

An Example of Bias?

How Journalists Feel About the Use of Exemplars in their Reporting

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Gregor Daschmann (University of Mainz)

JOHANNES
GUTENBERG
UNIVERSITÄT
MAINZ

The impact of examples or: What is the problem?



Exemplification research – state of the art

Large number of studies investigating the effects of exemplars

Experiments confirm a strong impact of number and type of examples upon recipients' judgments

(e.g. Zillmann et al. 1992, 1996; Daschmann 1992, 2000, 2001, 2007, 2008; Brosius & Bathelt 1994; Gibson & Zillmann 1993, 1994, 1998; Brosius 1995; Aust & Zillmann 1996; Zillman & Gan 1996; Perry & Gonzenbach 1997; Zillmann & Brosius 2000)

Content analyses (U.S. and Germany) confirm an ubiquitous use of examples in media coverage (Daschmann & Brosius 1997, 1999; Zillmann & Brosius 2000)

Open questions:

- Do journalists know about the impact of examples?
- Do they use them responsibly?
- Do they instrumentalize examples?

Research questions

1. Does representativeness play a role for journalists' selection of exemplars?
2. Do journalists consider the use of particularly drastic cases as exemplars to be legitimate?
3. Do journalists know of the considerable impact exemplars, and the comparably small impact statistics have on recipients?
4. Do journalists consider the selection of extreme examples to be justified if it happens with a positive intention, e.g. if the reporting might trigger positive consequences?
5. If journalists differ in their view of the issues mentioned in 1-4, what are the reasons for these disagreements?

Method

Questions about the use of exemplars included in representative print journalist survey in Germany

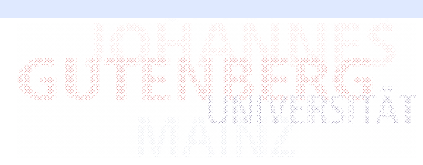
Paper & pencil survey among Journalists of the 136 different newsrooms of national, regional and local papers in Germany,

Divisions: Politics, Economy, Local news (n = 6.920)

Stratified Sample size = 484, return rate = 47 % (N = 195)

Journalist's opinions about dealing with exemplars

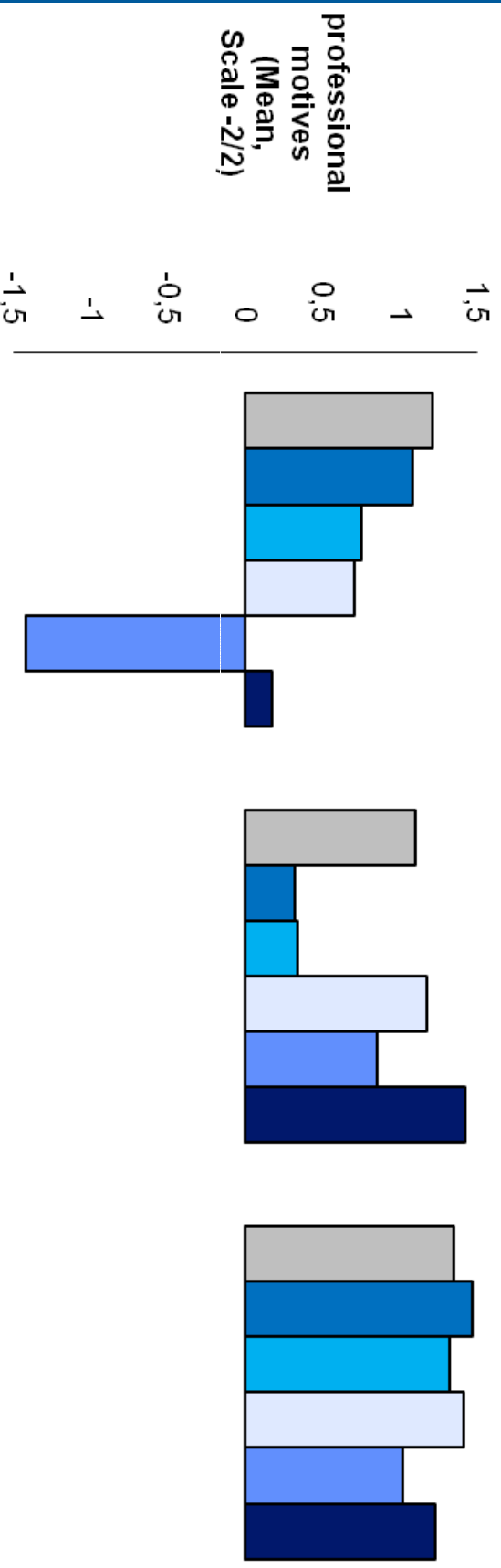
Question: „How much do you agree with the following statements?“	Completely true	Partly true	Don't know	Not really true	Completely untrue
Statements published in street surveys do not have any influence on readers, listeners or viewers.					
Statistical data such as survey data, has a serious influence on the judgments of readers					
From street surveys, which may not be representative anyway, the journalist is allowed to intentionally select votes that best fit the tenor of the report					
The more dramatic an example is, the more it should be reported.					
In the selection of examples journalists must not make sure that they are representative.					
During the reporting, extreme exceptions are more important than undramatic, typical events.					
In a nursing home, some patients are not adequately cared for. A journalist took a serious individual case, and thus aroused the impression that in general things are done this way in this nursing home. Do you think this is acceptable?					
A journalist wants to discuss the homeless in Germany. In his research, he is looking not for typical examples, but especially for particularly tragic fates. This is legitimate, because he wants the report's to improve social commitment.					



