CHANGES IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF ADOPTION:

A CONTENT ANALYSIS COMPARING

NEWSPAPER COVERAGE FROM

1992 AND 2007

by

ANNA LEE GRESHAM

A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

A content analysis of newspaper articles about adoption of children was conducted. Several items were noted including mentions of all members of the adoption triad – birthparent, adopted child, and adoptive parent – and the valence of those mentions, and the type of adoption mentioned in the article. The results showed that the members of the triad were covered fairly equally and fairly, which differed from many studies in the literature review. One of the most interesting findings is in the change in coverage of international adoption. There was significantly more coverage in the 2007 time period compared with the 1992 time period.

Future research should examine the relationship between foster care and adoption and how often that relationship is portrayed in the media. Also, research should be conducted that covers a longer time span to include a more varied sample in the types of articles. Further research is also needed to assess the use of negative adoption language. The results of a study of that nature will show subtle and perhaps unintentional negative bias in the reporting of adoption of children.

INTRODUCTION

Katarina Wegar (2000) argues in an article published in *Family Relations* that there is still a stigma attached to adoption. She writes that many adoption practitioners have "failed to recognize the impact of social stigmatization on adoptive family life" (p. 368). Adoption will continue to be portrayed negatively "as long as such images can be used to elicit emotions and capture audiences' attention" (p. 368). The majority of Americans get their information about adoption from friends and family and the news media (Thomas Foundation, 2002) which shows the importance of a study that examines how adoption is portrayed in the media. If individuals are relying on news media to provide adoption information, it should be known what information exists. The purpose of the study is to examine any stigmas present in news media and the changes in the presence of stigmas over time by performing a content analysis on a sample of articles published in newspapers. It will be noted how each member of the adoption triad is portrayed as well as how often the controversial types of adoption are portrayed (i.e. transracial adoption, open adoption, adoption by same-sex couples). It is important to know how media are portraying adoption as this may impact public policy, public opinion and individuals' willingness to adopt.

The work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced the concept of the media agenda determining the public's agenda. For the purposes of this study, that means that the way the media cover adoption and members of the adoption triad directly impacts the way consumers of media think about adoption. The content analysis will be used to

determine the media agenda, and national surveys, primarily the National Adoption Attitudes Survey, will be used as predictors of the public agenda.

According to a study published by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute in 2002, approximately 81.5 million people, or four of every ten adults, have considered adopting a child at one point in their lives (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2002). From October 2005 through September 2006, almost 51,000 children were adopted (Administration for Children and Families, 2006).

There are several participants in adoption, commonly referred to as the adoption triad. The triad includes the birthparent(s), adoptee, and adoptive parent(s). Each member of the triad has a different, but necessary role in adoption, and it is useful to understand how the participants are treated together and separately in the media.

The objective of this study is to examine the change in adoption coverage over time and determine to what extent the coverage influences the public's perception of adoption. The types of adoption to be examined in this study include closed versus open adoption, international adoption, transracial/interracial adoption, adoption by same-sex couples, and celebrity adoption.

Closed adoption involves absolutely no contact between the birthparent(s) and the adoptive parent(s). As mentioned in Volkman (2003), adoptions around the 1950s and 1960s were always closed. In open adoption, some information is exchanged between the birthparent(s) and the adoptive parent(s), but there are varying levels of open adoption. The various members of the triad can agree to any amount of contact from exchanging information through an adoption agency, social worker, or lawyer, to

exchanging phone numbers and addresses and having regular contact (Yngvesson 1997; Pertman 2000). Even though in current adoption practices open adoption is the norm, it has been controversial in the past (Reamer & Siegel 2007). According to a 2003 study by Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, and Grotevant published in *Adoption Quarterly* and quoted in Berge, et al. (2006), only 36% of adoption agencies offered fully open adoptions in 1987, but in 1999 79% offered open adoption and none offered completely closed adoption.

According to the United States Department of Homeland Security, there were a total of 19,471 children adopted internationally in fiscal year 2007 (Office of Immigration Statistics). Volkman states that in the 1990s international adoption increased dramatically, and since then "transnational adoption has become visible and vocal" (p. 29). One difficulty families with a transnational adoptee face is the issue of the adoptees' original culture. There has been literature that discusses the pros and cons of extensively teaching the adoptee about his or her birth country and the culture there.

The Multiethnic Placement Act was passed in 1994, which prohibits adoption agencies placing children based on race alone. While this obviously legally allows transracial/interracial adoption placements, there is still somewhat of a stigma attached to it (Hollingsworth, 2002). The primary concern, similar to transnational adoption, is that the adopted child will have difficulty feeling connected to his or her ethnic background.

In 2008, laws were passed in Florida and Arkansas banning same-sex couples from adopting. Adoptions by same-sex couples are still very much stigmatized (Crawford, 1999). According to Alexander (2001), gay and lesbian couples face more thorough background checks and encounter prejudices throughout the adoption process.

With the adoptions by Angelina Jolie and Madonna in the last five years, it seems as though celebrity adoption is increasing, or at least receiving more press. Since no research is readily available on the topic, it seems appropriate to undertake that task in this study.

Not only will this study examine different types of adoption, one objective is to also look at issues an adopted child or adoptive family may face – attachment and reunions. There is significant literature available on the adjustment of adopted children versus children parented by biological parents. Many Americans believe that that adopted children are more likely to have drug or behavioral problems (Thomas Foundation, 2002). Some studies show that adoptees may have significant problems adjusting (Brodzinsky, Smith and Brodzinsky, 1998). However, other studies show that adoptees and biological children have the same issues in relatively the same proportion (Haugaard, 1998). Many experts encourage adoptive parents to encourage attachment from the very first day the adopted child is brought home (Gray, 2002). This, it has been shown, should minimize any adverse affects an adopted child could face simply because he or she was adopted.

