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The Price of Lives: A Gatekeeping Analysis of Missing Persons in News Coverage.

**Literature Review**

On September 11, 2021, a 22-year-old woman was reported missing after she did not return from a cross-country trip with her fiancé (Hauser). The woman’s name, Gabrielle Venora Petito, would circulate on social media pages and news stations throughout the United States, prompting a nationwide search and the involvement of the FBI. Unfortunately, these efforts led to the findings of Petito’s remains, which were in Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming (Hauser). While many who followed the case were devasted by the news, others criticized the amount of coverage the case received. News coverage refers to the number of times a person or event is represented in news media. This includes in newspapers, television, radio, and news websites.

The term “Missing White Woman Syndrome,” coined by late journalist Gwen Ifill, gained popularity as people were searching for Petito (Robertson, 34). The term refers to the phenomenon in which news media focus on wealthy or middle class white women who go missing at levels and with frequency that sharply contrast with coverage of missing minority women. Missing people of color are disproportionately represented in media and rarely receive even a fraction the coverage the Petito disappearance garnered (Williamson & Reynolds, 59). Many academics have analyzed Missing White Woman Syndrome (MWWS) to determine how race, age, gender, and lifestyle impact the newsworthiness of missing persons. Using these characteristics, scholars have shown how news media frames and gatekeeps stories based on the “ideal victim” mentality.

It is not uncommon for people to go missing. In the United Kingdom alone, over 300,000 people go missing each year. This means that a person is recorded missing approximately every two minutes (Fyfe, et al.). This number only grows when looking at the U.S. population, which is larger than the U.K.’s (331.9 million vs 67.33 million as of 2021) (Trebuka, 33). Not every case will get the same amount of news coverage that Petito’s did, in other words, and these variances can largely be explained by race and ethnicity. To better understand why there are these gaps, this study will apply the gatekeeping theory of media news selection, or how news stories are determined to be worthy of audience attention (Stacks et al.), and the companion theory to gatekeeping of framing.

The gatekeeping theory is a prominent framework in the field of media and communication studies that posits that the news selection process is not a simple reflection of reality but a complex process where information is filtered and shaped by media professionals who act as gatekeepers. Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in social psychology, laid the groundwork for gatekeeping theory. In his influential paper, "Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change," Lewin (1943) introduced the concept of the "gatekeeper," suggesting that individuals control the flow of information. This notion paved the way for communication scholars to explore the role of gatekeepers in media organizations. David Manning White's work significantly advanced the gatekeeping theory. White (1950) introduced the "gatekeeper" concept in his study, "The 'Gatekeeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News." This research focused on how editors in a newspaper decided which stories to publish, shedding light on the complex nature of news selection. White's study marked a turning point in the development of gatekeeping theory by emphasizing the role of journalists in shaping public information. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, building on White's work, expanded gatekeeping theory through their development of the "Hierarchical Model" (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This model posits that gatekeepers, who include editors, journalists, and media owners, play a vital role in deciding which stories are presented to the public. Shoemaker and Reese's model offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the various stages of news selection, including agenda-setting and framing.

As the media landscape has evolved, so too has gatekeeping theory. In the digital age, gatekeeping has expanded to include not only traditional news organizations but also social media platforms and citizen journalists. Bruns and Highfield (2012) examined the role of gatekeeping in social media, highlighting how content goes through a process of selection, curation, and dissemination on platforms like Twitter and Facebook. This expansion of gatekeeping to new media platforms has broadened the scope of gatekeeping theory. The hierarchical model proposed by Shoemaker and Reese further contributed to our comprehension of how gatekeepers influence the news agenda. In the digital era, the concept of gatekeeping has expanded to include new media platforms, changing the way we view the role of gatekeepers in shaping the information landscape (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). This research will fill a gap in the literature by addressing specifically disparities in coverage of missing persons based on race and ethnicity.

A frequent companion method to gatekeeping, framing theory is a fundamental concept in media studies that examines how news stories are constructed and how media outlets influence public perceptions of events. It focuses on how the presentation of information can shape the way audiences understand and interpret news stories. This literature review explores the key studies that have contributed to our understanding of framing theory. The roots of framing theory can be traced back to the work of Erving Goffman, a sociologist. Goffman's 1974 book, "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience," laid the theoretical groundwork for framing theory. Goffman's concept of "frames" as cognitive structures used to interpret reality was influential in shaping the development of framing theory within the field of media studies (Goffman, 1974).

Robert Entman's work has been pivotal in defining and advancing framing theory in media. In his 1993 article, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," Entman provided a comprehensive framework for understanding framing. He argued that framing consists of selecting and highlighting certain aspects of events or issues while downplaying or excluding others, thus influencing how audiences perceive the issue (Entman, 1993).

Iyengar's research has explored the influence of media frames on public opinion. His 1991 study, "Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues," demonstrated that the way news media frame political issues affects public perceptions of responsibility and blame in political events (Iyengar, 1991). This study exemplified how frames have real-world consequences in shaping public opinion.

In addition to news media, police are crucial sources of information about missing persons. In the current social media era, they do not need journalists to release this information. They can directly communicate with the public through sites like Facebook. This gives the police gatekeeping power over both the public and journalists (Liebler [Not at Risk?]). Even when police work with journalists to release details of a case, they can influence what people see. This is because “any bias in police work has implications for news content, as official sources and structures influence news” (Liebler [Not at Risk?]). This, as well as newsworthiness, impacts what stories reach the public eye and which get buried.

