Media Coverage of Celebrity DUIs: Teachable Moments or Problematic Social Modeling?

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Abstract — Aim: Alcohol in the media influences norms around use, particularly for young people. A recent spate of celebrity arrests for drinking and driving (DUI) has received considerable media attention. We asked whether these newsworthy events serve as teachable moments or problematic social modeling for young women. Method: Qualitative analysis of US media coverage of four female celebrities (Michelle Rodriguez, Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie and Lindsay Lohan) was conducted over the year following their DUI arrest (December 2005 through June 2008). The media sample included five television and three print sources and resulted in 150 print and 16 television stories. Results: Stories were brief, episodic and focused around glamorous celebrity images. They included routine discussion of the consequences of the DUI for the individual celebrities without much evidence of a consideration of the public health dimensions of drinking and driving or possible prevention measures. Conclusions: Our analysis found little material in the media coverage that dealt with preventing injury or promoting individual and collective responsibility for ensuring such protection. Media attention to such newsworthy events is a missed opportunity that can and should be addressed through media advocacy efforts.

DUI ARRESTS AMONG YOUNG FEMALE CELEBRITIES

There have recently been several highly publicized drinking and driving (DUI) arrests involving young female Hollywood celebrities. In December 2005, star of the hit television series ‘Lost’, Michelle Rodriguez (age 27), was arrested in Hawaii. Rodriguez failed a field sobriety test and was found to have a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.145% (Hawaii legal limit for driving is BAC < 0.08%). In September 2006, ‘reality TV celebrity’ and heiress Paris Hilton (age 25) was arrested, failed a field sobriety test and was measured to have a BAC of 0.08%. In December 2006, ‘reality TV celebrity’ Nicole Richie (age 25) was arrested for DUI after driving the wrong way down a California freeway. Accounts of Richie’s DUI arrest include discussion of alcohol, marijuana and Vicodin without reporting her BAC. Finally, in May 2007, actress Lindsay Lohan (age 20) crashed her car, was arrested and was found to have a BAC above 0.08%. In July 2007, Lohan (now 21) was arrested again after engaging in a car chase, with a BAC of 0.12%.

The media attention given to these ‘diva’ DUI events is informed by considering the influence of the celebrities’ gender on public reaction. Historically, drunkenness has been found to be more tolerated among men than women, with women’s drunkenness being seen as a breach of feminine responsibility and morality (Herd, 1997). The drinking and driving events referred to above can be understood as stark examples of deviant acts on the part of young women whose societal standing is bound up in their feminine image and identity. This violation may contribute to the considerable media attention given to these incidents. In this paper, we analyze news media coverage of these four female celebrities over the year following their DUI arrest. We are interested in how the DUI events are presented as worthy of news attention and how they are presented in relation to societal norms and expectations.

DRINKING AND DRIVING IN THE USA

Drinking and driving is a major public health concern, given both the prevalence of the behavior and the related injury and mortality consequences (Yanovitzky, 2001). In 2005, alcohol-related crashes (defined as a crash where at least one driver or non-occupant had a BAC of 0.01% or higher) resulted in 16,885 fatalities, 86% of which included at least one driver or non-occupant who exceeded the 0.08% BAC limit (US Department of Transportation, 2008). In 2004, 1.4 million drivers were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or narcotics (US Department of Transportation, 2008). Of particular concern, people younger than 21, for whom alcohol use is illegal, have a higher relative risk of a fatal crash at lower levels of alcohol (The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2008). Moreover, the prevalence of DUI is also not abating among these younger drivers. As of 2001, 31.4% of college students (age 18–24) reported driving under the influence of alcohol, an increase of nearly 5% since 1998 (Hingson et al., 2005).