Another issue adoptive families and children have to deal with is the possibility of a reunion with the birthparent(s). Since adoption records are typically now open, this has become a bigger issue (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998). Many Americans still believe that birthparents will want to reclaim their child if an adoption is open. The Thomas Foundation study found that the majority of Americans surveyed (82%) believe that birth parents will return to reclaim the adopted child.

Review of the Literature

There has not been extensive research conducted on the portrayals of adoption in the media. However, the prior research that does exist suggests that the various members of the adoption triad are treated differently (Kline et. al, 2006). According to Kline et. al, adoptees and birth parents were largely portrayed negatively in the broadcast news stories analyzed. Following Goffman's stigma theory, Kline looked for negative coverage of all members of the adoption triad. Negative coverage was defined as "when portrayals of adoptees, birth parents, or adoptive parents are linked to socially undesirable attributes (e.g., critical adoptive parents) as opposed to positive attributes (e.g., loving adoptive parents)." Almost 25% of the stories featuring adoptees portrayed them only in a negative light. Adoptive parents, on the other hand, were frequently portrayed in a positive light. In fact, over 40% of the news stories "depicted adoptive parents and adoptive families and their interactions in solely positive ways" (p. 495). One of the most interesting findings is that 14% of the stories "contained stigmatizing claims about adoption and its participants, without story elements to counter these claims" (p. 495).

Hollingsworth (2002) examined transracial adoptees in particular in the media by coding media reports of interviews. The study revealed some support for transracially adopted children facing racism, their adoptive parents not being able to socialize them, and the concern that they will not be connected to their cultural/ethnic community. However, overall the adoptees seemed to be quite well-adjusted and "were depicted as having a physical and social identification with the ethnic group" (p. 292). Additionally, they were interested in finding their birthmother, but still had a positive relationship with their adoptive parent(s).

Elisha Marr (2007) in her dissertation found that since 1985 there has been an increase in newspaper articles in Michigan written about transracial adoption. While the increase was encouraging, Marr found a decrease in comprehensive, in-depth coverage of transracial adoption and the implications for racial groups and individuals connected to adoption. Marr also found that adoptive parents were generally the feature of the articles and were largely portrayed positively, while birthparents were rarely featured in stories and were more often portrayed negatively.

Waggenspack (1998) found when examining a sample of various mass media outlets' coverage of adoption from 1997 that most adoption stories focused on coverage of adoption policy. Of the remaining articles, there was twice the number of stories of bad adoption outcomes as good outcomes. Fisher (2003) also found that adoption primarily received negative coverage. He examined sociology textbooks published between 1998 through 2001 and found that there was little coverage of adoption, but when it was covered it was negative.

Based on similar findings, Waggenspack stated that Americans are not receiving comprehensive or accurate coverage of adoption issues. Creedy (2001) agreed and went further to say that the public must demand fair coverage of adoption and adoption issues if it is ever to happen.

Since studies focusing only on media coverage on adoption is lacking a bit, studies looking at other social issues can be helpful. Martin (2008) found that bad press can actually be good press. He reported that negative coverage of social issues sparked political action.

Journalists and communications professionals need to understand what message is being conveyed regarding adoption. Once that is assessed, news media can ensure that stories on adoption are portrayed realistically and truthfully.

Furthermore, organizations wishing to implement campaigns to encourage individuals to adopt could have more successful outcomes if it is known what messages about adoption are already being presented to the public.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-setting theory was first formally introduced in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw and attempts to answer how the media agenda influences the public agenda. While agenda setting theory is frequently used and operationalized to show the power of the media in regards to political issues, it has many more practical applications, such as determining the media agenda regarding adoption. Virtually any issue covered by the media can be compared to the public's perceptions, attitudes, or beliefs about that issue to determine if the media do have the power to set the public agenda. There are two basic types of agenda setting research – hierarchy studies and longitudinal studies (Lowry, Nio, and Leitner, 2003). Hierarchal studies examine several issues and their salience at one point in time, whereas longitudinal studies examine one issue and the change in its salience over time.

Cohen's work in 1963 serves as an intellectual antecedent to agenda setting theory. He stated that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13). One major assumption of agenda setting theory is that people who consume mass media gain knowledge from it (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Furthermore, this

knowledge seems to almost seep into individuals' consciousness. As Berelson states (as quoted in McCombs), "on any single subject many 'hear' but few 'listen'" (p. 177). This knowledge individuals gain from the media then help them to make decisions (McCombs 1972).

Kiousis (2008) goes a step further to assert that individuals use this knowledge not only to make decision but also to take action. The theory was operationalized to test political agenda setting and action, and Kiousis found that "agenda setting serves as a critical intrinsic process in political socialization contributing to the crystallization of political predispositions, which lead to electoral participation" (p. 495). Essentially, the findings of the study support the idea that agenda setting reaches even into individuals' behavior.

Stefaan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst (2006) make the assumption that "not all population categories are as susceptible to media cues" (p. 92). According to Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller (1980), "differential media treatment is but one factor among many that determine the salience of issues" (p. 18). Other factors including personal experience and present circumstances have an impact on salience.

Walgrave and Aelst also claim that not all media outlets carry the same agenda setting power. Researchers have debated the differences in the power each type of media has on the public's agenda. Furthermore, Eilders (2002) asserts that the public agenda is only influenced if many different media outlets cover the same issue.

There are several concepts involved in agenda setting theory: media agenda, public agenda, issue, salience, and issue salience. Cook et al. define the media agenda as "the media's capacity to shape the general public's policy priorities by leading the public

to view certain issues as more important" (p. 16). Walgrave agrees, but he states that in the current literature "The question of what kind of media, under which precise circumstances, affect what kind of…agenda has yet to be answered" (p. 445). Eilders states, "Because selection [of information] establishes a particular salience structure in the media and determines issue hierarchies in the perception of the audience, it plays a crucial role in agenda-setting research" (p. 182). In research, the media agenda can be measured operationally by examining frequency of coverage of the issues, space given to the issues, or a number of other ways.

