



## Viewpoint

*Viewpoint is a feature of Prevention Pipeline to promote the exchange of ideas and opinions on current topics of interest to those working to reduce substance abuse problems. Readers are invited to comment on these views and future viewpoint articles.*

### NO NEWS IS BAD NEWS: THE STORY ON ALCOHOL IN THE NEWS

by Lori Dorfman, DrPH

If television news and newspapers were your primary source of information you would learn very little about alcohol. Television news viewers and newspaper readers see that alcohol is sometimes dangerous, though that danger is usually overshadowed by the specter of illicit drugs. Viewers get a clear message that drinking and driving continues, but there is little else on alcohol that would stand out. In fact, most mentions of alcohol are lighthearted incidental references that reinforce the idea that alcohol is either a neutral or positive fixture of life.

For example, on TV network news alcohol stories rarely appear—less than 2 percent in one study and about 4 percent in another were alcohol stories. Local television news fared worse: only 1.5 percent of stories in local television news broadcast throughout California over a 12-day period mentioned alcohol.

Similarly, in our study of how youth and violence are portrayed in California newspapers we found very few mentions of alcohol either as a discrete topic or in the context of youth or violence. Of the more than 7,680 stories and opinion pieces we examined over the 3-month study,

alcohol appeared in the headline or lead paragraph in 71 (or less than 1 percent of) items. Most of those (32) were incidental mentions such as the lead in a restaurant review: "Diners sip wine at sidewalk tables..."

Twenty-six of the items in our sample had alcohol as their main topic. Several were in-depth items about various problems related to alcohol use on topics such as the relationship between alcohol outlet concentration and homicide rates, stockholder resolutions challenging alcohol industry marketing practices, and controversies surrounding neighborhood-based alcohol treatment centers.

The good news, then, is that in-depth reporting on alcohol can happen within the constraints of contemporary journalism. The bad news is that it rarely does.

There are several reasons we should be concerned about the dearth of news on alcohol. The first is that the news media bestow credibility and legitimacy to issues.

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Unless alcohol is being reported, the public is unlikely to consider it a salient problem. As news commentator Daniel Schorr has put it, if you don't exist

in the news, you don't exist.

Second, how an issue is reported will influence the way audiences think about solutions. Over the years, a significant body of political science and communications research has indicated that the

structure of news stories has serious implications for the way the causes and solutions for social problems are perceived by the audience.

The effect is especially strong in television news. Professor Shanto Iyengar at UCLA has found that most TV news is "episodic," depicting events and incidents disconnected from the larger social context. He has found that when audiences see episodic stories, and then are asked about who has responsibility for solving problems, they answer that the individuals with the problem need to work harder to solve it—in effect, blaming the victim.

Alternatively, when viewers see stories that are more contextual social circumstances, they understand the causes and solutions for problems in ways that include institutional and government responsibility as well as personal responsibility.

I liken it to the difference between a portrait and a landscape. When people see news stories focused on people and events—portraits, they respond by emphasizing personal responsibility as a solution for the problem.

When the event or person is seen in a broader context, the landscape—audiences respond to questions of what to do about the problem in ways that include social accountability. Institutions and government are seen to have a role in solutions.

This is not an either/or situation; it is a question of balance. Studies have found that 80 percent of network and local television news is episodic, emphasizing individuals, incidents, and events.

Much of the story simply is not being told.

There is a simple way to expand the frame so that more of the story about alcohol problems and their prevention can be told: ask better questions. One of the things journalists do better than anyone, usually, is ask questions. But, are they asking the right questions when it comes to alcohol stories? And, are they asking questions about alcohol when they are reporting on other topics? For example, the increased availability of alcohol is a risk factor for violent death and injury, yet alcohol is rarely mentioned in the context of homicide reports.

Imagine how we, as a society, might understand violence differently, if, with every routine crime report besides who, what, where, when, and why, reporters also asked: Were the people involved—the victim and perpetrator—drinking alcohol? What type? How much? Where did they obtain the alcohol? How many alcohol outlets exist in the community in which the crime took place? How does this compare to alcohol availability in neighboring communities? These kinds of questions would help expand the frame on violence reporting to include the context surrounding the incident. Routinely including information about the role of alcohol in news reports on crime and violence would help inform a community about whether restrictions on alcohol availability were warranted.

Right now, news portrayals of alcohol tend to blame the victim for the problem and hold the victim accountable for prevention. If news stories continue to feature

portraits of individuals who suffer from alcohol-related problems without also including substantial information about the landscape on which that portrait sits, they may be reinforcing the prevailing attitude that individuals are solely responsible for their problems. Such frames diminish our ability to promote policies for preventing death, illness, and injury from alcohol.



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