

FREAKS, MORAL TALES & MEDICAL MARVELS: HEALTH & MEDICAL STORIES ON AUSTRALIAN TELEVISION

Population surveys repeatedly show that people from a range of countries, both developed and developing, nominate the mass media, and particularly television, as their leading source of information about important health and medical issues. Examples of such research include those analysing sources of information on dieting and weight control (Crawford & Worsley 1988), AIDS and HIV (Dolan, Corbor & Zacour 1990; Robb et al 1991; Chang et al 1990), drug use (Wright & Pearl 1990), asthma (Brook 1990), family planning (Adamchak & Mbizvo 1991) and mammography (Baines et al 1989). Such studies also frequently report that media sources of information are regarded as credible by many people. For example, a recent study involving 2134 people in three different cities in Queensland found doctors to be a 'distant second' to magazines and radio/television as the main source of information on health both for people describing themselves as 'active information seekers' and for those who described themselves as more passive (Kassulke et al 1993). The framing of health and medical issues by the media is, for the majority of people, their prime way of making sense of such issues, particularly those of which they have little or no personal experience.

In the range of television programs that focus directly or indirectly on health issues, news bulletins and the current affairs programs which follow them in peak evening viewing times consistently rate highly in terms of audience size (Oliver 1993) and so constitute an important focus for studying media discourses and representations of public health and medicine. A 1975 study of television news in Australia found that in terms of frequency, health and medical stories ranked eighteenth out of 35 content categories (Grundy 1980). More recently, a study

conducted in 1987 of Australian audiences found that 'science/medicine' stories were rated highest out of fifteen categories in terms of audience interest, yet only ranked tenth when actual news content was surveyed (Henningham 1988). An American study of a 'composite' day of television found that 41% of news stories concerned health and medicine. The authors noted a repeated focus on stories about medical technology and victims, saying of the latter that this served to 'define and reinforce health problems as individual issues' (Wallack & Dorfman 1988).

This article describes the health and medical content of a randomly selected week of prime-time news and current affairs television in Sydney. In particular, it addresses in detail the question of 'what made these stories newsworthy?' by examining the discourses, sub-textual narratives, metaphors and apparent news values which framed or carried each story.

METHODS

During the week 15-21 March 1993 we video-recorded the prime-time evening news bulletins on Sydney television channels ABC, Nine, Seven and Ten as well as all evening current affairs programs shown on these channels (*The 7.30 Report*, *A Current Affair*, *Real Life* and *Hinch* respectively). All items, with the exception of sport, finance (stock exchange reports), weather, 'coming up next', reviews of 'tonight's top stories', newsreader sign-offs, advertisements and program promotions, were video-recorded and categorised under headings largely based on categories used in Henningham's (1988) study of Australian television news. A discourse analysis (Lupton 1992) was then performed on the language and imagery used in the news texts. In discourse analysis, the method used

to examine texts is similar to that of the micro concerns of literary criticism combined with a broader sociological political perspective. The emphasis in discourse analysis is upon looking for patterns in the texts, for both consistency and differences in the content and form of accounts, for shared features and for the function and consequences of accounts, with an emphasis on the reproduction of power relations (Potter & Wetherell 1987; van Dijk 1990, 1991). Accordingly, all health and medical stories were considered in terms of their dominant sub-texts, the major shared assumptions and allusions inherent in the language used and their socio-political context (see Gabe, Gustafsson & Bury 1991 and Lupton 1994 for research using similar methodology).

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, excluding sports items, there was a total of 432 news and current

affairs stories broadcast during the seven nights on 27 news bulletins and 20 current affairs programs. Like Henningham (1988, 163) we found that politics ranked highest of the topical categories, followed by crime/police stories. However, our random sample found health and medical stories ranked equal third out of the seventeen categories, a much higher rank than in Henningham's study.

