Changing Coverage of Domestic Violence Murders

A Longitudinal Experiment in Participatory Communication

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Stressing relation-building and participatory communication approaches, the Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence worked with journalists to develop a best practices handbook on news coverage of domestic violence murders. This study compares print coverage of domestic violence murders prehandbook (1996-1999) and posthandbook (2000-2002). Significant changes include increased labeling of the murder of intimates as domestic violence and doubled usage of advocates as sources. As a result, domestic violence murders, previously framed as unpredictable private tragedies, are more commonly framed posthandbook as social problems warranting public intervention. The authors conclude that relation-building approaches can affect news cultures and public discourse when conducted in conjunction with comprehensive participatory communications strategies.

Keywords: *domestic violence; media coverage; social movements; source analysis*

In 1995, Family Violence Prevention Fund communication director Marissa Ghez (1995) observed, "American society implicitly accepts . . . that domestic violence is a private, and not a public, concern" (p. 4). To challenge these attitudes, she urged that domestic violence advocates integrate strong

communications components into their efforts to reduce and prevent domestic violence.

The following year, concerned that Rhode Island news coverage typically described domestic violence murders as private, family tragedies, the Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence (RICADV) launched a comprehensive, statewide experiment in participatory communication.[1] Their objective was to change news coverage of domestic violence murders.[2] To accomplish this, RICADV worked with journalists in three ways: to identify difficulties encountered when reporting on domestic violence murders, to create and disseminate a handbook presenting best journalistic practices, and to establish ongoing dialogue with the handbook serving as a vehicle. Collaborating with RICADV in the experiment were its member agencies including the survivor group Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships, the Media Research and Action Project (MRAP), and Sea Change Press.

This article assesses the experiment's effect on reporter practices and subsequent coverage. First, we define participatory communication, linking it to the concept of relational ties. We review past findings regarding news coverage of domestic violence, and we briefly sketch the handbook intervention. We then present a quantitative content analysis of print news coverage of domestic violence murders in Rhode Island before and after the intervention. In our discussion, we link this study to broader discourses on participatory communications for social change.

Literature Review

Mass media form the convening systems of modern societies, that is, mass media host the public discourse that influences public opinion. Because ideas and policy initiatives that fail to reach relevant publics languish, media coverage becomes a critical resource for influencing public opinion or mea-

suring public support. Far from being neutral hosts of public discourse, however, media outlets participate in ongoing policy contests; by choosing whom to quote and whom to ignore, journalists decide whose accounts count. Accounts that count gain visibility; their proponents can use that visibility to gain political ground. Accounts that do not count fail to gain visibility; their sponsors lose credibility and face marginalization (Gamson, 1992; Ryan, 1991).

Efforts to sponsor a message do not automatically result in coverage by news outlets. Those marginalized by inequalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and age and/or those raising perspectives countering dominant views face serious obstacles in their efforts to become routine sources. To facilitate quick production and avoid contention, journalists recurrently use sources widely deemed noncontroversial or reliable, hesitating to cultivate sources among more easily challenged marginalized constituencies (hooks, 1992; Huesca, 1996; Ryan, 1996; Van Dijk, 1991).

Moreover, marginalized constituencies often do not launch extensive efforts to gain coverage. Individuals facing the inequalities described above rarely contact the media directly. The immigrant denied health benefits does not write and disseminate a media advisory, nor does the victim of domestic violence call a press conference. The capacity to communicate via mass media requires resources well beyond most individuals. This is particularly true for individuals facing personal crises reinforced by institutionalized inequalities. In short, introducing and more importantly sustaining alternative perspectives and voices in mainstream discourse presupposes an organizational sponsor with an institutional infrastructure.

Currently, two streams of social experiments address the need for such an organizational sponsor. Emerging in the global south are participatory communications models stressing dialogue, relation building, and grassroots empowerment.[3] These models begin with an analysis of structural inequalities and insist that those directly affected by these inequalities be part of change efforts (Dagron, 2001; White, Nair, & Ashcroft, 1994). The models acknowledge that, at heart, all social change efforts involve communication—identifying a problem, brainstorming suggestions, evaluating action alternatives, mobilizing allies, or resolving internal or coalition conflicts. Communication is an integral, indispensable, and essential component of participating in democratic change, celebrating "the right and power to intervene in the social order and change it through political praxis" (Freire, 1994, p. 12).

