

Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 5(6) - Don't Stop Till You Get Enough: How Media Coverage of Michael Jackson's Death Might Raise Awareness About the Dangers of Prescription Drug Abuse.

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On June 25, 2009 at 5:20 p.m., the celebrity gossip web site TMZ.com posted a story titled "Michael Jackson Dies." Shortly thereafter, the cable news channels went live with footage of an ambulance taking Jackson's body to the hospital. For the next few hours, news networks covered countless breaking details without pausing for commercial breaks. The non-stop television coverage coincided with a dramatic spike in Internet activity, particularly on social networking sites. The popular communication site, Twitter, slowed considerably—the result of a surge in Jackson-related "tweets"—up to up 5,000 per minute at peak. This rate of tweets represents the biggest jump since the presidential inauguration.

Before the major news outlets could even confirm that Jackson had died, talk turned to allegations that Jackson had been abusing prescription painkillers. About one-third of the initial stories focused on the potential causes of Jackson's death, including rumors of drug abuse, according to a report by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. Clearly, Jackson's death momentarily has focused the nation's attention on the dangers of prescription drug abuse. And past experience tells us that media coverage of celebrity health issues can influence real-life health behaviors. For instance, colonoscopy rates jumped more than 20% after Katie Couric underwent the procedure live on national television.

In this week's *Addiction and the Humanities*, we explore whether, and to what extent, the news media used the opportunity of Jackson's death to highlight the

broader issue of prescription drug abuse and its consequences. We are particularly interested in whether news accounts have presented Jackson's death as an isolated event or as an issue within the larger context of prescription drug abuse.

We conducted an informal analysis of television, print, and on-line stories about Jackson's death, modeled after a recent analysis of news coverage focusing on celebrity DUI arrests (Smith, Twum, & Gielen, in press). We chose six prominent national sources that together represent a variety of media outlets in terms of media type and intended audience. These include one newspaper (*The New York Times*), a celebrity news magazine (*People Magazine*), two primetime cable news shows (*Larry King Live* and *The O'Reilly Factor*), one network news website (ABCNews.com), and one National Public Radio program (*Talk of the Nation*). For each source, we searched published archives for the article or broadcast most relevant to Jackson's prescription drug abuse. For each article or broadcast we located, we explored the extent to which the writer or host presented a broader public-health perspective by including informative elements, such as facts about prescription painkillers and their health consequences, statistics about prescription drug abuse/dependence, prevention strategies and policy initiatives, and the inclusion of expert perspectives.

There was a wide variety in the tendency to include a public health perspective within articles and broadcasts. The stories produced by *The New York Times* and *The O'Reilly Factor* provided no public health elements. The *Times* article ("Medication is a Focus of Jackson Inquiry," published on June 27, 2009) focused exclusively on the Los Angeles County coroner's office efforts to determine the cause of Jackson's sudden death. In the episode from *The O'Reilly Factor* airing June 30, 2009, a guest host and two commentators discussed whether Jackson's race contributed to the media's focus on his drug abuse and child abuse allegations. The *People Magazine* story, published on-line the day after Jackson's death and titled "Drugs and Alcohol: Jackson Family Attempted Vegas Intervention," detailed a 2006 attempt on the part of Jackson's siblings to perform an intervention in Las Vegas. Though this story focused mostly on the specifics of Jackson's case, it included a quote from an unnamed source about "clinically functioning addicts" more broadly: "Michael is a clinically functioning addict and these are the most dangerous.... These are the ones that OD."

The remaining sources offered several informative elements in their stories. A

report published on ABCNews.com the day after Jackson's death, "Friend Says Michael Jackson Battled Demerol Addiction," includes expert perspectives, facts about prescription painkillers, and statistics about prescription drug abuse. For instance, a cardiologist was quoted discussing how people build up a tolerance to opiates. Figures from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration were used to highlight the growing rate of deaths involving prescription pain relievers. During the episode of *Larry King Live* that aired June 10, 2000 ("Michael Jackson Drug Abuse Details Emerge"), guests included a psychiatrist who specializes in addiction and an anesthesiologist/pain management specialist. These guests provided information about warning signs of prescription drug abuse and the process of tolerance. However, neither of these stories provided as much public-health information as the broadcast of *Talk of the Nation* that aired on National Public Radio on July 2, 2009. In this broadcast, host Neal Conan used Jackson's death purely as a starting point for a wide-ranging discussion about prescription drug use and abuse. A pain care specialist, a professor of law and health care ethics, and a representative of the Drug Enforcement Administration discussed methods to reduce prescription drug abuse, including efforts on the part of individual physicians as well as state and federal initiatives to limit drug misuse. People with chronic pain enhanced this discussion by calling in to discuss their need for effective pain management.

At this writing, nearly four weeks have passed since Michael Jackson's death, and many of the major news providers have offered non-stop coverage. A Google search of "Michael Jackson drug abuse" yields over 1.5 million hits. Because of the sheer amount of articles produced by this coverage, it would be nearly impossible to generate a truly representative sample of articles. However, this informal analysis illustrates the potential for news organizations to use the sad occasion of Jackson's death to inform the public about the dangers of prescription drug abuse. And there is cause for optimism: according to a survey conducted by the American Society of Health Systems Pharmacists, 28% of pharmacists surveyed said their patients are asking more questions about the risks of prescription pain medications since Jackson's death.

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

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