

Entertainment (Mis)Education: The Framing of Organ Donation in Entertainment Television

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Researchers and practitioners who have sought to understand public reluctance to donating organs in spite of favorable attitudes toward organ donation have long thought that belief in myths about donation contribute to the problem. How these myths emerged and more important, why they have persisted in spite of national education campaigns is not clear. In the absence of direct personal experience with organ donation or transplantation, we believe that most people receive their information about donation through the media. In this study, we identify all entertainment television shows with organ donation storylines or subplots broadcast on ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX from 2004–2005. Frame analysis reveals 2 competing metaframes: the moral corruption of the powerful and organ donors are good people. In addition to the metaframes, 4 secondary frames, and 6 tertiary frames are identified. Organ donation is framed in mostly negative terms, with a few notable exceptions. Recommendations for how to address negative framing of organ donation in the media are offered.

Choosing what frame . . . phenomena are to be placed in may do more to determine their meaning than lengthy discussions of the facts of or arguments toward them. . . . Once an unfamiliar idea, topic, action, or event has been framed its interpretation is driven by the frame.” (Hertog & McLeod, 2003, p. 147)

Year after year, studies of American attitudes toward organ donation indicate nearly universally strong support (80%–90%, Gallup, 1996; Horton & Horton, 1990; Morgan & Miller, 2002; Rubens, 1996). Yet, when asked to make a decision, only about 30% to 50% of people consent to the donation of the organs of a loved one (Guadagnoli, McNamara, Evanisko, Beasley, Callender, & Poretzky, 1999; Hong, Kappel, Whitlock, Parks-Thomas, & Freedman, 1994), and even fewer (about 30%) actually sign a donor

card or join an organ donor registry to declare an intent to donate one’s own organs after death (Allerman, Coolican, Savaria, Swanson, & Townsend, 1996; Rubens, 1996; Rubens & Oleckno, 1998; Shaub, Shapiro, & Radecki, 1998). This wide gap between attitudes and behaviors has been largely ignored by researchers in this area. Instead, researchers have examined the linear relationships between attitudes, knowledge, social norms, and a variety of other variables to determine which have the most impact on behavior (Horton & Horton, 1991; Kopfman & Smith, 1996; Morgan, Miller, & Arasaratnam, 2003; Skumanich & Kintzfather, 1996). Successful social and behavioral interventions have improved attitudes and knowledge about organ donation (Callender, 1987; Morgan, Miller, & Arasaratnam, 2002; Sanner, 1994; Sanner, Hedman, & Tufveson, 1995), and yet, the metaphorical elephant in the room is the tremendous and unexplained gap between attitudes and behaviors.

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This begs the question: exactly how do people form their opinions about organ donation? Some researchers have proposed that people with direct experience with donation would be more likely to be willing to be a donor themselves (Shaub et al., 1998; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1996). Although the people on the transplant waiting list now number close to 100,000 (www.unos.org), they represent a relatively small fraction of the U.S. population. So how else would the general public learn about organ donation? Getting information about organ donation is important because in at least 36 states, each individual is asked about his or her intent to donate organs when they apply for a driver's license.

Perhaps not surprisingly, people report that their primary source of information about organ donation is the mass media (Feeley & Servoss, 2005; Guadagnoli et al., 1999; Rubens & Oleckno, 1998). The theory of social representations (Flick, 1998; Moscovici, 1998) states that individuals gathering information about an unknown phenomenon from the mass media is the first step in forming public opinion about that phenomenon. As Fuglsang (2003) points out, "the media impart knowledge and create an awareness of the world we experience, as well as those aspects of our existence which remain unexperienced, unexplained and hidden" (p. 192). Thus, for researchers and practitioners in the area of organ donation to better understand the disjuncture between attitudes and the willingness to donate, we would do well to take a close look at the information that people are receiving in the media.

Framing approaches provide an excellent theoretical framework for an analysis of media presentations of organ donation. Media framing analysis has been used to examine a wide variety of social and political issues, including foreign policy decisions, political correctness, AIDS, and the sexual abuse of children (Bantimaroudis & Ban, 2003; Dickerson, 2003; Kitzinger, 2004; Lupton, 1994). Many definitions of framing have been offered, most of which contain many of the same elements. Reese (2003) defines media frames as "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (p. 11). What is so important about frames is that they have a very real impact on the cognitive and affective responses of audience members (Reese, 2003; Tankard, 2003). In fact, "the media structure if not dictate, the way the public thinks about its second-hand reality" (Reese, 2003, p. 9). As discussed previously, organ donation is an excellent example of a "second-hand reality," one which can only be formed by exposure to the media, except in those rare cases where an individual has been personally affected by organ donation or who has actively sought information from Web sites designed to inform the public about organ donation (see, e.g., www.shareyourlife.com and www.unos.org).