Participatory communications models are less common within the global north, where centralized and privatized media markets present vast barriers to civic involvement (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). Marginalized constituen-

cies in the global north draw on the traditions of domestic social movements to establish the organizational capacity change public awareness via mass media (Riano, 1994; Ryan, 1991). As with participatory communication, social movement models stress strong relational ties (Diani, 2000), coalition building (Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001), and collective processes (Kurtz, 2002).

Domestic Violence as News

Groups working to end domestic violence claim significant progress, including the establishment of research, preventive education, and support systems and the training of public safety, social service, and health care providers in the past three decades (Bart & Moran, 1993; Tierney, 1982). As part of preventive education, many advocacy groups pursue proactive communication strategies to raise public awareness and to stimulate public dialogue. To engage mass media in proactive education, advocates work to become routine news sources; they familiarize themselves with news norms regarding deadlines, story formats, and mainstream news criteria, and they establish ongoing working relationships with journalists.

This relation building has expanded proactive coverage—news stories abound during Domestic Violence Awareness Month, for instance. Nonetheless, when an incident of domestic violence occurs, reporters do not consistently turn to domestic violence advocates. Instead they revert to traditional crime beat sources, producing routine crime news lacking substantive, contextualized insight into deeper underlying issues (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Iyengar, 1991; Kaniss, 1997). In crime stories about domestic violence, researchers identify these recurring problematic patterns:

- News reports suggest that victims, at least partially, are responsible for their fate (Meyers, 1997).
- Inscribed as crime news, domestic violence reports focus on the sensational. Reporters revert to predetermined framings such as tragic love going awry (Jones, 1994; Meyers, 1997).
- In an exculpatory search for the perpetrator's motive, domestic violence is psychologized and individuated (Pagelow, 1981; Soothill & Walby, 1991).
- When coverage focuses on the perpetrator's motives, the victim disappears (Meyers, 1997).
- Coverage obscures social dimensions of domestic violence—ways that society produces and promotes violence against women (Bart & Moran, 1993; Caputi, 1993).
- Applying notions of objectivity mechanically, reporters suggest a false parity in describing domestic violence (Meyers, 1997).

All of the above effects are exacerbated if the victims are poor or working class women and/or women of color (Benedict, 1992; hooks, 1992; Meyers, 1997; Van Dijk, 1991).

These coverage patterns isolate the victim, implying complicity on her or his part: that she or he was a masochistic partner in a pathological relationship, that she or he provoked her or his batterer, that she or he failed to take responsibility for leaving, and so on (Pagelow, 1981, p. 88). They also undermine efforts to change public policy and consciousness (Loseke, 1989); atomized victims struggle for protection while the social roots of domestic violence remain obscured (Meyers, 1997).

Recommendations for Change

Service providers, advocates, and researchers have translated the above critiques into practical suggestions for three types of reforms in news-making institutions:

- Changes in news practices (Benedict, 1992; Byerly, 1994; Jones, 1994; Meyers, 1997; Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence [RICADV], 2000).
- Changes in journalist professional training and in-service education (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2003; Byerly, 1994; Jones, 1994).
- Development of institutional guidelines for the coverage of domestic violence (Benedict, 1992; Johnson, 1994; Meyers, 1997).

Though practical and compelling, the recommendations do not address the formidable barriers posed by market-driven news organizations. Although change is possible (Meyers, 1992), media critics generally concur that corporate mass media systems bedevil reform efforts (Gans, 2003; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999) unless grounded in strong collective efforts—groups of citizens working in concert (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001; Ryan, 2004). Thus, despite their practicality, the reforms proposed above remain primarily a critique. This study describes an effort to implement these reforms and to assess their actual effect on coverage of domestic violence.

Study Design

Background—The Intervention

In keeping with its mission to eliminate domestic violence in Rhode Island, RICADV involves itself in many arenas of social and political life. Its work to deepen relationships with journalists represented one aspect of a

comprehensive, statewide strategic communications plan covering police, judicial, legislative, health, educational, and grassroots or community arenas. RICADV's desire to build strong relational ties (Diani, 2000) inspired a coalition-building orientation that permeated its work with survivors, service providers, court personnel, police, and schools.

We date strategic communications efforts from 1996, at which point RICADV and MRAP, in collaboration with other domestic violence advocates, survivors, journalists, scholars, and public interest lawyers, began discussing the disparity between typically positive news coverage of RICADV events—such as Domestic Violence Awareness Month—and the often problematic coverage of domestic violence murders by the same media. RICADV noticed that domestic violence murder news frequently exhibited the patterns described above—lost context, sensationalism, exculpatory searches for motive, and so on. RICADV hoped to encourage reporters covering domestic violence murders to stress community responsibility, collective action, and prevention.