We need to better understand the factors that appear to undermine society’s concerted efforts to change social norms around drinking and driving. Understanding the nature of news messages is an important public health communication goal, as is ultimately shaping news coverage as a means to prompt policy and behavior change (Yanovitzky, 2001). Media are an important source of socialization about alcohol and the consequences of consumption (Baillie, 1996) and have an influence on the construction of collective definitions of acceptable behavior (Yanovitzky and Stryker, 2001). Furthermore, the media shape the ‘terms of discussion’ for issues such as alcohol (Hansen and Gunter, 2007). The potential of celebrity figures to influence others exemplifies the concept of observational learning, or modeling, which is an integral component of Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning/Social Cognitive Theory. This theory has considerable empirical support for its utility for a variety of injury-related behaviors (Simons-Morton and Nansel, 2006;
Media Coverage of Celebrity DUs

The data were the result of a qualitative analysis (Altheide, 1996) of US media coverage of four celebrities (Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Nicole Richie and Michelle Rodriguez) in the year following each of their DUI arrests. We intentionally limited this analysis to a consideration of media coverage of young female Hollywood celebrities who had been arrested for DUI, although there have also recently been a number of male celebrities and sports stars involved in highly publicized arrests. The data are from a purposive sample of prominent print and television media.

Our media sample reflects a decision to follow coverage in a variety of news media sources—including those traditionally thought of as both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ and that have audiences that include young people. We included a sample of eight news media sources that were selected to provide variety in terms of media type, focus and targeted audience. It was our intention that this small sample should serve as a rough proxy for the overall media environment. Our sample included The New York Times (newspaper of record), Time Magazine (news magazine with popular readership) and People Magazine (celebrity focused news magazine with high youth readership) and the evening news broadcast from both network and cable news channels: ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Fox News. Our data collection took two forms. For print news, we searched online publication archives and for the television coverage, we searched the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive. For each celebrity, we searched for stories from the day of arrest and for 1 year following. We limited our analysis to stories that made any mention of drinking and driving or a particular DUI incident, and we excluded articles that mentioned consequences from the DUI arrest such as jail time, rehabilitation and trial, without explicitly discussing the DUI incident.

We constructed a coding framework (see Table 1) that is anchored around public health and injury prevention constructs as well as an initial review of our data. We intended our coding framework to capture main elements of relevant story content as well as a public health framing (e.g. setting the DUI within an overall context by providing statistics such as those above or discussions of prevention strategies or policy initiatives). We coded for the nature of the newsworthy event, placement of any mention of the DUI incident, inclusion of expert perspectives or quotes, mention of contributing factors or consequences of DUI, social and legal consequences of DUI, prevention policy and whether the news frame was episodic or thematic. Episodic framing presents the story as an isolated event, whereas thematic framing presents the story as an ongoing issue within a larger context (Myhre et al., 2002).

**FINDINGS**

Our search yielded 150 print and 16 TV news stories that were deemed to be relevant to this study (i.e. an article focused on one of the celebrities in the year following her arrest...
Table 1. Coding framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News story unique ID</th>
<th>Celeb initials—news source—date (eg. PH—ABC—12-5-2007)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News story section</td>
<td>Ecuador, UK, New York City, Hollywood, Los Angeles,TX,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsworthy event (choose 1)</td>
<td>DUI event, celebrity, place, date, event, location,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injury consequences of DUI</td>
<td>No injury or death mentioned, injury mentioned, death mentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal and social consequences of DUI</td>
<td>Arrest, jail, community service, fine, loss of employment, enrolment in treatment program, other intoxicating substances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific term used for driving incident</td>
<td>DUI, drunken driving, alcohol-related reckless driving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DUI as a public health problem (choose all that apply)</td>
<td>Arrest statistics for DUI, death statistics for DUI, injury statistics for DUI, health effects of alcohol use, prevalence rates for alcohol use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mention of prevention and treatment strategies</td>
<td>Social host, dram shop, zero tolerance under 21 drinking &amp; driving, vehicle modification, drinking age, mandated minimum sentences for repeat offenders, designated driver, BAC level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenters’ comments (TV only)</td>
<td>Paris Hilton has accepted her fate as a jailbird, saying she will not appeal her 45-day sentence and is ‘learning and growing’ from her time as an inmate. (Van Gelder, 2007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

that mentions her DUI. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lindsay Lohan, who was involved in two DUI events in short succession gained the most relevant coverage, such that stories pertaining to her accounted for 46% of all coverage (see Table 2).