Frames can also serve as arguments (McCombs & Ghanem, 2003). Certain attributes that are made particularly salient through framing are effectively "bundled" together, creating an enduring schema for organ donation. The resulting gestalt can "predispose recipients toward a particular line of reasoning or outcome—with major behavioral consequences" (McCombs & Ghanem, 2003, p. 77). One need only recall the Nobel Prize winning research of Kahneman and Tversky (2000) to understand the powerful impact on decision making that results from framing the same information in different ways. The power of media frames can be found in their common elements; verbal frames often revolve around myths, narratives, and metaphors that are well-understood and accepted, and largely unquestioned, by members of an entire culture (Hertog & McLeod, 2003).

Applications of framing to the issue of organ donation have been limited, however. Maloney and Walker (2000) conducted a frame analysis of organ donation in print news in Australia and discovered that a variety of frames were used in discussions of organ donation, including surgeons as vultures, surgeons as messiahs, and children as the most deserving of recipients. Although this study has not been replicated, a forthcoming article (Feeley & Vincent, 2007) does examine the tenor and frequency of newspaper coverage of organ donation in the United States.

We have elected to focus only on entertainment television in this study for two reasons. First, the frames that are used to describe organ donation in television news are dramatically different from those used in entertainment television (Feeley & Vincent, 2007; Maloney & Walker, 2000; Morgan, Harrison, Chewning, & Habib, 2005). This should not be surprising because entertainment television, by definition, involves fictionalized accounts rather than accounts of factual events or crises or public debates about policy. Second, because entertainment television presents fictionalized accounts in narrative form, they are cognitively processed differently than factual information; there is evidence that receivers suspend counterargument and become fully absorbed in the story being told (Green & Brock, 2000; Kellerman, 1984; Slater & Rouner, 1996).

Because of the powerful impact television can have on health decision making (Dutta-Bergman, 2004, 2006), entertainment-education has risen as a way to utilize the effects of the media for positive change. For example, Davenport Sypher, McKinley, Wentsam, and Valdeavellan (2002) report on the success of a reproductive health campaign using entertainment-education in the Peruvian Amazon. The effectiveness of these international interventions has led to initiatives and research into similar dissemination strategies in the United States (Singhal & Rogers, 1999; Slater & Rouner, 2002). The focus on entertainment television is a distinguishing feature of these approaches because of the ability to engage in narrative persuasion.

Entertainment television, unlike television news, often acts out scenes involving organ donation in front of the audience's eyes, which may create a more powerful impact on the public. Morgan and colleagues' work on message sensation value provides further evidence that acting out powerful or graphic scenes adds to the persuasive power of a message (Morgan, Palmgreen, Stephenson, Hoyle, & Lorch, 2003).

METHOD

We subscribed to a television monitoring service called ShadowTV, which provides clips and closed-caption transcripts of all shows that mention organ donation. The television stations that are monitored include ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, CNN, C-SPAN, and MSNBC. ShadowTV provides e-mail notification whenever programs air that contain any of our search terms. These included organ donation, organ donor, organ transplantation, organ transplant, transplant recipient, liver transplant, kidney transplant, and heart transplant.

Media clips that met our criteria were downloaded, including the full streaming video content and a preliminary closed-caption transcript. These transcripts were then "cleaned" by copying the transcript into a Word file, then reviewing each clip and adding in any missing dialogue. Typos and misspellings in the closed caption transcript were also fixed. Every 3 months, media clips were burned onto CDs, creating a complete library of all media clips and accompanying transcripts. The transcripts were then analyzed. Video clips were occasionally reviewed to clarify the tone or context of an interaction represented in the transcript.

For the purposes of this study, only clips of entertainment programs were included in this analysis. We have limited our analysis to the last 2 calendar years (January 2004 through December 2005). A list and synopsis of all clips with organ donation plots captured by ShadowTV can be obtained from the authors.