Journalist's opinions about dealing with exemplars

Question: „How much do you agree with the following statements?“	Completely true	Partly true	Don't know	Not really true	Completely untrue
Statements published in street surveys do not have any influence on readers, listeners or viewers.	7	22	15	38	18
Statistical data such as survey data, has a serious influence on the judgments of readers	20	56	15	7	2
From street surveys, which may not be representative anyway, the journalist is allowed to intentionally select votes that best fit the tenor of the report	2	10	12	20	55
The more dramatic an example is, the more it should be reported.	7	42	29	11	9
In the selection of examples journalists must not make sure that they are representative.	11	32	17	25	14
During the reporting, extreme exceptions are more important than undramatic, typical events.	7	32	25	21	15
In a nursing home, some patients are not adequately cared for. A journalist took a serious individual case, and thus aroused the impression that in general things are done this way in this nursing home. Do you think this is acceptable?	19	26	9	20	27
A journalist wants to discuss the homeless in Germany. In his research, he is looking not for typical examples, but especially for particularly tragic fates. This is legitimate, because he wants the report's to improve social commitment.	14	42	13	18	13

Types of journalists based on their professional motives



- criticism at nuisances
- admonish people of a danger
- present one's own point of view

- commitment for the socially disadvantaged
- get improvements off the ground
- influence public dialogue

hierarchical cluster analysis; binary squared euclidean distance; ward linkage

Different Types of Journalists and Exemplars

Percentage of Group agreeing with	Advocates (n = 45) %	Missionaries (n = 74) %	Idealists (n = 66) %
Dramaticness and Bias			
The more dramatic an example is, the more it should be reported.	48	54	46
From street surveys, which may not be representative anyway, the journalist is allowed to intentionally select votes that best fit the tenor of the report.	5	19	9
During the reporting, extreme exceptions are more important than undramatic, typical events.	36	47	35
Influence on Recipients			
Statements published in street surveys have an influence on readers, listeners or viewers.	52	60	53
Statistical data such as survey data, has a serious influence on the judgments of readers	66	85	73
Representativeness			
In the selection of examples journalists must not make sure that they are representative.	43	50	36
In a nursing home, some patients are not adequately cared for. A journalist took a serious individual case, and thus aroused the impression that in general things are done this way in this nursing home. Do you think this is acceptable?	51	42	45
A journalist wants to discuss the homeless in Germany. In his research, he is looking not for typical examples, but especially for particularly tragic fates. This is legitimate, because he wants the report's to improve social commitment.	57	60	51

Summary

- The journalists surveyed disagree about the responsible and proper dealing with the selection of examples
- The majority believes that the more dramatic an example is, the more it deserves media attention.
- A large majority agrees with the use of particularly dramatic examples, even at the risk of prejudice and drawing a distorted picture
- Biased examples are more likely to be tolerated the more the reporting yields positive results
- The majority is quite aware of the effect of examples on the audience
- The willingness to deal with instrumental examples depends on the professional motivation

Summary

Open questions:

What do television journalists think?

Exemplification effects have been found in very different cultures.
What about journalists' way to deal with examples?
Are there cultural or national differences?

Is the journalists' disunity concerning exemplification
a problem of professional education?

When discussing the truth of exemplars,
are we discussing the right problem?

An Example of Bias?
How German Journalists Think About the Use of Exemplars

When discussing the truth of examples,
are we discussing the right problem?



Thank you for your attention