Erbring et al. define the public agenda as "the concerns of the general public (p. 17). Others support this definition. Dearing (1998) states that an agenda is "a ranking of the relative importance of various public issues" (p. 310). In the past the public agenda has been operationalized and measured by public opinion polls (Dearing).

According to Dearing (1989) an issue is "a subject of perceived importance" (p. 310). Erbring defines issue salience as "relative perceived importance of a problem" (p. 17). Spiro Kiousis (2004) attempts to more clearly define media salience in terms of agenda setting. He touches on the many ways in which salience has been defined in agenda setting literature. At times it has been used "interchangeably with concepts such as awareness, attention, concern, popularity, and importance," but it has also been used to indicate awareness and involvement (p. 72). Overall Kiousis states that the salience of a particular issue tends to be most often viewed in relation to other issues.

Agenda Setting Theory explains the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. Specifically, it posits that the more the media cover a particular issue, the more salient it will be in the public.

To answer these questions and determine the agenda setting function of the media regarding the issue of adoption, the results of the content analysis will be compared to the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption National Adoption Attitudes Survey.

The following research questions have been posed:

RQ1:   How has adoption coverage changed over time?

RQ2:   Has coverage of interracial/transracial adoption, international adoption, celebrity adoption and open adoption increased or decreased?

RQ3:   What events/issues are covered in the stories (bad outcomes, reunions, etc.)?

RQ4:   Are most portrayals positive, neutral, or negative?

METHODOLOGY

Procedures

A content analysis was used to analyze the content of stories about adoption

published in U. S. newspapers in June 1-14, 1992 and June 15-30, 2007.[1] The years were

chosen for different reasons. The early 1990s saw many changes in adoption;

international adoption and open adoption were both on the rise. Furthermore, adoption

records that were previously closed were beginning to be released, making 1992 a good

year to examine. The year 2007 was selected because it was the most recent year to have

been completed when the study began. These two years should produce appropriate

articles to determine the change in adoption coverage over time. Using Lexis-Nexis, the

sample was obtained by using the specified dates and the keywords "adoption"

(appearing in headline and lead paragraph), AND "children" (appearing anywhere in the

text), OR "adopt" (appearing anywhere in the text). From the census of stories returned,

editorials, letters to the editor, news briefs and other irrelevant stories were eliminated,

leaving a total of 75 stories to be examined. Examples of stories eliminated included

stories about pet adoption or encouraging the adoption of highways, rivers, etc. Some of

the returned stories included community calendars advertising meetings about adoption

or stories about the adoption of legislation regarding children.

The stories were published in various newspapers around the United States. The

purpose of using all newspapers on the Lexis-Nexis database was to accurately assess all

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[1] The month was randomly selected.

adoption information that is reaching the public, not just the information in the newspapers with the most circulation or the ones considered to be more prestigious. If the same story was published in two or more newspapers, only one instance of the story was used.

Two coders practiced on articles not in the sampling frame to gain acceptable intercoder reliability. Upon completion of preliminary reliability, 10 stories in the sample were coded by both coders and achieved an intercoder reliability score of .88. After receiving an acceptable score, the remaining articles were coded according to the categories set forth below.

Coding Categories

The unit of analysis for this project was the story. The story name, name of the paper, date published, the section in which the story appeared, page number and word count were all coded. In addition, an overall subject was assigned to each story – policy issues, covering a specific adoption, adoption in general, and other. The purpose of assigning an overall subject was to determine if most adoption stories tend to cover adoption policy issues or other issues. The other coding categories measured the type of adoption and the nature of the coverage. These categories include: birth mother, birth father, birth parents; adoptive parents, adoptive mother, adoptive father; adoptee; open or closed adoption; interracial/transracial adoption versus same race adoption; international adoption; celebrity adoption; reunion (between birthparent(s) and adoptee); bad adoption outcomes (placement that falls through, adoptee kills adoptive parents, etc.); and adoption agency presence and valence (praising the agency, agency's wrongdoing, etc.).

For the individuals involved in an adoption – birthparent(s), adoptive parent(s), and adoptee – the coding was based on the extent of the coverage and the nature of the coverage. In order to determine which member of the adoption triad received the most coverage, coders counted the number of mentions of the adopted child(ren), adoptive parent(s)/family, and birthparent(s). Valence was the coded for each member of the triad on a scale from one to five. One was very positive, two was mostly positive, three was neutral or not enough information present to make a judgment, four was mostly negative, and five was very negative. Because of the differences in all the members of the adoption triad, the various levels of valance were operationalized differently.

For the birthparent, very positive valence included instances where the birthparent had a great adoption experience, is glad the child was placed for adoption. He or she is overall physically and emotionally well. Mostly positive valence included stories in which the birthparent may be glad the child was placed for adoption, but may be upset about not being able to raise the child. It may be mentioned that he or she has some emotional, mental, or physical problems (drugs or depression, etc.), but overall is a stable person. Neutral valance included instances in which not enough information is given to accurately code for valence or when past and present circumstances balance out. For instance, the birthparent may have had a rough patch when the child was first placed for adoption, but is well-adjusted now. Mostly negative valence of the birthparent is coded if the birthparent was using drugs or unhappy that the child was placed for adoption. She may have emotional or mental disabilities/issues. Very negative coverage was coded if the birthparent abused, neglected, or abandoned the child, if the birthparent feels as

though she was made to place her child for adoption by the agency or an individual, or if the birthparent is marginalized by the adoptive family or adopted child.

For the adoptive parent(s)/family, valence was coded as very positive if the adoptive family was a loving family who were happy with their adopted child, they loved and cared for the child, and had a very positive adoption experience. Valence was coded as mostly positive for instances in which the adoptive family was happy and had a good adoption experience, but there may have been some growing pains experienced or their extended family or friends may have opposed the adoption. However, overall the adoptive family was portrayed as happy. Neutral valence was coded when there was not enough information given about the adoptive family to accurately code for valence or the adoptive family was glad they adopted once, but because it was so difficult or expensive they will not adopt again. Mostly negative coverage included stories in which the adoptive family regretted adopting the child, they had a terrible adoption, they experienced many disrupted placements, they dealt with a corrupt agency, or some other bad adoption experience. Very negative coverage included instances in which the adoptive family beat or abused the adopted child, they returned the child to foster care, or otherwise harmed the child.