Coding Scheme Development and Analysis

Twenty-eight different shows aired 50 storylines involving organ donation, with a total of 80 airings or episodes over 2 years (January 2004 through December 2005). This total includes only programs aired on four channels that broadcast entertainment programming: ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX, and does not include any cable channels, including those that reair shows that have gone into syndication (e.g., *Law and Order*, *ER*).

Thematic analysis was guided by earlier work on media coverage of the Jessica Santillan organ transplant case (Morgan, Harrison, Volk Chewning, & Habib, in press), an Australian study of media coverage of organ donation (Maloney & Walker, 2000), and a study of HIV/AIDS media

coverage (Lupton, 1994), and was grounded in the literature on organ donation (Morgan & Miller, 2002; Morgan et al., 2002). All transcripts were repeatedly read and reread in their entirety to closely examine the evidence for the use of the themes identified and to search for any new themes or frames that were previously overlooked. This resulted in the identification of two competing sets of metaframes: the moral corruption of the powerful versus the inherent goodness of organ donors. Within these frames, secondary and tertiary frames were identified that correspond to myths about donation, allocation and fairness issues, and perceptions and roles of doctors and the medical system. These frames appear in Table 1.

RESULTS

Although *ER* featured the greatest number of unique plot lines about organ donation in this 2-year period ($n=7$), daytime serials (especially *One Life to Live*) had the greatest number of episodes that included some kind of treatment of the issue of organ donation. However, one of the most striking results of the analysis was the diversity of the types of entertainment programming that featured organ donation plot lines, which ranged from animated series such as *The Simpsons* and *The Family Guy*, to dramatic medical and legal shows such as *ER* and *Law & Order*, to daytime serials, including *General Hospital* and *All My Children*, as well as prime-time comedies like *Seinfeld* and *The Drew Carey Show*. However, episodes of medical and crime shows aired the greatest number of storylines that correspond to public misconceptions about organ donation. The primary, secondary, and tertiary frames used to portray organ donation are discussed below, and supported by exemplars from different episodes included in our analysis.

Metaframe: The Moral Corruption of the Powerful

Entertainment programming is rife with stories of powerful people and institutions that abuse the trust of the public, manipulate the organ allocation system, and not infrequently, murder people to obtain their organs. This metaframe is comprised of four secondary frames: *corruption in the medical system*, *undeserving or ungrateful recipients*, *the rich can buy anything* (even human organs), and *donors are only sources of "spare parts."* Examples of storylines that use each type of frame appear below.

Corruption in the medical system. Four tertiary frames exist in this category: Black markets for human organs exist in the United States; doctors "game" the organ allocation system; doctors or other medical staff declare death prematurely to get patients' organs; and doctors are "vultures" who are eager for patients to die so their organs can be procured for transplantation.

TABLE 1
Entertainment Media Frames

| <i>Meta-Frames</i> | <i>Secondary Frames</i> | <i>Tertiary Frames</i> |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The moral corruption of the powerful | Corruption in the medical system Undeserving or ungrateful recipients, including alcoholics, prisoners, abusers, and other “bad” people Rich people can buy anything, including life (or life of others) Donors are sources of spare parts | Black market for organs: Buyers and sellers are willing to do anything to get organs for transplant, including murder Doctors “game” (manipulate) the system or decide for themselves who gets organs Declaration of premature death/killing patients to procure organs from a patient Doctors as vultures who are eager for patients to die so their organs can be procured Recipients and/or their family members secretly hope for the death of another person so they can get their parts. Donors are disassembled coldly while their “fresh” organs are whisked away to save lives |
| Organ donors are good people | | |

The black market theme is highly prevalent in a wide range of entertainment programming, especially legal shows and daytime serials. In episodes of crime shows, including *NCIS*, doctors are portrayed as running a black market for organs. In episodes of crime shows such as *Crossing Jordan*, dead bodies are often found in alleyways or cheap motel rooms after being butchered for their organs. The medical impossibility of these scenarios and the presence of strict “checks and balances” in the organ allocation and medical systems is never acknowledged¹.