As a point of departure, a research team from MRAP conducted a qualitative content analysis of local print media coverage of domestic violence murders in the Rhode Island media market between 1996 and 1999. Although the study corroborated many of the findings cited above, it also identified journalistic best practices that broke with these patterns. At the same time, RICADV conducted a focus group with domestic violence survivors to document their experiences with news media. Thinking from the survivors' standpoint, RICADV wanted to better understand how reporters miss survivors' concerns and experiences. RICADV also conducted intensive interviews with local journalists (editors and reporters) to explore their understanding of domestic violence. Thinking from the journalists' standpoint, RICADV wanted to better understand the constraints under which journalists make news decisions. For instance, time-starved, crime beat reporters write most domestic violence murder stories. In the spirit of relation building, RICADV asked journalists what they needed to better cover domestic violence and how advocates could respond to those needs.

An RICADV-MRAP work team then analyzed the findings of the content analysis and the interview and focus group transcripts. The content analysis revealed that of the 37 different reporters covering the 12 domestic violence murders cases occurring between 1996 and 1999, only 3 (8%) covered more than one case. With journalists rotating through news beats so quickly, RICADV could not depend on reporters improving over time. It needed to store information in newsrooms' institutional memories.

Taking journalists' advice, RICADV organized its findings as a handbook to serve not as a freestanding product but as a catalyst for building dialogues

and sustaining working relationships with journalists. In keeping with that approach, RICADV drafted the handbook, then asked journalists to review the draft. A second draft incorporated their input. The handbook passed through a final review by journalists before printing.

In June 2000, RICADV (2000) published *Domestic Violence: A Handbook for Journalists* and distributed it to its extensive press list. RICADV also met with journalists from Rhode Island's largest print news outlet, the *Providence Journal*, to present the handbook's findings and seek feedback.

RICADV then worked to address outstanding issues that reporters identified. For instance, RICADV now helps time-pressed reporters by quickly researching criminal histories of alleged perpetrators. Relation building, in other words, was not confined to the handbook. Rather, the handbook provided a flexible vehicle for continuing dialogue. RICADV routinely calls editors and reporters to see whether they need copies or have suggestions for handbook additions or changes.

Assessing the Intervention

To evaluate the handbook's effect, RICADV commissioned MRAP to conduct a quantitative content analysis of news coverage before and after the handbook was disseminated. MRAP sought to measure whether best practices highlighted in the handbook had been adopted by journalists. Of particular interest were four recommendations. The handbook had urged journalists to adhere to the following guidelines:

1. "Use the words, 'domestic violence' . . . when you are speaking about violence between intimates; it . . . sets the context of the crime" (RICADV, 2000, p. 6-2).
2. Ask the police whether the crime fits the legal definition of domestic violence. The handbook provided the legal definition and offered suggestions for interviewing police (RICADV, 2000).
3. Avoid quoting bystanders such as neighbors or community residents. Lacking real information, they "reinforce popular myths about domestic violence as random unpredictable acts: 'They seemed to be nice,' said a next-door neighbor." (RICADV, 2000, p. 6-6).
4. Prioritize interviews with survivors, advocates, police, and other domestic violence experts who can put individual acts of domestic violence in the context of larger trends and discuss prevention (RICADV, 2000).

MRAP hypothesized that for the handbook intervention to qualify as effective, coverage should reflect shifts in reporter practices on four dimensions:

1. Measure increased reporter understanding of what constitutes domestic violence by tracking the frequency with which reporters incorporated domestic violence language before and after the intervention.
2. Measure increased use of police to define a crime as domestic violence by police source patterns before and after the intervention.
3. Measure increased use of domestic violence experts and advocates as sources by comparing expert or advocate source patterns before and after the intervention.
4. Measure increased reporter caution regarding bystanders as news sources by comparing uses of bystanders as sources before and after the intervention.

Method

Working with RICADV, MRAP designed and conducted a quantitative content analysis comparing news coverage of domestic violence murders before and after the intervention. We present the results of that content analysis below. Here we describe our evaluation design, method, and procedures.

