Reflections

Famous for Fifteen Minutes: Notes on the Researcher as Newsmaker

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Do you know me? As a sociologist, I publish the results of my research in scholarly journals with circulations of a few thousand copies. On occasion, citations to my work appear in textbooks or articles written by other social scientists. Several times a year, I receive calls from the local media requesting my (presumably expert and preferably pithy) comments on some currently newsworthy topic, ranging from the relationship between unemployment and crime to the cloning of Elvis Presley. As with most academics, you can find my name in print, but you have to look for it.

Yet, for a few days last October, I had the opportunity to present the results of one of my research projects to tens of millions of people. I was flown to New York for interviews on NBC's "Today" show and Cable News Network. I gave phone interviews to the Associated Press, the ABC and Mutual radio networks, and radio stations owned and operated by NBC and CBS—sources which supply news to hundreds of other newspapers and radio stations. Some of these news outlets wanted more; they called asking for special interviews or live, on-the-air commentary. Phone messages went through triage; knowing that I couldn't answer every call, I chose which media in which markets would hear from me.

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I spoke to reporters from the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and the *Denver Post*, and gave radio interviews to stations in Toronto, Boston, St. Louis, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles—in all, about forty interviews in the space of a week. The Warholian future had arrived: I was famous for fifteen minutes.

I was surprised by this attention. I hadn't expected my research on Halloween sadism to receive extensive news coverage. As I gave my interviews, I learned some things about the nature of news and the workings of the media. I think these lessons have implications for social science researchers' role in society.

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**Studying Halloween Sadism**

I first heard about Halloween sadism during the late 1960s. Those early reports featured hippies who gave drugs to trick-or-treaters. Within a few years, the stories changed: now the contaminated treats often held razor blades, pins, or other sharp objects. A 1970 case caught my eye, when a little boy’s death was first attributed to a Halloween sadist, then later revealed to have been accidental. Thereafter, I paid attention to the annual warnings against and news reports about Halloween sadism. Although most people seemed to view the threat as real, I became convinced the problem was exaggerated.

I decided to survey press coverage of Halloween sadism, reasoning that authentic instances would surely have been treated as newsworthy. Working with one of my students, Gerald Horiuchi, I surveyed three major regional newspapers, the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as our local paper, the *Fresno Bee*, from 1958 to 1984. We were unable to find any evidence that any child had ever been killed or seriously injured by a contaminated treat received during trick-or-treating.

We prepared a manuscript, describing our findings, arguing that Halloween sadism was best understood as an urban legend, and suggesting that urban legends could be seen as unconstructed social problems. We submitted the manuscript to the sociological journal *Social Problems* and eventually had it accepted for publication (Best and Horiuchi, 1985).

In the meantime, I began to think that the fact that there was little or no substance to the stories of Halloween sadism might interest the general public. Early in October, 1984, I submitted a short piece to the *Fresno Bee*; it ran on the opinion page, but did not get picked up outside California's central valley. In 1985, I decided to try to reach a larger