Similarly, daytime television played into public fears about organ donation. *One Life to Live*, a popular daytime serial, ran a lengthy storyline during the spring of 2004 wherein the chief surgeon of the hospital runs a black market for transplantable organs. His theft and sale of a donor heart nearly costs a much-loved character her life. Two intrepid

young characters play detective and gather evidence about the black market being run out of the hospital and are nearly murdered by the corrupt surgeon, but finally bring the surgeon to justice. Millions of women watch daytime serials regularly (Dutta-Bergman, 2006), and much has been made of the emotional involvement with the characters and their lives that these viewers feel. The extended nature of the storyline (which stretched over months) is likely to have added to the persuasive power of the portrayal of medical corruption.

The checks and balances that exist in the medical and organ allocation systems are framed as being highly suspect in a number of shows. Doctors, especially the main character in the television drama *House*, are seen “gaming the system,” that is, evaluating a patient as being sicker and in greater need of a transplant than they really are or otherwise manipulating the organ allocation system to favor patients of their choosing. Alternately, doctors are shown lying to hospital committee members about the eligibility of a patient for a transplant, thus placing their own judgment above medical realities or fairness in organ allocation. Even *The Simpsons* plays on this theme: When Marge receives a much coveted T-shirt from a television program, she is approached by the town doctor, who offers to put her at the top of the heart transplant waiting list if she will give him the T-shirt. She points out that she doesn’t need a transplant, but the doctor warns her that she might someday.

Other episodes, including those of *One Life to Live* and *Gray’s Anatomy* imply that doctors or hospitals have the power to decide who receives the organs of a deceased donor. Not surprisingly, in both storylines the organs are

¹Black markets for human organs are extremely unlikely in the United States for several reasons. First, transplant surgery is highly intricate and requires that the designated transplant recipient be surgically prepared to receive the organ at the same time the organ is being procured from the donor. Second, organs must be matched by tissue type, among other things. Black market “butchers” have no way of doing this type of matching before murdering people and then selling the organs (presumably to people who have also not tissue-typed themselves). Third, hospitals and transplant surgeons simply would not accept an undocumented organ that has not gone through The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) matching system. Loss of accreditation, criminal charges of accessory to murder, and lawsuits are among the potential consequences. However, illegal living transplants are not uncommon in other parts of the world, and efforts by the United Nations are under way to curb the trafficking in human organs. It should be noted that many Americans are among those who are going overseas to get living donor transplants from desperately poor people in a number of developing countries.

given to friends of the surgeons. In numerous other shows, characters often plead with doctors to “find” their loved one an organ. It is exceedingly rare for a program to make reference to The United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS) or the organ transplant matching system, much less to explain the criteria that place a person at the top of a transplant waiting list or even what would make a person eligible for a transplant in the first place.

The premature declaration of the death of a patient for the purpose of organ procurement is a storyline that is second in popularity only to black market storylines. Perhaps the most egregious example occurs in an episode of *Gray’s Anatomy* where a woman is discovered not to be brain dead by an intern just as she is about to be taken to an operating room to have her organs procured for transplantation. The intern (O’Malley) notifies the attending physician of the possible mistake, and both men confront the transplant surgeons. A literal tug-of-war for the body of the woman on the gurney ensues. The transplant surgeons are outraged by the possible delay and argue that the woman will be dead by the time she reaches the operating room and indignantly chide the hospital staff that six recipients have already been prepped for transplant surgery. O’Malley prevails in his request for more tests and it is discovered that the woman merely has a brain tumor and is expected to make a full recovery after surgery.

The portrayal of doctors as “vultures” who are eager for the death of potential donors is also quite common. In *Gray’s Anatomy*, a bicycle accident victim is excitedly identified by doctors as a potential donor for the chief-of-staff’s close friend. *Gray’s Anatomy* also shows interns extremely eager to participate in organ procurement surgery. Little acknowledgment of the humanity of the donors appears in these episodes. In *One Life to Live*, a patient dies on the operating table and the lead surgeon is encouraged by another to “let the patient go” and not employ aggressive procedures to revive her, all the while planning to transplant the liver into a friend.

It is even implied in an episode of *Law and Order: Trial by Jury* that doctors are so eager for organs that they would give permission for their own child’s organs to be procured even before they were dead. Part of the issue, however, is that this episode (like many others) does not recognize brain death as “real” death.² As such, episodes, including one *Law & Order*, often talk about brain-dead donors as “living” donors.