Sample Selection

The study sample includes all local print news stories regarding domestic violence murders that occurred in the 4 years prior to the intervention (1996-1999, hereafter Phase 1) and in the 2 years following the intervention (2000-2002, hereafter Phase 2). Using a news clipping service, we surveyed all newspapers, weekly or daily, in the Providence, Rhode Island media market, the 43rd largest of the nation's more than 200 media markets.

To assure sample completeness, we compared the Phase 1 sample provided by the clipping service to a sample covering the same period drawn using LexisNexis, supplemented by a search of the University of Rhode Island's archives of small weekly community papers. The additional search using LexisNexis and university archives netted only one additional article (1 of 103 articles). In Phase 2, we also cross-checked the news clip sample against LexisNexis. The sample included 103 articles for Phase 1 and 172 articles for Phase 2.

We focused on murders rather than incidents of domestic violence more generally for several reasons. Use of murders ensured that the issue met news criteria. Murders could be identified irrefutably as domestic violence (as contrasted to domestic violence incidents that are contested by either party). Finally, murder stories represented a clear example of unplanned crisis coverage, as contrasted with coverage of preplanned events that media tended to cover extensively.

Our focus on local media reflects previous findings that local news provides the most common journalistic arena for domestic violence crimes because these crimes are usually deemed of limited, mostly local interest (Loseke, 1989; Meyers, 1997). National media, covering only the most egregious or unusual domestic violence murder cases, would be a less reliable arena in which to evaluate coverage.

Our focus on print media grows from Kaniss' (1997) finding that local print news outlets serve as kingmakers directly affecting politicians, police, and other institutions. Broadcast news, Kaniss finds, generally trails print coverage, the longer print accounts serving as raw material for broadcast journalism's shorter headline versions of events.

The resulting sample includes all 1996 to 2002 print news coverage of Rhode Island murder cases meeting the state's statutory definition of domestic violence. A total of 12 domestic violence murder cases occurred in Phase 1 before the intervention, and another 10 cases occurred in Phase 2 after the intervention.[4]

Coder Training

During the course of the study, two teams of three coders each were trained to identify both source patterns and use of domestic violence language. Posttraining, intercoder reliability averaged .92.

Content Variables

This article concentrates on two key variables—journalists' choices of language to describe domestic violence murders and source patterns. To analyze journalists' choices of language describing domestic violence murders, we first reviewed RICADV press releases for each murder. From these press releases, we created a glossary of common phrases used by advocates vis-à-vis domestic violence murders.[5] Each news article was then coded for reporters' incorporations of language that corresponded to the advocates' domestic violence message. Coders documented the term and where and how often it occurred. Each story was coded three times, each time by an independent coder. A final coding reviewed all cases for consistency, data entry errors, and so on. Intercoder reliability exceeded .90.

Positing that source selection shapes story line (Soley, 1992), we also studied how source patterns shifted between Phase 1 and Phase 2. We coded articles for all quoted sources. For each article, the coder recorded basic identification information (outlet, reporter, date, headline) and listed each quote and its location. The coder then identified each source according to the

source's relationship to the crime (e.g., police, victim, victim's family, friend, coworker; perpetrator; perpetrator's family, friend, coworker; community resident, advocate, etc.).[6] The police category includes court and judicial professionals. The advocate category includes domestic violence survivors, advocates, and others involved in domestic violence research and/or services via shelters and so on.

From the entire data set (103 articles in Phase 1; 172 articles in Phase 2), we drew two subsets of articles that quoted identifiable sources (74 articles in Phase 1; 137 articles in Phase 2) for the purposes of analysis. One subset focused on lead quotes, the other on key quotes.[7] Focusing on these key variables—domestic violence language and source patterns—we present below a comparison of Rhode Island print news coverage of domestic violence murders before the handbook intervention (Phase 1) and after (Phase 2).

Findings

Between Phase 1 and Phase 2, news coverage of domestic violence murders changed significantly in use of domestic violence language and in sourcing patterns.

Changes in Domestic Violence Language Between Phases 1 and 2

In Phase 1 (preintervention), half of the articles (51.5%) called the murder of an intimate partner "domestic violence." If the handbook intervention improved communication with journalists, more postintervention news articles should have labeled these murders explicitly as domestic violence. In fact, seven eighths of all Phase 2 (postintervention) articles (87.2%) labeled the murders domestic violence.