For the adopted child, valance was coded as very positive in stories in which the child was portrayed as very well-adjusted and well cared for. The article may have mentioned that he was doing well in school, that he had made many friends, or something illustrating that the child had adjusted well. Mostly positive coverage was coded if there were a few growing pains, but the child is well-adjusted overall. Neutral coverage included instances in which there was not enough information can be given about the

situation to determine or if the child had a bad first placement, but was with a loving family at the time of the story. Mostly negative coverage included instances in which the child had not been abused or beaten, but was not adjusting well to his new family (acting out at school or home or is depressed). Very negative coverage included instances in which the child was beaten or abused or the family wanted to return the child to foster care or the adoption agency.

The presence of reunions and ongoing contact between the birthparent and adopted child was coded no, yes, and not mentioned. No was coded if the adopted child expressed a desire never to reunite with the birthparent. Yes was coded if a reunion was planned or had happened in the past or if there was contact between the adopted child and the birthparent. Not mentioned was coded if neither option was mentioned. The presence of bad adoption outcomes was coded. These outcomes include the adoptee not being able to adjust or attach well, the adoptee resenting his or her birthparent(s) or adoptive family, or abuse. Yes was coded if this was present; no if everyone was happy and healthy; and don't know/not mentioned was coded if an adoption had not actually taken place or if it was not specified what the outcome was. The presence of adoption agencies was coded as not present, positive portrayal (the agency was helpful, etc.), neutral portrayal (mentioned but no details were given), or negative coverage (corrupt agency).

The findings from the content analysis will then be compared to the finding of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption National Adoption Attitudes Survey (2002) to determine if the media are actually setting the agenda in regards to adoption coverage.

RESULTS

Descriptives

In all, 75 stories were coded. Eighteen of the stories (24%) were published between June 1-14, 1992, and 57 of the stories (76%) were published June 15-30, 2007. Nine relevant articles were published June 17, 2007, the most of any one day. This could be because Father's Day was that day, and it was also a Sunday. Sixteen stories (21.3%) were published in the A section, and 16 were also published in the B section. Additionally, 26 stories, or 34.7%, were published on the first page of the section in which they appeared.

The subject of each story was coded. Twenty-three stories primarily discussed a specific adoption or specific adoptions, while 11 stories discussed adoption in general. Ten articles focused on highlighting children available for adoption through the foster care system, and seven discussed policy issues affecting the adoption of children. The remaining 24 articles fell into the "other" category. Two examples of "other category" articles include a story about retailers pulling ads from television shows that portrayed same-sex adoption and one about adoptive parents pushing for more diversity in schools and extra-curricular activities.

International adoption was the most mentioned type of adoption of all that were coded. It was mentioned in 25 of the 75 articles (33%). Open adoption was only

specifically mentioned in two of the 75 articles coded, while closed adoption was not specifically mentioned in any of the articles. Interracial or transracial adoption was mentioned in seven stories (9.3%), and same-race adoption was mentioned specifically in two stories. International adoption was mentioned in 33.3% of the articles (25 articles). Same-sex adoption was mentioned in three articles (4%), and celebrity adoption was mentioned in seven articles (9.3%).

Adopted children were not mentioned in 41.3% of the sample (31 stories). Adoptive parents were not mentioned in 37.3% (28 stories), and birthparents were not mentioned in 84% of the sample (63 stories). The articles that were publicizing children available for adoption did not mention any member of the adoption triad. These types of stories account for 10 articles in the sample. Other types of stories that did not mention all members of the triad include articles about adoption in general – the need for it, the desire of potential adoptive parents to adopt, and the journey parents take while trying to adopt. In these articles, since the parents had not yet adopted a child, they were not considered adoptive parents nor was the child considered an adopted child. Birthparents are frequently not mentioned in most stories of adoption.

Addressing the Research Questions

RQ 1: How has adoption coverage changed over time?

RQ 2: Has coverage of interracial/transracial adoption, international adoption, celebrity
adoption and open adoption increased or decreased?

Since RQ1 and RQ2 were closely related, it was decided to consider them together. Eighteen stories in the sample (24%) were published from June 1-14, 1992, while 57 stories (76%) were published from June 15-30, 2007. The two specific mentions

of open adoption were found in the group of articles from 2007. Interracial/transracial

adoption was mentioned four times in 1992 and three times in 2007. International

adoption was specifically mentioned four times in 1992, compared with 21 times in 2007.

All seven of the mentions of celebrity adoptions appeared in the articles from 2007.

There were five mentions of reunions and/or ongoing contact between adopted child and

birthparent in 2007 and one mention in 1992.

Table 1.1: Number of Mentions – Adoption Type

Type of Adoption	1992	2007
Open Adoption	0	2
Interracial/transracial adoption	4	3
International Adoption	4	21
Celebrity Adoption	0	7
Reunions	1	5

RQ 3: What events/issues are covered in the stories (bad outcomes, reunions, etc.)?

Reunions between adopted child and birthparent and/or ongoing contact between the two

were mentioned in 8% of the sample (six stories). Bad adoption outcomes were

mentioned in 9.3% of the sample (seven stories). Of those, the birthparent was not

mentioned in any of the articles. Adoption agencies were not mentioned at all in 89.3%

of the sample. In the remaining 10.7%, negative mentions of adoption agencies

comprised 4%. Many of the stories covered parents who were trying to adopt a child but

had not yet done so. Foster care issues were also covered a good deal. In the practice

sample to determine the coding categories, foster care was present but not prevalent. However, it was mentioned in what observationally seemed like a majority of the sample.

The coding categories did not accurately capture the nature of stories that did not specifically discuss an adoption-related topic. For example, many articles ran as Father's Day specials that discussed fathers and their children. Some of these children were adopted, and, while it may have mentioned the adoption process, the main focus of the article was the fathers. This type of story was coded with a subject of "Other" and no issues or events were coded.