DUI was the focus of all of the TV stories and was dealt with substantially (mentioned in the headline, first paragraph or more than 1/2 paragraphs) in 83 (55%) of the 150 print stories. Many stories where the DUI was a more ‘minor mention’ appeared in People Magazine, which is focused on an ongoing consideration of celebrities’ lives. All of the TV stories were accompanied by either video or still images as were three quarters of the print stories (n = 113). Most photos and video footage were publicity shots or ‘red carpet’ in style rather than images associated with the DUI arrest (such as arrest photos).

In coding for content, our ‘Topic’ code was structured around the question, ‘What is getting this celebrity media coverage today?’ (see Table 2). The most frequently occurring topics were arrest, sentencing and going to/release from jail. Considered collectively, just under half (n = 82) of all of the stories focus on some legal aspects of the DUI event. Two other topics (treatment and consequences) focus on the repercussions of the DUI for the celebrity. Articles coded as ‘other’ for event were often ones where DUI was only briefly referred to, which increased as time passed following the DUI event.

Next, we coded for any mention of the consequences of DUI (for the celebrity, another individual or society as a collective), the inclusion of any public health context or any prevention strategies or policies. We found that coverage rarely presented the DUIs as part of a larger societal issue; only seven of the stories employed a thematic frame. No stories provided any explicit public health context (such as prevalence rates or injury or fatality statistics), although stories on Lohan’s community service occasionally mentioned the possible consequences of drinking and driving. Few articles included any consideration of any of the DUI-related policy or possible societal interventions. BAC was mentioned in 16 articles, but only 9 articles provided specific BAC policy information. Monitoring of alcohol consumption (through the use of an ankle bracelet, for example) was discussed in 12 stories; DUI minimum sentencing was discussed in 11. ‘Dram Shop’ laws (holding servers accountable) were mentioned in two articles, a further two mentioned the legal drinking age (which Lohan had not yet reached by her first arrest) and one suggested the possibility of a designated driver.

Discussions of the consequences of DUI were almost entirely limited to discussions of the legal and professional repercussions of the DUI for the celebrity herself (see Table 3). In some cases, such consequences were the impetus for the story rather than the DUI. Going to jail or losing movie or TV roles were both newsworthy.

Paris Hilton has accepted her fate as a jailbird, saying she will not appeal her 45-day sentence and is ‘learning and growing’ from her time as an inmate. (Van Gelder, 2007)

But hard reality was also quickly setting in. Across this close-knit town, decision makers were mentally wiping Ms. Lohan from their short lists. (Waxman, 2007)

The framing of the DUI events in relation to the consequences for the celebrity is demonstrated in the following clip from Anderson Cooper on CNN. The story is primed by a reference to Lohan’s celebrity standing (‘It girl to out girl’).

Anderson Cooper – Yup, quite a picture. From it girl, to out girl, is an apparently passed out Lindsay Lohan, one of a series of, well, embarrassing photos shot on Memorial Day just a couple of days after she crashed her Mercedes, then was charged with DUI. It almost goes without saying, we’re hearing that the 20-year old star has checked into rehab. (CNN, 2007a)

Only seven stories made any mention of injury or potential injury from the DUI events. All of these stories pertained to Lohan’s hospitalization for ‘minor upper chest injuries’ following the crash, with five stories also noting that her passengers...
were not injured. None of these stories provided DUI injury statistics by way of context.

We sought to identify whose perspective is provided in the news, noting the first three people quoted in each story. We created categories of quoted individuals on the basis of their relationship with the celebrity (such as lawyer or family member) or the DUI event (such as arresting officer or prison warden). Most frequently quoted were those involved in the justice process (police, district attorney and judges but not celebrity attorneys) \( (n = 74) \), followed by celebrities themselves \( (n = 39) \), family members \( (n = 35) \) and celebrities’ lawyers \( (n = 31) \). There were only three quotes from doctors and two stories quoting victims. No story included quotes from public health stakeholders or DUI advocacy groups.

Only one news story included any manifest prevention message, and this came from the reporter rather than a quoted stakeholder. In reporting on Rodriguez’s DUI in late December, CNN’s Anderson Cooper linked the DUI coverage to an appeal for viewers to be careful over New Year’s Eve—presumably referring to drinking and driving.