²The organ procurement field distinguishes between cardiac death and brain death for transplant purposes, with brain death being the most viable option for transplantation. In cardiac death, the heart stops beating and the body can no longer sustain life. Cardiac death is probably more closely aligned with common perceptions of death than brain death. Brain death represents the complete and total cessation of brain functions, including involuntary responses and control of the autonomic nervous system. When a patient is brain dead, he or she is placed on mechanical support to keep organs viable for transplantation. Both cardiac death and brain death represent “real death” and there is no recovery from brain death.

In summary, corruption in the medical and organ allocation systems is a very common theme that runs throughout many entertainment television storylines. It certainly is not the only negative frame for organ donation, however. Portrayals of potential or actual transplant recipients use other types of frames.

Undeserving or ungrateful recipients. Undeserving or ungrateful recipients include criminals, people who create their own health problems, or those who are not mindful of the precious gift that has been given to them and waste it by adopting unhealthy habits or not taking the required antirejection medication.

As the World Turns features a character who is a transplant recipient who continues to abuse alcohol. Another type of recipient who is framed as undeserving is one who does not take care of the organ they have already received and now needs another transplant. In *ER*, a woman who stops taking her antirejection medication tries to get listed on the transplant waiting list with no initial success; however, her father vows to find a doctor who will help her.³

Another type of undeserving recipient is one who created his or her own condition. In an episode of *Gray’s Anatomy*, an abusive, alcoholic father who has just killed someone while driving drunk receives a living transplant from his reluctant teenage son. In *House*, a bulimic woman whose condition led to organ failure would not have been eligible to be added to the transplant waiting list; however, Dr. House decides to lie to the hospital committee to have her listed.

Cold-blooded, manipulative (potential or actual) recipients are also featured in some storylines. In *All My Children*, a long-lost half-brother searches for his sibling for the sole purpose of getting a living kidney transplant. Similarly, in an episode of the popular drama *Lost*, a character reveals that he was manipulated by his birth parents to donate a kidney to his birth father and that after the transplant his father was no longer interested in having a relationship. *Medium*, a show about a psychic, featured a storyline where she helps a woman find her birth family so that she can get the living transplant that she needs, implying that (at least some) recipients want to make contact with family members only because they want something from them.

One interesting twist on the deservingness theme is its application to donors rather than recipients. As will be discussed in a subsequent section, donors are often framed as good people. In some shows, including an episode of *Law & Order*, donors are seen as not being good enough to be a donor and their gift of life must somehow be revoked. In this particular episode, a murderer is killed by the mother

³The decision to add a patient to a transplant waiting list is made by a hospital committee, not a single doctor, and is made based on a list of medical and other criteria. This episode also plays on the notion that one doctor alone can have the power to determine who does or does not receive a transplant.

of his victim, but her plan of revenge is complicated by the fact that the murderer becomes an organ donor. The idea that the murderer will somehow “live on” enrages her and she becomes determined to kill all of the recipients.

Living donors are sometimes seen as desiring the power to “play God,” with the worst of consequences. In two separate episodes of *Law & Order*, a living donor decides that his recipient(s) is no longer deserving of his “gift” and murders the recipient(s). In both episodes, the living donors locate desperate potential recipients on the Internet and make judgments based on their personal stories who is most deserving of life. When those recipients’ life plans change (one woman gives up her dream of becoming a legal advocate for children to become a wife and mother), the donors feel that they are entitled to kill them “because they would have died without [the donor] anyway.” Even *Malcolm in the Middle*, a comedy, highlights how living donors can be perceived as “playing God” because they make a decision about whether a family member will live or die.

The rich and powerful can buy anything (including organs). This frame is not dissimilar to the black market theme in that organs are bought by the wealthy. *All My Children’s* amateur detectives accused a corrupt surgeon of auctioning off organs to the highest bidder. Characters in both *Law & Order* and *House* make comments about how easy it was for Mickey Mantle to get an organ transplant, with the implication that Mantle was an undeserving recipient whose transplant was made possible by his wealth and position. *Days of Our Lives* ran an extended storyline where the child of two of the characters needs a transplant. Corporate sponsorship enables the development of a Web site where the child’s plight is publicized, an advantage that is certainly not enjoyed by the majority of people on the transplant waiting list.

However, not all rich people take advantage of their position. A comedy, *Just Shoot Me*, featured a story where a main character dates a powerful politician, only to find out that he is married to a woman who needs a transplant. He bemoans the fact that his wife refuses to accept preferential treatment, which nevertheless implies that preferential treatment was a readily available option.