RQ 4: Are most portrayals positive, neutral, or negative?

Of the 47 stories that contained a mention of an adoptive parent, 24 covered the adoptive parent positively, 16 covered the adoptive parent neutrally, and seven portrayed them very negatively. The majority of the negative portrayals featured adoptive parents who abused or neglected their children, sometimes ending in the death of the child.

Table 2.1: Valence of Adoptive Parents

Coverage of Adoptive Parents	Number of Stories
Positive	24
Neutral	16
Very Negative	7

Of the 48 stories that mentioned an adopted child, 14 portrayed the adopted child positively, 22 neutrally, and six portrayed the adopted child very negatively. Examples of a negative portrayal of the adoptive child include an article about an adopted child killing himself and of an adopted child being neglected and killed by his adoptive mother.

Table 2.2: Valence of Adopted Child

Coverage of Adopted Child	Number of Stories
Positive	14
Neutral	22
Very Negative	6

Of the 12 stories in which a birthparent was mentioned, three were positive, two were mostly positive, six were neutral, and one was mostly negative. A second birthparent was only mentioned once and was portrayed mostly negatively. Additionally, in the seven stories that mentioned bad adoption outcomes, the birthparent was not mentioned.

Table 2.3: Valence of Birthparent

Coverage of Birthparent	Number of Stories
Positive	3
Mostly Positive	2
Neutral	6
Mostly Negative	1

Observationally, it seemed that most stories were either neutral or negative. In some articles, the main focus of the story was about a specific person or event, and it was mentioned that that person was adopted. There seemed to be a number of stories about adoptive parents and former foster parents abusing the adopted child. Since overall valence was not covered, the tone of the entire article can only be presented based on unrecorded observations of the researcher. In general, it seemed that there were more

negative stories than expected. Many of the negative articles focused on the abuse of adopted children by their adoptive parents. There was one case in particular that was covered in several of the articles about an adoptive and foster mother who had starved and beaten her son to death. The articles chronicled the story of the son and the prosecution of the mother. The positive stories were typical, heart-warming stories about adoptive parents adding to their families through adoption. Some articles told of adoptive parents who, once they adopted their child, went on to form organizations to help others wanting to adopt.

Comparisons with National Adoption Attitudes Survey

The National Adoption Attitudes Survey conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption found that the fear of a birthparent coming back to reclaim the adopted child keeps many individuals who have considered adopting from actually adopting. Based on this fact, the researcher expected to see at least a handful of articles on this subject, but there was not a single article that depicted this scenario.

The survey notes that open adoption, international adoption, and interracial adoption have all increased over the last several years. Based on this and statistics showing that these types of adoption have increased, categories were included to determine how much coverage these issues were receiving in the media. In this sample, these issues were covered relatively infrequently, although the coverage of international adoption did increase in the 2007 articles. However, this correlation is not strong enough to suggest agenda setting on this issue by newspapers.

Thirty-two percent of respondents indicated that they believe adopted children are less likely than children living with their biological parent(s) to be well-adjusted. This

statistic suggested that there would be many stories about adopted children who had not adjusted to their new families or surroundings and focus on the growing pains experienced by the family. However, this depiction was rare. Instead, there were more stories focusing on abusive parents.

Nineteen percent of respondents indicated that media coverage of adoption was very favorable, while 53% said it was somewhat favorable. These statistics seem to mirror the outcome of this study; however, it seems overall that there cannot be a good case made for agenda setting by newspapers on this issue. Some findings of this study support it, but on the whole the findings do not point toward a clear case of newspaper agenda setting with regards to adoption.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to assess how the media is covering adoption and how that coverage has changed over the last 15 years or so. The purpose was to help practicing journalists realize any problematic portrayals present in the reporting of adoption and to see how media portrayals of adoption compare to the attitudes of the public. Using the agenda setting theory, the researcher thought that the types of adoption portrayals would be closely related to the attitudes of adoption measured in the National Adoption Attitudes Survey conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. The results of a content analysis were compared to the findings of the survey to assess if agenda setting by the media was present. The findings suggest that the media does not seem to set the agenda for the attitudes of adoption held by the public.

As previous research indicated, findings showing unbalanced coverage of the members of the adoption triad and more instances of negative portrayals of the birthparent than the adoptive parent or adopted child was expected. But, results of this study indicate that this was not necessarily the case with this sample. The birthparent(s) was not mentioned as often as adopted children or adoptive parents, and there was only one very negative portrayal of a birthparent. Also, as Waggenspack (1998) found, it was expected that many articles would focus on bad adoption outcomes. However, this was not the case in this sample as only seven stories included bad outcomes.

So, what do the findings here mean in terms of media coverage of adoption? Perhaps it can be concluded that newspapers are not covering adoption and adoption-

related issues often enough to set the public agenda. Overall, newspaper coverage of adoption is not as negative, as far as this study is concerned, as other studies have found. It is important to note, though, that this study did not analyze an exhaustive sample, or perhaps even a representative sample, of adoption article published in newspapers. It may be more beneficial to look at the biggest newspapers to get a more complete picture of the adoption stories that are reaching the most readers. Since this study examined articles from all newspapers found on the Lexis-Nexis online database, articles from many smaller, local newspapers were analyzed. It is possible that these papers could cover local stories that include a person who has adopted or who has been adopted as opposed to larger newspapers that may try to write more in-depth stories covering adoption in general.

Theoretical implications

Agenda setting theory is not only based on determining what information the media is making available to the public. The researcher also must make a connection between what the media is covering and what the public is thinking. The findings of this study do not suggest that agenda setting theory is at work in the case of newspaper coverage of adoption.

The fact that this study was longitudinal and measured the changes in salience of one particular issue (adoption) over time is what set it apart from previous research. The researcher believes that future studies should also look at changes in coverage over time and compare the findings to surveys from the past to assess the agenda setting function of the media.