An independent samples t test determined a significant change in the mean number of domestic violence citations per article between Phases 1 and 2. The mean for domestic violence citation in Phase 1 was 3.44. In Phase 2, the mean shifted to 7.93, an increase of 4.49 domestic violence citations per article from Phase 1 to Phase 2 ($t = 4.99$, $p < .001$).

Changes in Sourcing Patterns

To analyze changes in sourcing patterns, we created a subset of articles in which one or more identifiable sources were quoted, then studied shifts in lead source and shifts in key sources.

Lead Sources

In Phase 1, four types of sources—police, victim's relations (family, friend, coworker), community residents, and advocates—composed 89% of all lead sources. These four sources split the lead category relatively evenly, clustering within 7 percentage points. Police were the top lead source, appearing first in more than one fourth (25.7%) of all print news coverage. Slightly fewer than one fourth (24.3%) of Phase 1 articles led with a quote from the victim's family, neighbors, or coworkers. Domestic violence advocates were the third most common lead source (20%), with sources representing the community at large following closely at 19%.

In Phase 2, advocates doubled their presence to become reporters' most common lead source (42%, χ^2 36, $p < .001$). Reporters also increased the frequency with which they used police as the lead source (χ^2 5.79, $p = .016$); police sources represented more than one third (35%) of leads in Phase 2. In contrast, reporters dramatically decreased their use of the victim's family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers as lead sources (χ^2 14.43, $p < .001$). In Phase 2, these sources composed only 11% of lead sources. Similarly, reporters' use of community residents dropped markedly from 19% to 4% (χ^2 19.6, $p < .001$).

Although in Phase 1 the lead source frequency of advocates and community residents differed by a single percentage point (20% advocates vs. 19% community), in Phase 2 the incidence of advocate lead source citations was 10 times that of community residents (42% vs. 4%, respectively). Thus, the relative distance between highest and lowest source grew dramatically (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

Key Source Patterns

Key sources include all identifiable sources other than the lead source quoted in an article's first three paragraphs or last paragraph and/or sources quoted for at least one paragraph. In Phase 1, as with lead sources, four groups—victim's family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, police, community residents, and advocates—accounted for 89% of cited key sources, clustered within 9 percentage points (19%-28%). Although police had been the most common lead source, most frequently cited as key sources were the victim's family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers (28%). Community residents (22%) and police (21%) ranked second and third, respectively, whereas advocate sources trailed by 2 percentage points (19%).

In Phase 2, as with the lead sources, reporters expanded citation of police and advocate sources and lowered citation of community sources and sources representing the victim's family, friends, and so on. Police rose from

Table 1
Lead Source Patterns

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Change
Police	25.7	34.8	+9.1
Advocate	21.7	43.2	+21.5
VFNC	23.0	9.1	−13.9
Community	18.9	3.8	−15.1
Perpetrator	6.8	3.8	−3.0[a]
PFNC	4.1	3.0	−1.1[a]
PV	0.0	1.5	+1.5
Victim	0.0	0.8	+0.8
Legislator	0.0	0.0	0.0
n	74	132	

Note: *n* is the number of articles with quotes. VFNC is victim's family, neighbors, and coworkers. PFNC is perpetrator's family, neighbors, coworkers. PV is perpetrator-victim, a batterer who was killed in the course of battering. A graphical representation of trends in lead source citation can be found in Figure 1.
a. Insignificant (all other phase changes were significant at p < .05.

Figure 1
Trends in Lead Source Citation
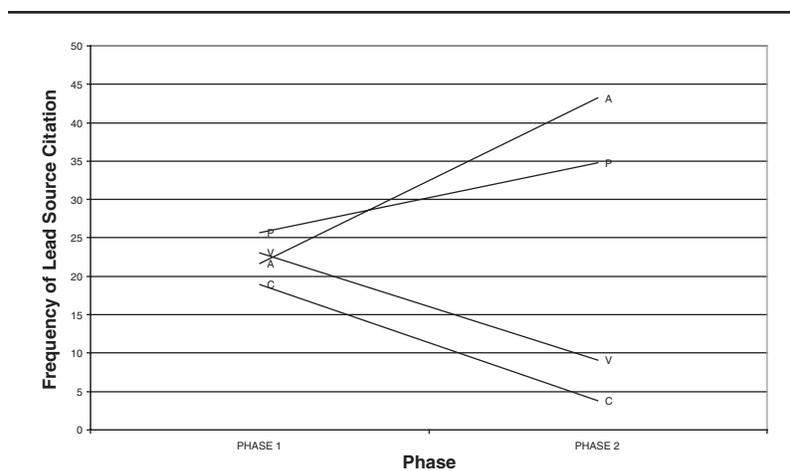
Note: P is police. A is advocates. V is victim's family, friends, neighbors, coworkers. C is community resident or bystander.