There were 24 different health and medical stories which, given some repetition of topics across channels, were broadcast 37 times (Table 2). Of the 24 items, only five were considered sufficiently newsworthy to be broadcast on more than one bulletin or program. Outstanding among these was a story about a New South Wales politician's call for smoking to be banned in hotels and clubs. This issue was covered on nine bulletins, three times more than the next highest-ranked item, the famine in southern Sudan where, according to the story '800,000 people are starving to death'. Nearly one third (12 or 32%)

TABLE 1

NEWS CATEGORIES IN SEVEN DAYS OF SYDNEY TELEVISION NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

CATEGORY	ITEMS
Politics	73 (16.9%)
Crime, courts, police	57 (13.2%)
Medicine, health, science	37 (8.6%)
Light, quirky, human interest	37 (8.6%)
Accidents, fires, misadventures	35 (8.1%)
Economy, industry, agriculture	30 (6.9%)
War	23 (5.3%)
Entertainment	23 (5.3%)
Demonstrations, protests	22 (5.1%)
Famous people	21 (4.9%)
Major disasters, storms	16 (3.7%)
Social issues, problems	13 (3.0%)
Environment, nature	10 (2.3%)
Events, openings, anniversaries, fund drives	10 (2.3%)
Corruption	9 (2.1%)
Culture, fashion, history	8 (1.9%)
Ordinary people's achievements	5 (1.2%)
Total	432 (100%)
	* 589 if sports items added

TABLE 2

HEALTH/MEDICAL STORIES IN ONE WEEK OF TELEVISION NEWS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS

TOPICS	RECURRENCE
Move to ban smoking in NSW hotels and clubs	9
Famine in the Sudan	3
Doctors may be sued for failing to diagnose HIV	2
Researchers discover gene for breast cancer	2
Soldier contracts HIV in Cambodia	2
Improved drinking water for western Sydney area	1
Sixteen year old girl with progeria	1
Anabolic steroid use in gyms	1
Irish Siamese twins separated	1
AIDS epidemic in Thailand	1
Aspirin prevents against cancers of digestive tract	1
Former cancer sufferer helps Royal Women's Hospital	1
HIV-infected doctors	1
Cervical cancer test to replace Pap test	1
Mother and son have heart-lung transplant	1
Drop in cot-death in Australia (sleeping position)	1
New strains of flu coming	1
Heavy menstruation treatment	1
Doctors face litigation re childbirth	1
Obesity clinic at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital	1
New cosmetic surgery fat removal treatment	1
New blood washing technique for reducing cholesterol	1
The effect of eating carrots & oranges on coronary heart disease	1
Careflight brings sick child from Vanuatu for medical care	1
TOTAL	37

of the health items were of overseas origin, an identical proportion to the overseas origin of all news items (sport excluded).

We found that 23 of the 24 different stories could be readily categorised as instances of at least one of four main narrative sub-texts (Table 3). Each of these sub-texts is now discussed in detail.

THE BIZARRE

As the quintessential visual medium, television tends to use only those stories which provide a vehicle for images that make compelling viewing. Hence, it is not

surprising that every news item broadcast in this study was accompanied by film footage. Indeed, a number of topics that occupied the screen during the sample week might not have been considered newsworthy if they had not featured strong visual imagery. This is especially true of those six news stories we categorised as 'bizarre' items, which all featured film of bodies *in extremis*: the very fat and thin, the grossly muscled, and people with rare medical conditions. For example, the three Sudanese famine items (on ABC and channels Ten and Seven's news bulletins on 16 March 1993) all used the same footage showing naked or semi-naked emaciated

MAJOR NARRATIVE THEMES OF HEALTH AND MEDICINE NEWS STORIES

The Bizarre
<p>Famine in southern Sudan Sixteen year old girl with progeria Anabolic steroid use in gyms Irish Siamese twins separated Obesity clinic at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital New cosmetic surgery technique for fat removal</p>
Moral Tales and Falls from Grace
<p>Soldier contracts HIV in Cambodia Anabolic steroid use in gyms HIV-infected doctors AIDS epidemic in Thailand Doctors may be sued for failing to diagnose HIV Doctors face litigation re childbirth Former cancer sufferer helps Royal Women's Hospital Careflight brings sick child from Vanuatu for medical care</p>
Medical Miracles
<p>Researchers may have discovered a gene for breast cancer A new cervical cancer test A new treatment for heavy menstruation Obesity clinic at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital New cosmetic surgery technique for fat removal New blood washing technique for reducing cholesterol Mother and son have heart-lung transplant Irish Siamese twins separated</p>
Low Tech Prevention
<p>Move to ban smoking in hotels and clubs in NSW Drop in cot-death in Australia due to change in sleeping position Study shows eating carrots, oranges will reduce coronary heart disease Aspirin prevents cancers of the digestive tract Improved drinking water for western Sydney area</p>

villagers, with intriguing warnings such as 'We warn that some scenes in this report from Southern Sudan are disturbing'.

