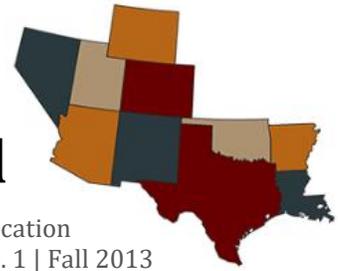


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The Death of Osama bin Laden: News Diffusion and the Role of New Media

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Abstract

A survey concerning the diffusion of information about the death of Osama bin Laden was administered to 324 undergraduate students at a university in the Southwest United States. Results of the survey indicated that a majority, 59.6%, of the participants indicated that they first heard of bin Laden's death through a new media source (text message, internet news site, or social networking site), and a significant number, 40.4%, indicated that they had first heard the news through a social networking site. Within the matter of a few hours of the first media coverage of bin Laden's death, 80% of respondents had heard the news. While new media played an important role in diffusion of information about bin Laden's death, face-to-face communication was most often used by those who reported sharing the news about bin Laden's death. Results of the current study seem to support that there were some differences between participants' use of media to get information on bin Laden's death based on gender and race/ethnicity.

The Death of Osama bin Laden: News Diffusion and the Role of New Media

Introduction

On Sunday May 1, 2011, at 11:35 p.m. EDT President Barack Obama stepped to microphones and television cameras in the East Room of the White House to announce that Osama bin Laden had been killed in a U. S. military operation (Obama, 2011). Anticipation of the announcement began an hour earlier when networks began to interrupt regular programming with the announcement that the president would be making an important statement to the nation (France, 2011). The networks made the decision to cut away from their programming after Dan Pfeiffer, the White House communication director, sent a tweet at 9:35 p.m. EDT that stated, “POTUS to address the nation tonight at 10:30 p.m. Eastern Time” (Stelter, 2011). According to NBC Nightly News anchor Brian Williams, shortly after Pfeiffer’s tweet many journalists were sent e-mails simply stating, “Get to work” (Stelter, 2011).

As networks broke away from programming, news anchors, reporters, and commentators took to the air and began to speculate about the nature of the impending address. Early speculation did not focus on bin Laden’s death, but at 10:25 p.m. EDT Keith Urbahn, the chief of staff for former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, tweeted, “So I’m told by a reputable person they have killed Osama bin Laden. Hot damn” (Stelter, 2011). Shortly after his initial tweet, Urban tweeted, “Don’t know if it’s true, but let’s pray it is” (Stelter, 2011). Jill Jackson, a CBS News Capitol Hill producer, tweeted at 10:32 p.m. EDT, “House Intelligence committee aide confirms that Osama bin Laden is dead. U.S. has the body” (Hernandez, 2011). Fox News tweeted at 10:41 EDT, “#FoxNews’ Chad Pergram confirms #Osama bin Laden is dead #usama #osamabinladen” (Hernandez, 2011). At about 10:45 p.m. EDT several networks began reporting that they were hearing from unnamed sources that bin Laden was dead.

Brian Williams reported to the NBC audience that the story of bin Laden's death had begun "to leak out in the public domain largely when some Congressional staffers started to make phone calls" (Stelter, 2011). While Obama's address was originally announced to start at 10:35 p.m. EDT, it was pushed back several times. By about 11:00 p.m. EDT the *New York Post's* website carried the headline, "We Got Him!" and *The Huffington Post's* headline simply said, "Dead" (Stelter, 2011). Around that same time, "there were more than a dozen Facebook posts with the word 'bin Laden' every single second" (Stelter, 2011). The news frenzy ended with Obama's announcement at 11:35 p.m. that indeed bin Laden was dead.

The timeline suggests that new media played an important role in the diffusion of the news about Osama bin Laden's death among media elites and the general public. There is a significant history of research on the diffusion process for national news events, but the place of the new media in the diffusion process has received less attention. This is true, in part, because much of the research on news diffusion was conducted well before the development of the new media.

News Diffusion

Rogers (2000) traces the beginnings of diffusion research to Miller (1945), and his study of the diffusion of the news of the unexpected death of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Miller's study, conducted with Kent State students, found that "most persons heard about the President's death by word of mouth" (p. 694). Fewer people heard about Roosevelt's death from radio, but tended to share the news with "an average of 7 persons, thus activating word of mouth communication lines" (p. 694). Miller also found that "radio, telephone, and newspaper serve both as informing and as confirming sources of news items" (p. 694). He noted that "the time it

takes for news to spread depends upon the routine patterns of daily association and the accessibility to mass communication devices at the time of announcement” (p. 694).