third place to first place (from 21% in Phase 1 to 34% in Phase 2; χ^2 44.64, $p <$ .001), whereas advocates jumped from last to second place (19% in Phase 1

Table 2
Key Sourcing Patterns

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Change
Police	21.3	33.8	+12.4
Advocate	18.5	32.3	+13.8
VFNC	27.6	20.1	−7.5
Community	21.6	5.4	−16.3
Perpetrator	2.8	1.0	−1.8
PFNC	6.0	4.8	−1.2[a]
PV	0.0	0.6	+0.6
Victim	0.3	0.4	0.0[a]
Legislator	0.6	0.4	−0.2[a]
Citations (*n*)	319	483	

Note: *n* is the number of key sources cited. VFNC is victim's family, neighbors, coworkers. PFNC is perpetrator's family, neighbors, coworkers. PV is perpetrator-victim, a batterer who was killed in the course of battering. A graphical representation of trends in key sources citation can be found in Figure 2.
a. Insignificant (all other phase changes were significant at *p* < .05).

to 32% in Phase 2; χ^2 60.98, *p* < .001). In other words, reporters significantly increased their use of both advocates and police as key sources.

Paralleling lead sourcing patterns, reporters in Phase 2 decreased citation of the victim's family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers as key sources (28% in Phase 1 to 20% in Phase 2, χ^2 13.66, *p* < .001), a drop of 8%. Reporters' use of community residents as key sources dropped even more markedly from 22% to 6% (χ^2 75.01, *p* < .001).

Again, the ratio of reporters' use of advocate sources to community sources shifted most dramatically. Although in Phase 1 reporters slightly preferred community sources—the typical bystander—to domestic violence advocates (22% vs. 19%, respectively), in Phase 2 the incidence of advocate key source citations was 6 times that of community residents or bystanders (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Changes in the Culture

Because advocates routinely use domestic violence language, we expected that an increase in the use of domestic violence advocates as lead or key sources might result in a concomitant increase in domestic violence language. This would tell us that domestic violence advocates had become more visible in public discourse but would not mean that other public voices had embraced domestic violence language. To test whether reporters and/or other sources—police, community, victim's family—increased their use of

Figure 2
Trends in Key Source Citation
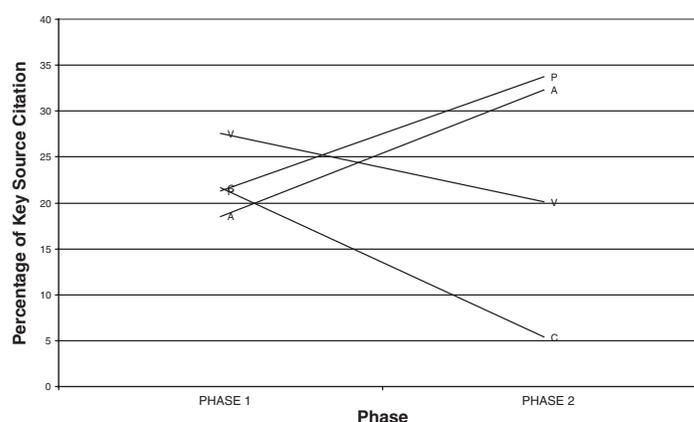
Note: P is police; A is advocates; V is victim's family, friends, neighbors, coworkers; C is community resident or bystander.

domestic violence language in Phase 2, we created a dummy variable that removed all articles citing advocates as lead or key sources. Using the resulting nonadvocate subsample of articles, we used an independent samples t test to examine any possible change in the means for domestic violence citations between Phases 1 and 2 for all cases that had no advocate interference.

For the nonadvocate subsample, the Phase 1 mean for domestic violence citations was .96 domestic violence references per article—slightly less than 1 reference per article. The Phase 2 mean shifted to 4.17 references per article, an increase of 3.19 in domestic violence citations between phases ($t = 6.7$, $p < .001$). In other words, even when advocates were not cited as lead or secondary sources, reporters and nonadvocate sources such as police quadrupled their use of domestic violence language.