An item on anabolic steroid use featured on Seven's news bulletin (15 March) was portentously labelled a 'special report' and featured shots of heavily muscled men and women dressed in skimpy Lycra outfits exercising in gymnasia, tantalisingly and pointedly described by the reporter as 'the

singles bars of the 1990s'. This story held the news advantages of being both a bizarre story and a moral tale. It was introduced by the newsreader with the words that the drugs 'offer a short-cut to massive muscles and a great-looking corpse', while an interviewed steroid user confessed that 'gym junkies want to look good without the hard work'. The use of the word 'junkies' in this context denotes deviance and lack of self-control as well as the

laziness implied in the phrases 'short-cut' and 'want to look good without the hard work'. A medical professor, given the last word in the item, described bodybuilders who use steroids as 'fools'. These words evoke the core lessons of the ascetic protestant ethic that life's rewards must properly be preceded by pain, hard work and denial, and that pride for many comes before a fall.

The Siamese twins separation item screened on Nine's *A Current Affair* on the same evening was patently a freak-of-nature story. Early this century, Siamese twins were paraded before the public in circus and freak shows. With public sensibilities now preventing such open voyeurism, the attempts of modern medicine to right the wrongs of nature conveniently allows the same public curiosity to be satisfied via an unquestioning and self-justifying veneration of the surgical skill involved. In a lengthy sequence lasting more than half the allotted 30 minutes screening time, viewers were shown many close-ups of the young Irish girls involved, their parents consulting with doctors concerning their surgical separation and articulating their hopes and fears about the impending surgery, and interviews with the parents following the death of one of the girls soon after the surgery.

The item screened on Seven's news bulletin on 15 March on the birthday celebration for 'the oldest little girl in the world' – a sixteen year old Australian girl with progeria (Hutchinson-Gilford syndrome) – was an exemplary instance of the way in which television can masquerade the active pandering to a community appetite for freak-show voyeurism as a legitimate news story. Progeria is a rare genetic disease with striking features that resemble accelerated aging (Brown 1992). It is so rare that in 1990, only one case had been ever been reported in China, the world's most populous country (Wang et al 1990). The 'news' here was that the girl was having a birthday – an event that happens to everyone once a year. The birthday provided a pretext for the news programmers to allow viewers to gawp at a bizarre medical condition, with any hint of insensitivity being mediated through the well-wishing of the newsreader and the implication that viewers had almost been invited guests at the girl's party. The reporter announced that those attending the party were said to have 'guarded the secret of little Becky Coss for eleven years', thus inviting viewers to feel that

they are being divulged a mystery, a device which was extended to coyly close the item with sad and tasteless irony:

Reporter: But at sweet sixteen, Becky Coss is keeping one wish a secret.

Adult at party: You're sweet sixteen and never been kissed before. What do you say to that?

Becky: Yes and no!

MORAL TALES AND FALLS FROM GRACE

Six stories were based on sub-texts that told moral tales about the dangers of self-indulgence, the wages of sin or medical negligence. The 'gym junkies' item (discussed above) was an overt moral tale about the dire health consequences of narcissism; three items about HIV in Thailand and Cambodia warned about the dangers of visiting prostitutes in Asia (screened on *Hinch*, 15 and 19 March, and *Ten news*, 19 March); and an item about an HIV-positive British gynaecologist was framed in terms of moral outrage about a conspiracy of silence to protect diseased, deviant doctors at the alleged expense of the health of thousands of ordinary women (*Real Life*, 16 March). In the *Ten news* item describing the case of an Australian soldier who returned from Cambodia infected with HIV after having had sex with a prostitute, the alleged transmission incident was described as 'a spur-of-the-moment encounter with a prostitute after a few beers on a day off', thus defining the circumstances of transmission as an aberrant 'straying from the path of righteousness' by a man portrayed in every other respect as normal and decent (it was emphasised in the report that 'The soldier is a married man, one of more than 100 in the Australian communications team sent to Cambodia as our contribution to the UN peace-keeping force'). The probability of such a single episode of intercourse leading to female-to-male HIV transmission is extremely remote (Hearst & Hulley 1988) but this consideration went unchallenged in the item's concern to depict the man's case as one of the folly of 'boys being boys'. However, the victim-blaming moral discourse of the item was also explicit: as one reporter commented, 'It's not as if the army failed to educate the soldiers sent to Cambodia. It even supplied protection'. This case provided television with a cautionary tale concerning lack of adherence to safer sex guidelines yet

interestingly enough, failed to question the soldier's decision to engage in marital infidelity with a sex worker. There was also an element of xenophobia in the story, with the mythical 'Far East' being depicted as a hot-bed of infection and disease, with statistics on galloping HIV infection accompanying film of outdoor markets and crowd scenes of Asian people.