If this study were to be replicated, it would be helpful to code for the overall valence of the story in addition to the valence of each member of the adoption triad. This would provide greater correlation to the statistic of how the public views media coverage of adoption. It was not coded for in this study because the researcher believed that more helpful information could be gleaned from the valence of each member of the adoption triad.

Limitations

As with all content analyses, one limitation of this study was that only manifest content can be coded. Sometimes the real meaning of the article is lost because it cannot be made to fit into a coding category. In the case of this study, several stories were focused on encouraging individuals to adopt, but never mentioned any items for which there was a coding category. Perhaps a well-defined category that codes for overall portrayal of adoption in general could have solved this problem. Obviously, a larger sample size would always be helpful, because it allows us to examine more material and make better judgments about the information being reported about adoption. However, for the purposes of this study, that was not possible.

The researcher believed that that looking at the same month during the two years would give a more complete picture of what information is being published about adoption. That was also the same reasoning behind examining articles from all newspapers available on the Lexis-Nexis database. In practice, though, this decision limited the articles available for coding and perhaps limited the types of articles that appeared. For instance, Father's Day was Sunday, June 17, 2007, leading to a few special articles featuring adoptive fathers. Also, the number of newspapers available on

the Lexis-Nexis database could have played a role in the number of articles returned for each year.

One particularly difficult limitation of this study is the question of what is news. Bad occurrences generally make the headlines (i.e. a child is abducted, someone is murdered), but "feel-good stories" rarely make the headlines and may only make the news on a slow news day. Therefore, it may be inevitable that adoption is covered in a negative light because it is deemed more "newsworthy" to write about an adoptive parent abusing their adopted child rather than a loving adoptive family.

Since relevant survey data was available from 2002, it was used for this study. If more time were available, it would have been helpful to have conducted a survey unique to this content analysis and then compare the data. If other survey data is available, it would have been helpful to have looked at the changes in attitude over time instead of a brief snapshot of attitudes about adoption in 2002.

Recommendations for future research

Many areas of this study can be improved upon for future study. Before making a firm decision on the coding categories to be used, a practice sample was coded. The articles in the practice sample seemed to include more instances of adoption agency issues and few instances of foster care, therefore leading to the category of adoption agencies being included in this study and the absence of a foster care category. However, the actual study sample contained many mentions of the foster care system, but there was no coding category to record it. Future studies should include a category for foster care.

A category should also be included to determine if a story is a hard news story or a feature story. Hard news generally covers a breaking event, while feature stories cover

"feel-good stories." Such a coding category could help the researcher determine if reporters are covering adoption in a negative way, or if they are mainly focusing on hard news stories in which something has happened with a member of the adoption triad.

It is also recommended that the researcher choose several major newspapers to examine closely for a longer period of time. This may result in findings that can more accurately predict what the public is reading about adoption in newspapers. It was the intent of the researcher during this study to capture the portrayal of adoption in newspapers across the country. As mentioned previously, this proved to be a limitation of the study. A selection of major national newspapers may provide more in-depth articles to analyze.

In the 2007 survey conducted by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, it was reported that 37% of survey respondents had a negative view of the foster care system in the United States. This is not unexpected, based solely on observational information gained from this research project. In future research, it could be interesting to examine the portrayal of the foster care system in newspaper articles as well as adoption. There seemed to be several negative stories of abuse and neglect by foster parents. At the very least, in any study of media coverage of adoption, foster care should be accounted for, regardless of what appears in the practice sample. Foster care and adoption are undoubtedly linked and will more than likely appear together. Accounting for this in future studies will be helpful in rounding out the complete picture of adoption coverage.

Selecting a different time period is recommended as well. Examining articles from a broader range of dates would probably provide a more accurate picture of the overall coverage of adoption. It may also be helpful to include letters to the editor or editorials. When pulling articles from Lexis-Nexis, several interesting editorial articles were found that could have added more helpful information to the findings of this study. However, the parameters of the study had already been set. Coding those types of articles would give insight into what readers of newspapers think and from what perspective editors view adoption.

Additionally, coding for what is widely considered to be negative adoption language would be helpful in assessing if a subtle negative message is being sent to the public. For example, most adoption professionals encourage the phrase "placing a child for adoption," as opposed to "giving a child up for adoption." Several articles also mentioned couples trying to have their "own" children but failing, so they decided to adopt. Again, for many adoption professionals and even adoptive families, this is very negative language. Adopted children are the adopted parent's "own" children. Pointing out these subtle differences and educating journalists about the correct terms to use while writing about adoption could go a long way in getting a more positive message about adoption to the public. This could also help future research in revealing how adoption is actually being covered rather than just what adoption issues are being covered.

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Appendix A

Operational Definitions for Coding Categories

Research Questions:
1. How has adoption coverage changed over time?
2. Has coverage of interracial/transracial adoption, international adoption, celebrity adoption and open adoption increased or decreased?
3. What events/issues are covered in the stories (bad outcomes, reunions, etc.)?
4. Are most portrayals positive, neutral, or negative?

Unit of Analysis: story

Sampling Frame:
All newspaper stories published in June 1-14, 1992 and June 15-30, 2007 found on Lexis-Nexis using the following search terms: adoption AND children OR adopt. Editorial pieces, letters to the editor, and news briefs were not coded.

Coding Categories:
Story Name
Paper Name
Date Published
Section of Newspaper
Page Number
Word Count

Subject:
The purpose of the subject category is to capture the main idea of the story.

        Policy issues-1

                The article is primarily about policies influencing the adoption of children. It may mention a specific bill or a court cases that will directly affect adoption legislations. It could also mention legislation that is currently in place that regulates adoptions. Even if specific adoptions or general adoption information is included at some point in the article, if the story opens with a discussion of adoption policies, it should be coded in this category.

        Specific adoption(s)-2

                The point of the story is to communicate the story of one particular adoption and to show the impact of adoption on the family/individual or to communicate the story of families or individuals seeking to adopt. It could focus on one or more families. The article could also focus on a couple or individual wanting to adopt a child.