In summary, our findings suggest that in Phase 2, reporters adopted the newsgathering practices suggested by the RICADV in several critical ways. First, articles identifying the murder of intimate partners as domestic violence rose. Second, source patterns shifted in three ways proposed by the handbook. Sources representing domestic violence advocates gained visibility in both relative and absolute terms. As the handbook urged, reporters also expanded their use of police sources. Also as the handbook suggested, reporters continued to use neighbors, family, friends, and coworkers as sources judiciously, but sharply limited their use of casual bystanders. As a result, these sources dropped in frequency. Notably, when domestic violence

advocates were extracted from the sample, reporters and nonadvocate sources quadrupled their use of domestic violence language.

Discussion

Can simply publishing a handbook explain these strong findings? We think not. Several unique characteristics of this intervention may explain the marked changes documented herein. Most fundamentally, RICADV used the handbook as a catalyst, a tool for facilitating ongoing dialogue with reporters, editors, and their news outlets. Consistent with this participatory approach, RICADV interviewed reporters about their understanding of domestic violence. The handbook was then intentionally structured to respond to reporters' questions. RICADV was surprised, for instance, to discover that most reporters did not know when a crime constituted domestic violence; thus the Rhode Island statute was included in the handbook. Working reporters influenced the handbook's tone and content; they helped RICADV to address the actual constraints under which reporters operate and to identify existing best practices. The preliminary qualitative study provided actual, as contrasted with hypothetical, examples of problematic and best practices. Additional invaluable advice emerged in interviews with survivors.

Following the handbook's publication, RICADV continued to develop its communications systems to respond to journalists' needs. From its dialogues with police and reporters, for instance, RICADV realized that it should call police and reporters proactively after a domestic violence murder. RICADV worked to ensure that reporters could reach the organization quickly and easily and that the organization could provide both reliable information about the murder and well-prepared spokespersons from its member agencies and its survivor group, Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships. Each incremental change helped reporters to follow the handbook's counsel. Reporters also benefited from RICADV's parallel work with police to increase their use of domestic violence language.

In short, RICADV did not simply expect reporters to change, it changed its own practices to respond to reporter needs. RICADV's criticism extended to its own practice, and it accompanied its criticism of reporters with support. The resulting exchanges were collaborative in tone. When defensiveness on the part of media institutions rose, RICADV intentionally did not respond in kind.

Critics of domestic violence coverage often urge journalism to "clean up its act" (Jones, 1994, p. 228) or tell advocates to seek journalists who have educated themselves (Meyers, 1997, p. 108). In placing responsibility for

change on the shoulders of journalists working within a media system unparalleled in its capacity to absorb, deflect, and diffuse challenges, however, domestic violence advocates may underestimate the changes that they themselves might initiate.

The handbook was one coalition-building tactic in a comprehensive, statewide, coalition-building communications strategy. The communications strategy, moreover, was an integral part of a comprehensive organizing strategy grounded in models of organizing influenced by the U.S. civil rights and women's movements. This represents a culturally American version of participatory approaches to organizing common in the global south.

Centralized, profit-driven mass media systems in the United States present formidable challenges to experimenters in participatory communication. Within each media market, individual media outlets can be acutely sensitive to pressure for ratings or profit.[8] Nonetheless, these outlets offer access to broad publics, and this potential access compels collective actors to tackle the mass media arena. Although complicated and laborious, RICADV's experience suggests that advocacy groups can gain access to mass media to promote change-oriented messages if they learn to function within news norms as a reliable source.

Market-driven media outlets are not opposed to covering stories with social significance; they simply want to make money doing so. Within each of the nation's 200 media markets, media outlets contend to attract local viewers, a competition that opens opportunities for advocates. Media outlets respond to story sponsors who help them attract and expand viewers, readers, or market share. In sum, although they are profit driven, mass media outlets do respond to story sponsors who understand mainstream criteria for newsworthiness and who meet news norms regarding production speed and quality.

To the extent that RICADV consistently helped reporters produce timely news that captured public interest, and to the extent that RICADV in its organizing and legislative work was making news, media outlets came to rely on the organization as a routine, reliable source. We interpret RICADV's success as evidence in support of a dialogic model of media-movement inter-action (Barker-Plummer, 1996). Stressing context, timing, reflexivity, and relations between movements and reporters, communications scholar Bernadette Barker-Plummer (1996) suggests that:

> a dialogic approach looks for two-way influences from any interaction, and it
> assumes the participants in any interaction can learn about and use the
> resources of the other—especially if those resources are discursive knowledge
> resources . . . . Seeing the media-movement relationship as two-way does not

> preclude it from being an imbalanced interaction, nor deny that one organiza-
> tion holds more power than the other. A dialogic model comes with no guaran-
> tees . . . . But to say that a relationship is difficult, complex, subtle and unbal-
> anced is not to say that its outcomes are inevitable. (p. 33)

Thus, although market forces constrain opportunities, advocates can establish mutually beneficial relations with reporters by launching sustained communications campaigns that can adapt to existing news norms and criteria. However, this requires resources and sustainable infrastructure, a communications capacity integrated into organizational capacity.