Otto Larson and Richard J. Hill (1954) examined the diffusion of the news of the death of Senator Robert A. Taft. Despite a newspaper strike in Seattle, where the study was conducted, Larson and Hill drew several conclusions about diffusion of the news. They found that information about Taft’s death was widely diffused among “the faculty and the laboring-class communities” (p. 432) studied. They also found that the “faculty community learned the news earlier than did the laboring-class community” (p. 432). They also reported that “the single most informed segment of both populations was the white respondents in the laboring-class community,” and “the single least informed group was the non-whites in the same community” (p. 432). Female respondents learned the news before males, and “more people learned the news from a mass media source than through interpersonal communication” (p. 432). Radio was found to be the most important source of information, but that finding could have been influenced by the newspaper strike. Men tended to share the news with other people through interpersonal communication than females. Learning the news through interpersonal communication encouraged individuals to involve themselves in more interpersonal communication, than learning the news through the mass media. The faculty community and non-whites were more likely to consult secondary sources of information, and whites were found to be more likely to engage in interpersonal communication.

In another early study Wayne Danielson (1956) examined, among other variables, the dissemination of the news that President Dwight Eisenhower had decided to seek a second term despite suffering a light stroke. Danielson found that more than half of the respondents had

heard about Eisenhower's decision within four hours of the announcement. He also found that radio was "the fastest source and reached the most people" (p. 441). In relation to supplemental media use, Danielson also reported that:

If radio is used as source of additional information about an event, then television and the newspaper will be used also; if television is used, then the newspaper will be used also; only the newspaper will be used alone as a supplementary medium by many persons; if the newspaper is not used, neither radio nor television will be used. (p. 441).

In a study that helped to set the pattern for future news diffusion studies, Deutschmann and Danielson (1960) studied the diffusion of three news events in several cities. They found that most respondents first heard of the stories from radio and television, and then shared the news with others in face-to-face communication. They also identified a pattern in the diffusion rates between the three news events, noting that the diffusion rates showed a decline when the diffusion process "shut down for the night" (p. 354). Deutschmann and Danielson determined that some news events diffused more slowly because those events may not be given a high level of importance or salience in the media. This study helped to focus future researchers attention on the rate at which news diffusion takes place, the various channels of diffusion (radio, television, newspapers, and interpersonal communication), the two-step flow of communication with interpersonal communication being stimulated by the mass media, the importance of salience in the diffusion process, and the importance of variables like the time of day, day of the week, and the location (Rogers 2000).

Mayer, Gudykunst, Perrill, and Merrill (1990) reviewed findings from a larger number of earlier news diffusion studies and drew six conclusions. First, news of important news events is

diffused by word-of-mouth, while word of less important news events is spread by the media. Second, people are more likely to learn about a major news event from another person if the event takes place on a weekday, but more likely to learn about an event from the media when the event takes place on a weekend. Third, in the workplace people tend to learn about a major news event from other people, at home people tend to learn about a major news event from the mass media. Fourth, the time it takes for people to learn about an event after it occurs is correlated with how they hear about the event. Fifth, various demographic variables are correlated with how long it takes for people to hear about events and how they hear about events. Based on their review of earlier research, Mayer et al. (1990) presented a model that indicated that where a person learned of a news event influenced how they learned, and influenced how soon they learned of the event.

More recently, researchers have investigated the role of new media in news diffusion. Greenberg, Hofschier, and Lachlan (2002) found that about one-third of participants in their study who had Internet access used Web sites for more information following the 9/11 attacks. Two percent of participants reported that the Internet was their most valuable source of information. Ruggiero and Glascock (2002) found that about two-thirds of participants reported using the Internet during the week following 9/11, and the Internet increased from about 5% to 13% as the first choice for follow-up information during that week. Glascock and King (2007) examined the diffusion of news about the space shuttle Columbia explosion and disintegration. They compared the diffusion of the news at a location close to the event with diffusion at a distant location. One important finding of this study was that a large number of respondents in

the distant location used the Internet as a primary source of news in the hours following the event.

The present study examines how a group of young adults, ranging in age from 18 to 30 years, learned of the death of Osama bin Laden, and the place of traditional and new media sources in the diffusion of this news. The study focuses on this group because they are more likely to use new media (see Jones, 2009).

- H₁: Most participants will initially learn about bin Laden's death through new media sources.
- H₂: The prevalence of new media will lead to a rapid dissemination of the news of bin Laden's death.
- H₃: Most participants will share the news of bin Laden's death with others through new media.
- H₄: Most participants will use new media sources to find follow up information on bin Laden's death.
- RQ₁: What, if any role will gender or race/ethnicity in participants' use of new media during the diffusion process?

Methods

The survey was administered during the week following President Obama's announcement on national television of bin Laden's death. A total of 325 undergraduate students enrolled in sections of an introductory communication course at a mid-sized public university in the Southwest participated in the survey. Of these 39% were male, 61% female.

The average age was 19.7 years and ranged from 18 to 30 years. Most of the undergraduates were freshman (49%) or sophomores (29%). Participants fell primarily into one of three racial/ethnic categories: Caucasian (59%), African American (26 %) and Hispanic (8%).