Advertising children available for adoption-3

This category is reserved for articles that feature a child who is available for adoption.

Adoptions in general-4

The primary goal of these types of articles is to communicate general adoption information to the reader. This may include general adoption statistics or may focus on an agency or a couple of agencies. It may also outline the process of adopting a child and what steps an adoptive parent needs to take. May include policy discussions and/or stories of various adoptions, but the primary goal of the article is to communicate general adoption information to the reader.

Other-5

If a story does not fit into one of the above categories, it should be coded "Other."

Mentions:

Adopted child(ren)

Count proper names and pronouns that clearly refer to the adopted child. The proper name of the child does not have to appear first. Other phrases that count include – "the child," "the toddler," "the ____-year old," and other phrases CLEARLY referring to the adopted child. Foster children or children waiting to be adopted DO NOT count in this category, even if they are currently living with the family who want to adopt them. The mentions count only children who are mentioned in the article by name.

Adoptive parent(s)/family

Count proper names and pronouns that clearly refer to the adoptive parent(s)/family. If the adoptive parents are a couple, they count as one mention when mentioned together ("Jack and Sue Smith"). It also counts as one mention when they are mentioned separately ("Jack Smith said…"). It counts as one mention with referred to by the last name (the Smiths).

Other phrases that count as a mention: "the couple," "the parent" (when clearly referring to the adoptive parent), "the woman" (when referring to an adoptive mother), "the man" (when referring to an adoptive father), "adoptive family," "adoptive mother," "adoptive father," "adoptive parent(s)" and other phrases CLEARLY referring to the adoptive parent(s).

This category DOES NOT include families/individuals who are waiting to adopt a child – only families/individuals who have actually adopted a child. It also DOES NOT include foster parents.

Birthparent(s)

Count proper names and pronouns that clearly refer to the birthparent(s). Count "birthparent," "birthmother," "birthfather," "first mom," "biological mother," "biological father," "biological parent(s)," and other phrases that clearly refer to the birthparent as one mention each. If the birthparents are referred to as a couple (such as John and Susie Smith), they count as one mention.

How many total adopted children are mentioned?

Only adopted children who are discussed in the article should be mentioned here. (For example, if the story is about a particular family who adopted Johnny, his sister Susie, and two other children, four adopted children are mentioned. If the article is about adoption in general and statistics are mentioned, but there are no children mentioned by name, a zero will be put in this category.) If the articles specifies that a family has adopted a total of 10 children, all 10 are counted in this category.

Presence:
Birth mother/father/parents

Are the biological parents of a child placed for adoption mentioned?
No-0
Yes-1

How many birthparents are mentioned?

Valence of birthparent 1 (If birthparents are mentioned together as a couple, valence is coded together. The birthparent(s) mentioned first in the article are Birthparent 1; the second is Birthparent 2, etc.)
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of birthparent 2
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of birthparent 3
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of birthparent 4
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of birthparent 5

Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

1 – Very positive = The birthparent had a great adoption experience. She is glad she placed her child with adoption. She is physically and emotionally well; she just could not care for a child.

2 – Mostly positive = The birthparent is glad she placed her child for adoption, but she may be upset about not being able to raise the child. It may be mentioned that she has some emotional, mental, or physical problems (drugs or depression, etc.), but overall she is a stable person.

3 – Neutral = Not enough information is given to accurately code for valence; she may have had a rough patch when she placed the child for adoption, but she is well-adjusted now. She may be having a rough time now, but she was well-adjusted when she placed the child. If the article mentions good and bad issues that seem to balance each other out, it is coded as neutral.

4 – Mostly negative = The birthparent may have been on drugs or a little unhappy that she placed the child for adoption. She may be upset with the adoption agency for the way the adoption was handled. She may have emotional or mental disabilities/issues.

5 – Very negative = The birthparent abused, neglected, or abandoned the child. The birthparent feels as though she was made to place her child for adoption by the agency or an individual. The birthparent is marginalized by the adoptive family or adopted child.

Adoptive parents/mother/father

Is (are) the adoptive parents(s) mentioned?
No-0
Yes-1
How many adoptive parents are mentioned?
(Couples count as one; individuals count as one.)

Valence of adoptive parent/family 1 (The adoptive parent/family mentioned first will be coded as adoptive parent/family 1; the second mentioned will be adoptive parent/family 2, etc.)
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of adoptive parent/family 2
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of adoptive parent/family 3
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of adoptive parent/family 4
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

Valence of adoptive parent/family 5
Very Positive – 1
Mostly Positive – 2
Neutral – 3
Mostly Negative – 4
Very Negative – 5

1 – Very Positive = The adoptive family is a loving family who are happy with their adopted child. They love and care for the child. They had a very positive adoption experience.

2 – Mostly positive = The adoptive family is happy and had a good adoption experience. There may have been some growing pains experienced or their extended family or friends may have expressed opposed the adoption, but overall the adoptive family is happy now.

3 – Neutral = There is not enough information given about the adoptive family to accurately code for valence or the adoptive family is glad they adopted once, but because it was so difficult or expensive they will not adopt again.

4 – Mostly negative = The adoptive family regrets adopting the child, they had a terrible adoption, they experienced many disrupted placements, they dealt with a corrupt agency, or some other bad adoption experience.

5 – Very negative = The adoptive family beat or abused the adopted child, they returned the child to foster care, or otherwise harmed the child.

Adopted child(ren)

Is an adopted child mentioned?

No – 0

Yes – 1

How many adopted children are mentioned by name?

(This counts only children who are specifically discussed, even if they are not named. Children included as part of a statistic are not included in this count.)

Valence of adopted child 1 (The child mentioned first in the article is coded as adopted child 1; the second mentioned is adopted child 2, etc.)