This last point, the importance of investment in communications capacity building, could be a potentially taken-for-granted finding of this study. This experiment's success was predicated on the existence of RICADV as a collective actor capable of institutionalizing lessons and expanding resources as it experiments and grows. To influence a profit-driven media market, RICADV developed communications skills and infrastructure and institutionalized its ties to news outlets. Only collective actors and in fact multiple collective actors, synchronizing their resources, can accrue sufficient experience, develop strategy, and consolidate skills and contacts to build an infrastructure sufficient to sustain a successful foray into the market-driven media arena. Thus, in the U.S. context, attempts to change public awareness via mass media require long-term, not short-term, interventions with ongoing collective actors. Ad hoc coalitions have a role but cannot create the needed infrastructure or sustain relation building.

Limitations of Study and Future Directions

Several unique features of this experiment are worthy of note. Staff stability ensured consistency of approach throughout the experiment. RICADV, however, has systematized many of its own best practices so that consistency of approach can be maintained even if staff turnover occurs. Additional longitudinal studies will be needed to assess whether the documented changes are sustained over time.

Also worth noting is that this statewide intervention occurred in a small state encompassing the 44th largest media market in the nation. Although this does not invalidate the results, it suggests that replicating them in larger states and media markets will require more time and resources. Finally, although this experiment supports the potential of RICADV's underlying participatory communications model, attempts to translate participatory communication models developed in the global south to the global north must attend to differences between the two hemispheres' media systems,

political structures, and social movement traditions, grounding work in our own social realities.

Conclusion

Despite extensive efforts by domestic violence programs, many Americans still consider domestic violence a private matter, and yearly domestic violence incidents still number in the millions. It is a matter of urgency that successful interventions to change public discourse vis-à-vis domestic violence, and consequently to influence public opinion, be shared and replicated. Given that each state has a domestic violence coalition akin to RICADV, potential exists to replicate this experiment in other localities. Treated as an isolated educational intervention, the handbook provides an insufficient explanation for the dramatic changes documented by this content analysis. Understanding the handbook, however, as an intervention embedded within a comprehensive participatory approach helps explain its effect. Placing the capacity for change in the hands of advocates, including survivors, this experiment resonates with participatory communications models emerging in the global south while drawing on models of organization created by the civil rights movement and other social movements of the late 20th century. Such approaches hold promise for initiatives to end domestic violence.

Notes

1. The mission of the statewide Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, founded in 1979, is to eliminate domestic violence in Rhode Island.

2. Domestic violence murder is defined in accordance with RI's 1988 Domestic Violence Prevention Act.

3. The term *global south* refers to nations, often in the southern hemisphere,

> that are economically dependent on and, from a model of industrial capitalism, seen as less developed than those countries in the North. The word has been used to avoid negative connotations that terms such as *developing countries* or *third world* countries may have." (Riano, 1994, p. 286)

4. One case straddled the two phases, the murder occurring in Phase 1 and the trial occurring in Phase 2.

5. Coded phrases included domestic violence, domestic abuse, domestic violence murder, battering, restraining order, domestic violence unit, and so on. We did not include the words, *violence*, *abuse*, or *murder* if they appeared in isolation from the word *domestic*. Mention of domestic violence advocacy organizations and shelters was also noted.

6. The community resident category in this study might more appropriately be called bystander. This category represented journalists' classic man-in-the-street interviews with passersby to gage public reaction to a murder.

7. The first source cited was coded as *lead*. Sources quoted in the first three or last paragraphs or quoted for at least one paragraph were labeled *key*. Any remaining sources, often not identified, were coded *secondary*.

8. We recognize that a transnational economy imposes intense market pressures on the global south, but in many cases oppositional social and political communications networks compete robustly with mass media outlets. Within the United States, mainstream media dominate media markets, leaving oppositional communications networks weakened.

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