Finally, although we did not formally code either the print or the TV stories for tone, we noted the newscasters’ lighthearted treatment of some of the stories as demonstrated in the next extract.

Table 2. DUI stories by source: celebrity and event

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Celebrity</th>
<th>New York Times</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>CNN</th>
<th>Fox News</th>
<th>ABC</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lohan</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>77 (46.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hilton</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36 (21.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richie</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30 (18.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodriguez</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23 (13.8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Mentions of individual consequences of DUI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequence</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>240 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrest</td>
<td>98 (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jail</td>
<td>60 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>45 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying a fine</td>
<td>12 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service</td>
<td>11 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol monitoring (such as anklet)</td>
<td>10 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of employment</td>
<td>1 (&lt;1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The potential for reporters to play a positive role in making the link between the newsworthy (or perhaps ‘gossip-worthy’) celebrity event and wider social concerns is evidenced by the initial quote from Cooper. It is, however, also possible to undermine any prevention communication by the adoption of a sarcastic tone or informal language when reporting on such events.

WHAT ARE THE PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF CELEBRITIES’ DRINKING AND DRIVING?

The nature of media coverage of celebrity DUls is relevant for the alcohol research community in two ways. First, to the extent that DUI is newsworthy, so coverage may influence attitudes and ultimately drinking and driving behavior. Secondly, coverage may raise the profile of the problem, which may in turn influence societal attitudes and ultimately promote policy initiatives.

The individualistic nature of this celebrity coverage suggests considerable opportunities to enhance public health framing of newsworthy DUls. In previous work, Yanovitzky (2001) outlined five ‘problem’ frames within which drinking and driving can be presented in the news media (one of which is a public health frame) and six possible ‘solutions’ (many of which are structural or regulatory in nature). Our study found coverage...
of celebrity drinking and driving to be dominated by a law and order frame, with little evidence of any presentation of ‘solutions’ for drinking and driving. Rather, ‘solutions’ were focused almost entirely on ‘fixing’ the individual celebrities’ problematic alcohol use.

Discussions of consequences of drinking and driving were largely limited to the legal and career implications for celebrities. We also suggest that the use of ‘stock’ publicity images of celebrities that have nothing to do with the DUI may serve to glamorize drinking and driving. To the extent that the stories include any prevention message, so such images would undermine this—but in fact we saw little evidence of any such messaging. Our findings resonate with other research on entertainment media that has argued that the negative consequences of drinking and driving to be dominated by a law and order frame, with little evidence of any presentation of celebrity drinking and driving to be dominated by a law and order frame, with little evidence of any presentation of ‘solutions’ for drinking and driving. Rather, ‘solutions’ were focused almost entirely on ‘fixing’ the individual celebrities’ problematic alcohol use.

Acknowledgements — Of drinking are rarely portrayed (Connolly et al., 1994). We found little discussion of personal or societal responsibility in the coverage beyond vague discussions of celebrity engagement in addiction treatment or legally mandated community service. These findings are consistent with the view proposed by Myhre et al. (2002) who argue that ‘from a public health standpoint, it is of concern that many news stories emphasize the episodic nature of the events rather than discussing root social causes or appropriate preventive action’ (p. 187).

IN SUM

Our analysis of media content clearly demonstrated that while the celebrities in question are influential, coverage of their DUIs was brief with a heavy focus on the consequences for the individual—namely the arrest, jail and subsequent treatment. Moreover, the newsworthiness of patry legal consequences for the celebrities may reduce any deterrent value of coverage that routinely included glamorous images of the celebrities while essentially ignoring the potential injurious consequences of her drinking and driving. The perceived trade-off between such consequences and the benefits of the glamorous lifestyle that led to them is an important question but not answerable from our data.

Our analysis of coverage of young female celebrities’ DUls provides insight into the drinking and driving messages in various news media, without explicitly examining the impact of coverage on behavior or policy initiatives. Research on other celebrity news (such as breast cancer and mammography) has demonstrated a potentially powerful influence of such coverage. Future research should include both an examination of news coverage of alcohol use among popular role models in media aimed specifically at young people as well as the comprehension and use of such content by youth and policy audiences.

REFERENCES