The questionnaire consisted of 11 items and was administered during the week following the announcement of bin Laden's death. First, respondents were asked how they first heard of bin Laden's death. Choices consisted of face-to-face, telephone call, text, television, radio, internet news site, social networking site, e-mail, and other. Second, respondents were asked to indicate when they first heard the news. Choices here consisted of the following CST time segments: Sunday, May 1, 9-10 p.m.; Sunday, May 1, 10-11 p.m.; Sunday, May 1, 11p.m.-Midnight; Monday, May 2, Midnight-1 a.m.; Monday, May 2, 1-2 a.m.; Monday, May 2, 2-3 a.m.; Monday, May 2, 3-4 a.m.; Monday, May 2, 4-5 a.m.; Monday, May 2, after 5 a.m. Third, respondents were asked where they were when they first heard the news. Choices were work, home/apartment, school, in transit, and other. Fourth, respondents were asked if they told anyone about bin Laden's death, and if so, how many people they told. Fifth, respondents were asked how they told others about the news. Choices for this item were face-to-face, telephone, text, television, radio, Internet news site, social networking site, e-mail, tweet, and other. Sixth, respondents were asked to rank their choices for getting additional information about bin Laden's death in the first several hours after they initially heard the news. Choices for this item were face-to-face, telephone, text, television, radio, internet news site, social networking site, e-mail, other. Respondents were also asked which network(s)/station(s) they watched if their top choice for getting additional information was television, and which Internet news site(s) they used if their top choice was an Internet news site. Seventh, respondents were asked to rank their

choices for getting additional information the next day following the announcement of bin Laden's death. Again the choices were face-to-face, telephone, text, television, radio, Internet news site, social networking site, e-mail, other. The remaining items collected demographic information from the respondents.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1 most participants learned about bin Laden's death through new media, primarily social media (40%) and text messaging (11%). Although Obama's announcement was aired on national broadcast television traditional media such as television (18%) and radio (1%) played decidedly secondary roles in how participants first heard about bin Laden's death.

Table 1

<i>How did you hear about Osama bin Laden's death?</i>		
Mode	Frequency	Percent
Social networking site	131	40.3
TV	59	18.2
Face-to-face	48	14.8
Text message	36	11.1
Internet news site	26	8.0
Telephone	15	4.6
Other	5	1.5
Radio	3	.9
E-mail	2	.6
Total	325	100.00

Given that bin Laden's death was announced around 10:35 p.m. CST by Obama, it appears to have diffused rapidly with 79.4% of participants reporting that they had heard about it by midnight CST. By early the next morning (5 a.m.) another 10% reported having heard the news. As can be seen in Table 2, most respondents were at home when they first heard while the next largest number reported being at school.

Table 2

<i>Where were you when you first heard about Osama bin Laden's death?</i>		
Location	Frequency	Percent
Home/Apartment	211	64.9
School	71	21.9
Other	27	8.2
Work	9	2.8
In transit	7	2.2
Total	325	100.0

About 60% of participants reported telling another person about the news of bin Laden's death. Of those reporting telling someone else, 6 participants reported telling over 200 other people, primarily through posting on a social network site (67%) or tweeting (50%). Excluding these select few (the next largest number was 25), participants reported telling an average of 3.2 people, with the range from 1 to 25. Of these, most reported using face-to-face (66%) as a means for telling others, followed by text messaging (38%) and social media (17%).

In terms of seeking out more information in the hours following their finding out about bin Laden's death, the largest number cited television (46%) as their first choice. About 34% used an Internet news site as their first choice for getting more information while 17% cited a social networking site. Only 8% of respondents mentioned using face-to-face communications as their first choice. In terms of a secondary source for additional information in the hours

following Obama's announcement, most respondents cited an Internet news site (20.4%) followed by television (15%) and then a social networking site (11%). Overall usage followed a similar pattern with television being used most often (66%) for a follow-up source at some point in the diffusion process, followed by an Internet news site (59%) and social media (42%) and face-to-face (24%).

Of those reporting television as a top choice for follow-up information in the hours following their finding out about bin Laden's death, most respondents reported using CNN (42%), followed by Fox News (28%), ABC (11%) and MSNBC (8%). The other two broadcast networks, NBC and CBS, garnered 7% and 5% respectively.

For those respondents who sought out more information using Internet news sites, the two most popular sites were CNN.com (28%) and Yahoo.com (24%). Next was FoxNews.com (11%) followed by WN.com (9%).

For follow-up information the next day (Monday, May 2, 2001) the media choices stayed relatively the same with respondents' first choice somewhat split between watching TV (35%), accessing an Internet news site (27%) or logging into a social media site (15%). The Internet was the top choice for being a second choice (15%) followed by TV (10%) and social networking (9%). Overall TV (50%) and Internet news sites (47%) were the two most popular ways for accessing more information the following day. About 32% accessed a social networking site to get more information the day after.