Newsworthiness is directly linked to what stories get published. For a story to be newsworthy, that story must have at least one of these attributes: timeliness, impact, proximity, conflict, novelty, or visual interest. Reporters have defended their choices in mainly covering attractive middle class white women “by saying they are responding to the market” and giving their audience what they want (Liebler [Me(di)a Cupla]). According to Liebler, they state that these cases are unusual, and their audience—which is mainly white and middle-class—will identify more with these women than minorities; therefore these stories will generate more impact. This view of “news value” also draws from implicit views of lifestyle and “the ideal victim.”

Ferguson et al. uses Lifestyle Exposure Theory to examine the levels of victimization a missing person could have. Here, “lifestyle” is defined as “the regular routines, vocational activities, and other engagements that occupy an individuals time” and include characteristics such as gender and household income (Ferguson et al.). Part of the investigative process includes understanding the missing person’s lifestyle as it can aid officers in finding a cause for why a person may have gone missing. Understanding a person’s lifestyle can also influence the scale and seriousness of an investigation by noting the levels of victimization the individual has and allowing the police to construct a risk assessment (Fyfe et al.). In this case, victimization refers to the state of being a victim, and risk assessment analyzes the level of risk a missing person could be exposed to. For example, a missing child carries a higher level of victimization than an adult because their age immediately puts them at a higher risk level to be a victim of a kidnapping. A child is also less likely to be able to provide for themselves.

“Risky” behaviors and lifestyles also increase vulnerability to victimization. These behaviors include drug use, binge drinking, and criminal activity. Offenders may target sex workers since they are less likely to file police reports due to their own involvement in crimes, which increases their victimization levels (Ferguson et al.). Communities who distrust police face a similar predicament. People who feel as though the police may not help or might worsen the situation will not go to the police if they are victims of a crime. Despite the increased victimization of these lifestyles, these stories have a lower chance of receiving coverage. Part of this is due to blameworthiness. If a missing person is considered dangerous or culpable due to their prior criminal involvement, they might be blamed for their current position (Gruenwald et. al.). A missing sex worker could be disregarded due to their job, and they would receive less sympathy than a middle-class woman who works in a daycare. These negative connotations of lifestyle allow news media to “run stories that are of interest to them […] and downplay stories involving the victimization of the out-group” (Gruenwald et al.). When taking everything into account, one can picture how news media choose the “ideal victim.” The ideal victim must be someone the public can pity and identify with. They tend to be white, female, young, and attractive while also having a background free of crime (Mescher). This idea of the perfect victim affects the way stories are framed and impacts communities by perpetuating stereotypes of those who do not fit this view.

According to Conlin et al., “framing occurs when events and issues are presented by a communication source in a certain way that leaves the receiver with a distinct picture of how the topic is supposed to be viewed.” It changes how the audience feels about the story and those involved, which is known as framing effects. Framing can be both visual and verbal; it can impact politics and cultural values, and it can be more influential than personal experience (Conlin et al.). In a sense, framing can be a form of gatekeeping. The amount of care put into a story can influence how the public views and discusses it. Framing can also influence how people see missing persons, and it can impact willingness to aid in a search.

Implicit biases on class, race, gender, and sexuality can slip into framing and portray minority groups as “less worthy” victims. For example, black men have repeatedly been portrayed as “dangerous” and in need of public scrutiny. Theses labels—as well as their overall image of criminality—portrays black men as offenders more than victims (Kumah-Abiwu). When they are victims, this stereotype frames the story to ridicule black individuals. In 2016, “a four-year-old black boy fell into the gorilla habitat at the Cincinnati Zoo” (Kumah-Abiwu). News media focused on his father’s criminal history, which was unrelated to the event. Just one week later, a two-year-old white boy was attacked by an alligator. The family did not face any media scrutiny for the event, and the response was more empathetic (Kumah-Abiwu). Due to the difference in lifestyle and race, news media ridiculed the black family and justified blaming them for their tragedy by perpetuating a stereotype and criminalizing them. This difference in framing is caused by implicit and explicit biases, which impact what stories are selected and how they are framed.

Between 2011 and 2020, 710 Indigenous Americans went missing in Wyoming (Grant et al. 11), the same state where Petito went missing. 57% of the missing persons were female and 84% were juveniles. Of the 710 missing Indigenous American, only 5 were recorded in NamUs—the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. None received similar coverage to Petito. When regarding cultural proximity to most of the audience of news media, the Indigenous women were not closely related, which decreased their chances of receiving coverage. In terms of lifestyle, they do not share the historical romanticization of the innocent and pure white woman and are often seen as poor and promiscuous (Gilchrist). When Indigenous women do receive coverage, their stories often give a sense of detachment and rarely include photographs, whereas the stories on missing white women included large photographs as well as childhood photos with more emotional writing (Gilchrist).

It is indicative that white women are portrayed in media at a disproportionate rate when compared with minorities. Through various themes and theories, scholars have dissected why MWWS exists. Newsworthiness, lifestyle theory, and framing have upheld MWWS and perpetuated stereotypes that negatively impact minority communities. These studies illustrate a need to change the current system of news media and to highlight implicit bias in news coverage, for those who hold high levels of risk are neglected. How, as a society, is it moral to value certain lives over others, and how can people change media coverage to be more inclusive?

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