Doctors featured as news actors in all but three of the 24 different health and medical stories screened during the sampled week. In the great majority of these, doctors played roles as heroes, technicians, experts or sages (research boffins making discoveries and breakthroughs, skilled body sculptors, clinicians and harbingers of warnings). However, in three instances the news value of the stories lay in the portrayal of doctors as having fallen from their usual venerated position. Two stories concerned medical negligence: the potential for doctors to be sued over childbirth incidents (ABC news, 17 March) and for failure to detect HIV (Seven and Ten news, 15 March). The third story was a lengthy report from Britain which was screened on *Real Life* on 16 March, concerning a gynaecologist who was HIV positive. The item was introduced by Stan Grant, *Real Life*'s presenter, with the following words:

It's the best kept secret in Australian medicine – the numbers of doctors infected with the AIDS virus, but still treating patients. Now the official view is that the known risks of passing on the virus are small, so why add to the patients' worries? But that view is under increasing attack, as you can understand, especially after a recent case in England of a gynaecologist who'd treated thousands of unsuspecting women.

The reporter then set the stage for a conspiracy story by asserting that 'doctors infected with the AIDS virus and thousands of their patients kept in the dark unless they find out by chance' and repeating the main story frame immediately after her first comment: 'Medicine's best kept secret. But should it be?'. Two of these 'unsuspecting' patients were then interviewed, articulating their dread, shame and fear:

I can't go out now. I come home, and that's it. I've stayed indoors. I won't go out. You know, I'm just being treated like a leper.

The suggestion was that even though the patients had tested negative for HIV, they

were stigmatised by mere association with the seropositive doctor from whom they had received treatment. The news interest of this story was in the inversion of the stereotype of the person with HIV/AIDS as posing a threat to health workers and medical professionals, in concert with the discourses of conflict, secrecy and medical negligence. Doctors were represented as endangering their patients' lives and refusing to acknowledge it, casting into doubt their status as altruistic carers.

The story on a former cancer sufferer who was helping a hospital with fund-raising shown on *Hinch* (16 March) was also essentially a moral tale, although one intended to evoke admiration and emulation, rather than the assessments of blame, guilt or caution evinced in the other items in this category. So too, the item on the Australian Careflight transport of a sick child from Vanuatu to an Australian hospital drew on the moral discourses of Australia's benevolence and caring toward sick and ailing children from less 'fortunate' countries. The personalisation of the sick child directed viewers to consider that in the mass of starving, sick and war-torn children that frequently fill foreign news items on television bulletins, Australian authorities were ready to be compassionate to an individual whose anonymity and chances of imminent death were thereby transformed, fairy-tale fashion, into a child with a name, a history and a future. This sub-text is one with which most viewers would be very familiar, being common, for example, in the regular news items about the effects of Australia's international aid efforts and in charity appeals to help the peoples of famine-stricken countries.

MEDICAL MIRACLES

There were eight events that could be categorised under the sub-textual theme of 'medical miracles'. The emphasis in these stories was upon glorifying the 'breakthrough' and success of medical science in its battle against human disease and death. The terms 'world first' and 'new' appeared several times in these stories, in concert with stock footage of medical and nursing staff clustered around a patient in an operating theatre, close-ups of electronic monitoring machines and interviews with doctors in their emblematic white coats, all icons signifying medical

progress and efficiency as a scientific discipline.

During the sample week the *Hinch* current affairs program featured a story on an Australian mother and son who had both undergone heart-lung transplants (17 March). This was especially newsworthy not only because both had survived the operation and appeared to be healthy, but because they were the first known mother and son who had both undergone such a procedure, and because the son's heart had been donated to a third person. As Hinch introduced the story:

An Australian mother and her son, suffering from the same heart and lung problems, now have a second lease on life ... along the way, they've also helped another life be saved.