Donors are only sources of spare parts. There are two tertiary frames that exist in this category: Recipients and/or their family members secretly hope for the death of another person so they can get their “parts;” and donors are disassembled coldly for their “fresh” organs. In an episode of *Gray’s Anatomy*, a young boy accuses his mother of praying for the death of someone else’s child so that he could live instead. His mother does not deny his accusation; instead, she turns and hangs her head.

An episode of *Yes, Dear* (titled “Spare Parts”) has a main character, Jimmy, pitching a movie script where people are

cloned so that each person would have a source of spare parts in the event they need an organ transplant. In addition, a romantic exchange between Grace and her surgeon husband on the popular comedy *Will and Grace* has the doctor telling Grace that he really should leave for a scheduled transplant surgery but that he could stay a while longer because “the kidney’s in the cooler.” In this type of exchange, organs are treated more like groceries than as a gift from a human donor for the purpose of saving the lives of others.

Gray’s Anatomy frequently frames donors as simply sources of spare parts. When Christine, a hospital intern, tries to convince a boy to accept a second heart transplant, she encourages him to not think about the donor but to focus instead on the medical miracle made possible by transplant surgeons. In fact, donors are rarely portrayed as human beings, except when there is confusion over whether the person is brain dead or whether brain death is indeed “real” death (which was the case in episodes of *ER* and *Gray’s Anatomy*). One exception to this occurs in an episode of *As the World Turns*. The mother of a young transplant recipient goes to a hospital chapel to pray for the family of the donor who saved her son’s life.

In a profound act of rebellion against viewing donors as sources of spare parts, a teenage boy murders his sister in an episode of *CSI*. His motive for the murder is to protect his sister from the suffering from being subjected to additional living transplant surgeries that are needed to save his life.

In summary, the metaframe of moral corruption in society and in medical institutions is used all too frequently to portray organ donation. In fact, negative frames dominate entertainment programming that features organ donation storylines. There are few programs or episodes that feature organ donation that do not use one of these frames. These exceptions, however, correspond to other myths about donation. For example, several shows, including *Ghost Whisperer*, *Spin City*, *The Simpsons*, *All My Children*, and *Killer Instinct* feature storylines where a dead donor’s characteristics change the personality traits of the recipients. Sometimes the spiritual change has a positive valence: Vicki on *One Life to Live* becomes “one heart” with her dead husband; a woman falls in love with her dead husband’s heart recipient because he becomes so much like him. On the other hand, on *The Simpsons* and *Killer Instinct*, transplant recipients turn into murderers because their donors were serial killers.

Metaframe: Donors Are Good People

As mentioned, positive portrayals of organ donation in the media are quite rare. However, it is clear that there is some sentiment in entertainment media that organ donors (or people who have declared their donor status on their license) are good people. In a movie called *Gang Related*, a cop questions a tough stripper about a crime. While looking at her license, he notices that she is an organ donor and

tells her that he is surprised to find that she actually “has a heart of gold.” Elaine, a main character on the long-running comedy *Seinfeld*, asks Jerry to look at the driver’s license of a man she has met. He notes approvingly that the man is a donor. Similarly, *The Drew Carey Show* featured a storyline where Drew tries to make sense of why a twist of fate saved his life but took the life of a good man instead. A long list of the dead man’s good deeds concludes with the fact that he was an organ donor.

This characterization of donors as good people can even help to vindicate suspects in crime shows. In *CSI*, a dead man thought to have attempted murder is found to have an organ donor card in his wallet. This is viewed as evidence that attempted murder was somehow out of character for the man and other explanations are sought for his death.

By contrast, people who decline to be organ donors are framed as selfish. On an episode of *NCIS*, a main character worries about the health of his children after getting a call from a hospital and half-jokingly speculates that one might need an organ transplant. His partner tells him that he is simply too selfish to be an organ donor.

Despite these examples, there is clearly a dearth of portrayals or even mere mentions of organ donors as human beings. In addition, it is interesting that these positive portrayals of donors are actually portrayals of *potential* donors. That is, the characterization of a person who would be willing to donate their organs is that of a good person (in keeping with findings that have shown that most people are in favor of organ donation). However, most storylines pick up once the decision to donate has been made. There are no storylines that focus on the decision to donate once death has been declared, or that focus on the life or plight of the donor. Rather, the focus is kept on recipients and donors are once again relegated to “spare parts.” The few mentions that exist, however, do indicate some sentiment that the willingness to donate is a sign of a being a good person.