Only a couple of significant differences were found between categories for gender and race/ethnicity. While male participants (33.6%) reported sending more text messages than female participants (20.1%), $\chi^2(2, N = 325) = 7.75, p < .05$, no significant differences were

found for other forms of communicating to others (face-to-face, email, text messaging, using social media, tweeting and telephone call), or whether participants told someone else after hearing the news, or the total number of people contacted after hearing the news. For race (limited to Caucasian, Hispanic and African-American which together made up 95% of the sample) the only significant differences were that Hispanics (59%) were more likely to use face-to-face communication to tell someone about the news than Caucasian (48%) and African American (34%) respondents, $\chi^2(2, 304) = 6.94, p < .05$, while African American participants (20%) were more likely to Tweet than either Hispanics (4%) or Caucasians (2%), $\chi^2(2, N = 304) = 28.72, p < .001$.

Discussion

Results of the current study support H₁ that most participants would learn about bin Laden's death through new media sources, and demonstrate the increased importance of new media in the diffusion of news. A majority, 59.6%, of the participants indicated that they first heard of bin Laden's death through a new media source (text message, internet news site, or social networking site), and a significant number, 40.4%, indicated that they had first heard the news through a social networking site. Even when seeking out more information in the hours immediately following the announcement, 51% of the respondents indicated they used a new media source (internet news site and social networking site) to get more information about bin Laden's death. It is true that college students are more likely to go online than other groups, but their media usage can also provide an indication of future trends (Odell, Korgen, Schumacher, & DeLucchi, 2000).

The news of bin Laden's death diffused at a significant pace among the respondents, confirming H₂ that the prevalence of new media would lead to a rapid dissemination of the news of bin Laden's death. In the present study, new media (particularly social networking sites) allowed for information to spread to a large number of people, as 80% of respondents first heard about bin Laden's death within a few hours. The effect of the new media may have been enhanced by the fact that most respondents, 64.8%, were at home where they might be more likely to have access and time to use new media, social networking sites in particular. This appears to conform to the model suggested by Mayer et al. (1990), where the location predicts how people hear about news events.

A majority of respondents (66%) who reported telling 1 to 25 people about bin Laden's death did so through face-to-face communication, which does not support H₃ that most participants would share the news of bin Laden's death through new media. However, the number of respondents who used new media, text messaging 38% and social media 17%, to inform others of the news was also quite high. Also, all of those who reported telling over 200 other people did so through the use of new media. This also supports in H₂ in that the rapid diffusion of bin Laden's death was likely aided by a high percentage of participants using new media to share the news with others.

Television was found to play a major role when respondents wanted to get additional information about bin Laden's death (66%), leading to the rejection of H₄ that most participants would use new media to get follow-up information on bin Laden's death. This supports the findings of Greenberg, Cohen, and Li (2003), who found that respondents in their study turned to television for additional information in the days after the initial attack on Baghdad in the First

Gulf War. Television has some structural advantages over other news sources, including some new media, for providing additional information for developing news stories. For example, television can devote open-ended coverage of developing stories, but Twitter's 140-character limit does not provide the space for developing significant detail on a story. Television may also be considered a more credible source by some individuals seeking additional information on a news story, others may prefer the visual and auditory stimulation provided by television, and still others may turn to television out of habit. Yet new media, Internet news sites (59%) and social media (42%), were also frequently used by respondents to gain additional information on the death of bin Laden. While new media haven't overtaken television as the major source for additional information, their usage has gained a substantial presence in the follow-up process.

A few differences were found between participants' use of media based on gender and race/ethnicity. The finding that male respondents sent more text messages than female respondents runs counter to trends in the use of texting identified in a study by Nielsen (2011) which found that women text 14% more than men every month. The finding that Hispanics were more likely to share the news of bin Laden's death through face-to-face communication may be explained in part by findings that Hispanics are less likely to have access to the Internet at home (Livingston, 2011), and that most respondents in the current study first heard the news of bin Laden's death while at home. The finding that African American respondents were more likely than other groups to tweet about bin Laden's death fits findings that African American's are more likely to use Twitter than other minorities (Webster, 2010).

The present study shows that individuals seek out information about news events, and that they are increasingly likely to use new media to gain information. The use of new media

also seems to accelerate the news diffusion process. To determine if dependence on the new media to gain information about a news event is a trend, future news diffusion research should include new media in any list of information sources. Additional new media sources like blogs, discussion boards, and even online video games should also be included in future research. Attention in future research should also be directed to the reasons behind the dependence on television for gaining additional information about a breaking story. Other age groups should also be included in future research to determine if the trend toward dependence on the new media for news is growing across all age groups.

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