Very Positive – 1

Mostly Positive – 2

Neutral – 3

Mostly Negative – 4

Very Negative – 5

Valence of adopted child 2

Very Positive – 1

Mostly Positive – 2

Neutral – 3

Mostly Negative – 4

Very Negative – 5

Valence of adopted child 3

Very Positive – 1

Mostly Positive – 2

Neutral – 3

Mostly Negative – 4

Very Negative – 5

Valence of adopted child 4

Very Positive – 1

Mostly Positive – 2

Neutral – 3

Mostly Negative – 4

Very Negative – 5

Valence of adopted child 5

Very Positive – 1

Mostly Positive – 2

Neutral – 3

Mostly Negative – 4

Very Negative – 5

1 – Very Positive = The child is very well-adjusted and well cared for. The article could mention that he is doing well in school, he has made many friends, he is adjusting well to

his siblings, he is glad he was adopted, adoption was positive, he is very happy with his adoptive family.

2 – Mostly positive = There may have been a few growing pains, but the child is well-adjusted overall. He may have trouble in school or may not be fully integrated with his new siblings, but he is cared for and his adoptive family loves him.

3 – Neutral = Not enough information can be given about the situation to determine or the child had a bad first placement, but is now with a loving family.

4 – Mostly negative = The child has not been abused or beaten, but he is not adjusting well to his new family. He acts out at school, acts out at home, is depressed, or expresses that he is sorry he was ever adopted, etc.

5 – Very Negative = The child has been beaten or abused or the family has wanted to return the child to foster care or the adoption agency.

Open adoption
(In an open adoption, the adoptive family knows one or both birthparents. Code Yes if it is noted that the adoption covered is an open adoption, if the policy deals with open adoptions, or if open adoption is discussed. Code No if a closed adoption is mentioned or if it is mentioned that the adopted child and adoptive family do not know the birthparent. If it is not mentioned or the coder cannot tell, it will be coded Don't know/not mentioned.)
> **No-0**
> **Yes-1**
> **Don't know/not mentioned-2**

Closed adoption
(In a closed adoption, the adopted child and adoptive family do not know the birthparent. If mention is made of a closed adoption or of birth records being sealed this should be coded Yes. If an open adoption is mentioned, this category should be coded No. If no mention is made or if the coder cannot tell, it should be coded Don't know/not mentioned.)
> **No-0**
> **Yes-1**
> **Don't know/not mentioned-2**

Interracial/transracial adoption
(In and interracial/transracial adoption the adopted child and adoptive family are from different races. This category should be coded Yes if there is a mention of the adopted child and adoptive family being of different races or if the specific terms of "interracial adoption" or "transracial adoption" are mentioned. It should be coded No if it is known that the adopted child and adoptive family are of the same race. Don't know/not mentioned should be coded if the article makes no mention of the race and the coder does

not know. Even if there is mention of an American couple adopting from Ethiopia, China, or any other country, this category should ONLY be coded Yes if there is specific mention of the race.)

No-0
Yes-1
Don't know/not mentioned-2

Same race adoption
(This category should be coded Yes if it is mentioned that the adopted child and adoptive family are of the same race. It should be coded No if it is mentioned that this was an interracial/transracial adoption. Don't know should be coded if the article makes no mention of the race and the coder does not know. Even if there is mention of an American couple adopting from Ethiopia, China, or any other country, this category should ONLY be coded Yes if there is specific mention of the family and child being the same race.)

No-0
Yes-1
Don't know/not mentioned-2

International adoption
(In international adoption, the child is adopted from a country different from the country in which the adoptive family resides. This category should be coded Yes if there is specific mention of international or foreign adoption in any way – a policy discussion, a family wanting to adopt internationally, or something similar– or if it is known that an American adoptive parent(s) is adopting a child from another country. It should be coded No if it is mentioned that the adoptive parent(s) is pursuing a domestic adoption. It should be coded Don't know/not mentioned if no mention is made about the country of origin of the child or if the coder cannot tell.)

No-0
Yes-1
Don't know/not mentioned-2

Same-sex adoption
(Both parents must be of the same sex – either both male or both female – to count in this category. Also, discussions of same-sex adoption, gay adoption, or homosexual adoption in policy discussions or other discussions count in this category as well. Also, if a same-sex couple wants to adopt, this category will be coded Yes. It will be coded No if the coder can CLEARLY determine that the adoptive parents are a man and woman. It will be coded Don't know/not mentioned if the coder cannot tell or if it is not mentioned.)

No-0
Yes-1
Don't know/not mentioned-2

Celebrity adoptions
(The purpose of this category is to capture if celebrity adoptions are being covered. If the adoptive parent or prospective adoptive parent is a well-known celebrity, code Yes. If

not, code No. If multiple adoptions took place on the same day or are discussed without the adoptive parents being specifically discussed, code Don't know/not mentioned.)

> **No-0**
> **Yes-1**
> **Don't know/not mentioned-2**

Reunions/contact with birthparent
(This should only be coded Yes if a reunion actually takes place between a birthparent and adopted child(ren) or if specific mention is made of contact between the adoptee(s) and birthparent. If an adoptee says he will never search for his birthparent or has no interest in it, code No. If it is not mentioned, code Not mentioned.)

> **No-0**
> **Yes-1**
> **Don't know/not mentioned-2**

Bad adoption outcomes
(If an adoption placement falls through, if an adopted child harms his/her parent(s), if the adoptive family is unhappy that they adopted, if the adopted child has been beaten or abused, etc., this category will be coded Yes. If everyone is happy and healthy, this is coded No.)

> **No-0**
> **Yes-1**
> **Don't know/not mentioned**

Adoption agencies

> **Not present-0**
> **Positive-1**   (Code for positive if only positive things are said about the agency – they were helpful, the adoption was easy with them, etc.)
> **Neutral-2**   (Code for neutral when an adoption agency is mentioned either by name or by "the agency," "the adoption agency," or another such term that clearly references the adoption agency, but nothing is said good or bad about it.)
> **Negative-3**   (Code for negative if the article mentions that the agency was corrupt, unhelpful, if they are being investigated for bad practices, etc. Mentions of high adoption fees do NOT count as negative.)