 10 August, 2013).

Le E (2006) Representations of national identity in editorials: Obstacles to a renegotiation of intercultural relations. *Journalism Studies* 7(5): 708–728.

Lindlof TR and Taylor BC (2010) *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Lott E (1997) The whiteness of film noir. *American Literary History* 9(3): 542–566.

Ludlow R (2013) Residents hope trial ends vitriolic assumptions about Steubenville. *Columbus Dispatch*, 13 March, p. A8.

Lule J (2001) *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism*. New York and London: The Guilford Press.

McCarty M and Grieco L (2013) Social media under fire in rape case. *Dayton Daily News*, 13 January, p. A1.

Macur J (2012) Hackers demand apology in rape case. *The New York Times*, 25 December, p. B8.

Macur J and Schweber N (2012) Rape case unfolds on web and splits city. *The New York Times*, 17 December, p. D1.

Meyers M (1996) *News Coverage of Violence against Women: Engendering Blame*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Miller M (2012a) Local fan site hacked again. *Herald-Star*, 27 December. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/581519/Local-fan-site-hacked-again.html (accessed 10 August 2013).

Miller M (2012b) Protest rally expected in Steubenville. *Herald-Star*, 28 December. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/581560/Protest-rally-expected-in-county.html?nav=5010 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Miller M (2013) Crowd gathers again to in Steubenville to address rape investigation issues. *Herald-Star*, 6 January. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/581801/Crowd-gathers-again-in-Steubenville-to-address-rape-investigation-issues.html?nav=5010 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Morning Journal (2013) Hacktivists fuel little by lynch mob mentality. *Morning Journal*, 13 January. Available at: http://www.morningjournalnews.com/page/content.detail/id/545411/Hacktivists-fuel-little-but-lynch-mob-mentality.html?nav=5016 (accessed 10 August 2013).

O'Hara S (2012) Monsters, playboys, virgins and whores: Rape myths in the news media's coverage of sexual violence. *Language and Literature* 21(3): 247–259.

Oppel R Jr (2013a) Accuser testifies in Ohio rape case; verdict expected. *The New York Times*, 17 March, p. A23.

Pauly JJ (1991) A beginner's guide to doing qualitative research in mass communication. *Journalism Monographs* 125: 1–29.

Rauch J (2007) Activists as interpretive communities: Rituals of consumption and interaction in an alternative media audience. *Media, Culture & Society* 29(6): 994–1013.

Renard T (2013) Agrestas voice support for defendant. *Herald-Star*, 9 January. Available at: http://www.heraldstaronline.com/page/content.detail/id/581905/Agrestas–voice-support-of-defendant.html?nav=5015 (accessed 10 August 2013).

Riegert K and Olsson E (2007) The importance of ritual in crisis journalism. *Journalism Practice* 1(2): 143–158.

Roberts VS (2013) Homeric heroes in Ethan and Joel Cohen's *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *The Big Lebowski* (1998) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007). *Journal of Religion and Film* 17(1): 1–30.

Robinson S and DeShano C (2011) 'Anyone can know': Citizen journalism and the interpretive community of the mainstream press. *Journalism* 12(8): 963–982.

Ross K (2007) The journalist, the housewife, the citizen and the press: Women and men as sources in local news narratives. *Journalism* 8(4): 449–473.

Scheub H (2012) *Trickster and Hero: Two Characters in the Oral and Written Traditions of the World*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Schudson M (2005) News as stories. In: Rothenbuhler EW and Coman M (eds) *Media Anthropology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, pp. 121–128.

Shafer DM and Raney AA (2012) Exploring how we enjoy antihero narratives. *Journal of Communication* 62: 1028–1046.

Singer JB, Domingo D, Hermida A, et al. (2011) *Participatory Journalism: Guarding Open Gates at Online Newspapers*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
Susman T (2013a) Rape trial ends, but not town's ordeal. *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March, A6.
Susman T (2013b) Teen rape case puts town on trial. *Los Angeles Times*, 10 March, p. A14.
Susman T (2013c) Teens tell of partying in Ohio rape trial. *Los Angeles Times*, 14 March, p. A14.
Tonkiss F (1998 [2004]) Analyzing discourse. In: Seale C (ed.) *Researching Society and Culture*. London: SAGE, pp. 245–260.
West B (2001) Crime, suicide, and the anti-hero: 'Waltzing Matilda' in Australia. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 35(3): 127–141.
Winch SP (2005) Constructing an 'Evil Genius': News uses of mythical archetypes to make sense of bin Laden. *Journalism Studies* 6(3): 285–299.
Zelizer B (1993) Journalists as interpretive communities. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10: 219–237.

Author biographies

Robert E Gutsche Jr is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University in North Miami, Florida. His research deals with myth and storytelling in the news.

Erica Salkin is an Assistant Professor of communication studies at Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington. Her research interests cover public school student speech, student press, and use of cultural symbolism in modern media.