Both mother and son, referred to as 'marvels of modern medicine', were quoted as saying that their lives had improved immeasurably since the operation:

To be alive, it's really great to be able to walk around and not be on oxygen and not be in a wheelchair ... It's really something that I didn't expect I'd be able to do.

To emphasise their new-found robustness, mother and son were shown engaging in light physical exercise; gingerly cycling on exercise bicycles, sitting side-by-side doing bicep curls with a tiny weight, and walking on the beach. To add to the miraculous element of the story, a third patient was introduced: a woman who had received the son's discarded heart after his transplant.

Other such stories included the discovery of a gene believed to predispose women to developing breast cancer (Seven and Ten news, 16 March), a test for cervical cancer (ABC news, 17 March), new treatment for heavy menstruation (ABC news, 18 March), the obesity clinic at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (Seven news, 17 March), a cosmetic surgical technique for fat removal (*Real Life*, 19 March) and a 'blood washing' technique for reducing serum cholesterol (Nine news, 19 March), as well as the previously discussed item on the separation of Siamese twins screened on *Hinch*. Only once (in the last-mentioned story) were the drawbacks or side-effects of the surgical technique involved discussed at any length, and this only because one of the separated twins died following the surgery. The portrayal of the other 'breakthroughs' tended to obfuscate the socio-economic and political reasons for ill-health or

conditions such as obesity, and neglected discussion of the alternative means of dealing with obesity or high-cholesterol that are directed at prevention rather than costly and invasive medical treatment. For example, the story on a trial procedure described as 'blood washing' framed the technique as a one-off miracle cure for the weak-willed. The story positioned the technology as science's alternative solution to the dreary asceticism and denial involved in selecting a healthy diet and completely avoided any consideration of broader questions about the food selection, marketing and distribution environment that encourages Australians to eat diets rich in fat.

LOW-TECH PREVENTION

Only five news items described recent research findings that pronounced the folk-remedy wisdoms of yore to be beneficial to health. These items stood in contrast to the medical miracle items in that while the latter valorised science's ability to improve on nature (surgical fat removal, improved host resistance through blood washing) or science-as-detective (gene for breast cancer found, new cervical cancer test), the former showed that science, in all its complexity, often was humbled in the face of common sense; eating vegetables is good for you (Nine news, 19 March), the mysteries of cot death lie in a baby's sleeping position (Nine news, 18 March); regular use of inexpensive aspirin, obtainable over the counter at pharmacies or supermarkets, may prevent cancers of the digestive tract (Ten news, 16 March); and ensuring clean water supplies prevents against ill-health (Seven news, 15 March). The discourse underlying each of these stories is that of the resilience of simple lay wisdoms about health in a world of scientific progress moving faster than many viewers could comprehend. Part of the power and appeal of this discourse derives from the intertextual referencing of such simple truths against the frequent honouring of the new in medicine. For example, as a postscript to the blood washing story described above, a brief item on an American Heart Association study claimed that:

eating just two carrots and two oranges a day will dramatically reduce heart disease. Fruit and vegetables contain anti-oxidants which stop the damaging effects of cholesterol. The Health Department recommends five serves a day to live longer.

The juxtaposition of this item with the science-fiction tone of the blood washing story illustrates the value pluralism of the news media: the unblinking ability to discuss the prevention of heart disease, seconds apart, framed in terms of two quite radically different metaphors and assumptions about the roles of biomedical treatment and lifestyle factors in prevention.

The most newsworthy story, the move to ban smoking in hotels and clubs (which featured on all television news bulletins on 16 March and reappeared throughout the sample week), also fitted into the low-tech prevention narrative, but additionally incorporated elements of controversy based on apparent governmental authoritarianism and contempt for 'the Australian way of life'. In addition, it was a local story, combining state politics with health issues, two of the most newsworthy thematic categories for television news. A ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces is a decision that would attract great attention from health lobby groups who have campaigned for such a decision, and the tobacco and hotel industries who have strongly opposed it. The ABC's news report framed the item almost wholly from the perspective of the latter, opening with the following statements:

Newsreader: Moves within state parliament for a blanket ban on smoking in all spaces except the home have sparked early protests in the hotel industry.

Reporter: It's as Australian as meat pies and kangaroos, but now the smoko at the local pub is under threat.

