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

Katherine Clegg Smith¹,*, Denise Twum² and Andrea Carlson Gielen³

¹Department of Health, Behavior and Society, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA, ²Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA and ³Center for Injury Research and Policy, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA

*Corresponding author: Department of Health, Behavior and Society, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA. Tel: +1-410-502-0025; Fax: +1-410-955-7241; E-mail: kasmith@jhsph.edu

(Received 28 October 2008; first review notified 12 December 2008; in revised form 17 January 2009; accepted 21 January 2009; advance access publication 16 February 2009)

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 respectability 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). 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 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;}

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evaluative slant (Hansen and Gunter, 2007).

NEWS MEDIA AND ALCOHOL

Agenda setting theory suggests that the media inform both what
issues people think about and what they think about them (Lima
and Siegel, 1999). The literature pertaining to news coverage of
alcohol and DUI more specifically is relatively sparse. Research
on the role of the media in shaping public attitudes toward
alcohol as well as alcohol consumption has tended to focus
on alcohol advertising. There is therefore a need for a broader
consideration of the symbolic environment around alcohol use
(Hansen and Gunter, 2007).

One of the long-standing societal norms around alcohol use
has been that ‘excessive use’ (however that is defined) is more
stigmatizing for women than for men (Robbins and Martin,
1993). One study of alcohol-related content in young adults’
magazines found, however, that coverage serves to normalize
drinking and to construct women who drink as ‘professional,
glamorous, good looking, competent and sophisticated’ (Lyons
et al., 2006, p. 228). The extent to which such ‘normalizing’
messages around young women’s drinking are also apparent
in other media sources remains an interesting and important
question.

In another recent study of news coverage of alcohol in gen-
eral, Hansen and Gunter (2007) found a strong tendency for sto-
ries to present an environmental or naturalistic evaluative slant
related to alcohol use and dependence, rather than explana-
tions that are moralistic or personality focused. In an earlier
study of print news coverage of alcohol, Myhre et al. (2002)
found that ~17% of the coverage concerned DUI events. They
also found that DUI stories are more likely to appear on the
front page and more likely to include some mention of alcohol
policy. Finally, Yanovitzky (2001) found that most news cov-
erage of DUI issues is episodic, and events are often framed in
criminal terms.

The fact that reported rates of driving impaired are higher
among young adult drinkers (18–20 years) than any other age
group (Shults et al., 2002) and that drinking and driving in this
age group (Hingson et al., 2005) also seems to be on the increase
suggests a need for additional studies of alcohol-related news
in media with large youth audiences. In particular, there is a
need for attention to the specific messages being relayed in
such coverage as well as whose perspective is shaping such
messages (Lyons et al., 2006). There is also a call for research
that extends beyond issue focus, specifically considering ‘who’
is driving news coverage of alcohol-related newsworthy events
that are potentially salient to young adults, such as celebrity
DUI arrests. Our analysis builds on the observations of previous
studies in the context of high prevalence of drinking and driving
among US young adults, and the potential of celebrity figures
to influence others via observational learning and modeling.

In order to address questions of agenda setting and fram-
ing as mechanisms of media influence, we ask the following
questions:

- To what extent is a celebrity’s DUI newsworthy during the
  year following their arrest in various media outlets?
- What issues or events associated with a celebrity’s DUI
  are covered in the news?
- How are DUI issues and events framed in various news
  media?

METHODS

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 intention-
ally 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 inten-
tion 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 mag-
zine 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 on-
line 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 ar-
rest 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 conse-
quences 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 an-
chored 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 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 the-
matic 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 fo-
cused on one of the celebrities in the year following her arrest
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)
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.

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**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>

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*Erica Hill – And Paris Hilton, is gonna have to put those party plans on hold. . . Anderson, can you believe, Paris is going to the clink?*

*Anderson Cooper – You know I think, eh, everyone’s gonna remember where they were the moment they, they heard that Paris Hilton was, was being sentenced to jail (Cooper laughs). (CNN Evening News, 2007b)*

Similarly, the following Fox News piece demonstrates an informal presentation tone in relation to some of the stories with the legal system (as represented by the police) being referred to in slang terminology.

*One of the stars of the hit television drama ‘Lost’ choosing to spend five days in jail instead of doing community service, after pleading guilty to driving under the influence. Cops say the 27-year-old had a blood alcohol level nearly twice the legal limit when they pulled her over back in December. (FOX Evening News, 2006)*

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 DUIs 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 DUIs. 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 celebri-
ties. 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 sto-
ries 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 enter-
tainment media that has argued that the negative consequences
of celebrity drinking and driving to be dominated by a law
and


derived by Myhre et al. (2002) who argue that ‘from a pub-
lic health standpoint, it is of concern that many news stories
emphasize the episodic nature of the events rather than dis-
cussing 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 paltry 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’ DUIs
provides insight into the drinking and driving messages in var-
ious 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 cover-
age. 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 compre-

Acknowledgements — This research was supported by funding from the National Center
for Injury Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (grant R49/CCR302486-17).

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