Male drinker: No, no, no. It's the last bastion.

Reporter: If independent Peter McDonald has his way, indoor smoking will be outlawed everywhere except the private home or car. The fine, \$5000.

In this discourse, rather than frame the issue as a victory for health campaigners over the vested interests of the tobacco industry or to describe the reaction from the two-thirds majority of Australian non-smokers, the reporter and editors elected to frame smoking as a cherished national icon and a 'last bastion' against the slippery slope of government health regulation. It was asserted inaccurately that individuals would face a \$5000 fine, whereas this fine was in fact the potential maximum that would be imposed upon hotel or club owners, not smokers themselves. The

themes of hypocrisy on the part of politicians and the state's intrusion into everyday life were also taken up by the other three channels:

Channel 10: ... while the government has targeted the smoker, state parliament remains one of the few public buildings where smoking is still permitted.

Channel 9: In another blow for smokers ...

Channel 7: Male smoker: Not in a pub or a club ... 'cos ... that's the only place you can really let your hair down, y'know?

Reporter: It's sacred?

Smoker: Yeah.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have argued that television coverage of health and medical topics tends to conform to readily identifiable framing strategies, using a standard and predictable stock of narratives, discourses and visual images. The bizarre, the moral warning, the discrediting of high status individuals, the medico-scientific breakthrough and the contrasting low-tech reaffirmation of folk remedies or preventive measures provided the frames around which almost all of the news stories in this sample were constructed. It is notable, however, that apart from the one story on banning smoking in pubs and clubs, medical breakthroughs and bizarre bodies were given more attention than preventive items. This can be explained not only because of the 'miraculous' nature of medical breakthroughs and the prurient voyeurism inspired by the bizarre, but also by the fact that preventive stories offer little in the way of arresting visual images. Viewers cannot 'see' a healthy diet working to prevent against heart disease in the same way as they can witness heart surgery being performed by the high priests of medicine, clustered around an operating table with the very organ pulsing in their bloodied hands.

As a vehicle for one-way communication, television allows its audiences to vicariously observe intriguing, ordinarily inaccessible situations where their actual physical presence might result in consequences they would prefer to avoid. The codes of interpersonal conduct which apply in face-to-face encounters can be suspended when one is viewing others through a television screen. For example, there are no risks involved in gazing intently at others' on-screen sexual behaviour, eavesdropping on others' filmed

conversations or in expressing reactions which would be normally suppressed through concern for the response or feelings of those involved. In a society obsessed with the body – its attractiveness, sexual exploits, shape, state of health – and preoccupied with notions of physical risk and self-discipline, the health and medical fields offer a wealth of opportunities for people to vicariously participate in many such taboo situations: one can stare or gawp unconstrained at the bodily misfortunes of others, learn of the private medical problems of strangers, and bear witness to medical procedures normally shrouded in medical privacy. Also worthy of note is television's tendency to cast heroes, villains and victims in health and medical stories, to both trivialise some illnesses and magnify the importance of others in the quest for visually striking images, and to make moral judgments about ill people (especially those with HIV infection), thus promoting either sentimental sympathy or fatuous antipathy for their plight.

The frames placed around health and medical issues, as exemplified in our sample week, have significant implications for television news audiences' construction of lay understandings about such issues. News stories dealing with life-and-death matters, or even events or developments relating to lifestyle choices, often present confusing and conflicting information. Television news is believed by Australians to be the most credible of all news sources (Henningham 1988), yet the average length of screen time of the news stories we surveyed was only 67 seconds. Credibility then, would seem to have little to do with comprehensiveness but more to do with the coalescence of visually striking images and the casting of stories within a quite limited number of frames and discourses which better allow audiences to rapidly 'make sense' of often technically and ethically complex health or medical topics. While we would not argue that audiences absorb such messages passively, uncritically or uniformly, we assert that the discursive ways in which media texts are structured, and the language and images chosen during production, work to set up a hierarchy of discourses and to persuade audiences to accept the producers' intended meaning (Astroff & Nyberg, 1992; Morley, 1992). To supplement text-based analyses of discourse and meaning, audiences' awareness and adoption of the

assumptions and closures effected by the sorts of discourses and visual images we have described should also be examined. We are currently pursuing this research, using controversial news stories about health and medicine as discussion points for audience groups.

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