DISCUSSION

This study has yielded often disturbing results. Although both print and television news has largely focused on reporting (often emotional or sensationalized) facts surrounding an organ donation event or controversy (Feeley & Vincent, 2007; Morgan, Harrison, Chewing, et al., 2005), entertainment media have often exploited myths about organ donation. As researchers and professionals in the area of organ donation, we often wonder where members of the public get “crazy ideas” about organ donation like the existence of a black market, the corruption of the organ allocation system, and the untrustworthiness of doctors. The answer may have been quite literally in front of us for years.

So, in the absence of other information, what does the public learn from entertainment media about organ donation? First, they learn not to trust the institutions that govern

the medical and organ allocation systems. These are institutions in which doctors can make specious decisions about who lives and who dies, where the rich, powerful, and well-connected receive transplants while more deserving people languish on transplant waiting lists. They learn that doctors are more interested in dissecting potential organ donors than in saving their lives.

The tension between these negative frames and the positive framing of organ donors as “good people” is striking. From entertainment media framing of organ donation, it would appear that the desire to be a good person is in direct conflict with good sense and a strong survival instinct. After all, what rational person would entrust one’s life to a corrupt system with an inherent interest in one’s death?

The question about whether this type of media framing actually makes a difference to public opinion about organ donation is probably obvious at this point. Although definitive experimental audience response research needs to be conducted, a set of qualitative studies may provide some important clues. For example, Maloney and Walker (2002) found that focus group discussions about organ donation reflected the themes and frames of the media identified in a previous study (Maloney & Walker, 2000). Similarly, Morgan, Harrison, Afifi, et al. (2005) studied interpersonal interactions of family dyads as they discussed organ donation. They discovered that people who did not favor organ donation frequently cited what they had seen on television (sometimes reciting entire plotlines of an entertainment television episode) as evidence for their negative opinions. Although participants acknowledged that they knew that entertainment television represented fictional accounts, this concession was followed by the assertion that “there’s always a kernel of truth.”

Indeed, the “kernel of truth” perception is exacerbated by the format of medical and legal shows. The scripts of these shows use technically accurate terminology, creating a sense of greater credibility. In addition, many storylines are based on real-life stories that audience members can easily recognize from news coverage. In fact, *Law & Order’s* tag line is, “Stories Ripped from the Headlines,” which further promotes the perception that what audiences are seeing is based on fact. Even though disclaimers sometimes appear just before the closing credits, we would wager that these disclaimers have little impact after people have just been absorbed in a gripping narrative and witnessed (with their own eyes) people being murdered for their organs by criminals or doctors.

Limitations

This study has important limitations that warrant mention. First, we were able to track only four channels that air entertainment programming. Cable television rebroadcasts shows in syndication for years, multiplying the number of times each episode might air. Second, a great deal of entertainment programming airs on highly popular cable channels,

including HBO and Showtime. We have identified over 20 movies with organ donation storylines (virtually all of which play on myths and misconceptions about organ donation), many of which are aired on cable channels. Thus, the public has exposure to far more entertainment programming featuring organ donation storylines or subplots than can be represented here.

Third, not every entertainment program episode mentioning organ donation fits the frames identified in this manuscript. Some episodes only make jokes about organ donation or make a simple passing reference to organ donation. For example, an episode of *The Family Guy* features a storyline where a family tries to raise money for a neighborhood kid who needs a liver transplant. The characters make minor jokes throughout the story about transplants and the child's chances of survival. In *the Gilmore Girls*, a mom begs her friend not to go into a house being renovated, likening it to bursting into an operating room where a heart transplant is taking place, exposing him to the image of a person's heart beating outside of his chest. Although the image may highlight the frightening aspects and "unnatural" nature of organ transplantation, it does not fit any of the frames identified in this study.

Finally, we identified one theme (previously discussed in this article) that corresponds to the fear that transplant recipients will acquire the personality traits of their donors. For example, an episode of *Spin City* makes much of the fact the mayor discovers that he is dating his mother's heart recipient. The most common "trait transference" storyline involves killers' organs altering the character of recipients. This myth does not correspond to the frames identified in this study, but certainly warrants attention.

CONCLUSION

This study is the most comprehensive study of the framing of organ donation in the media conducted to date. The assistance of ShadowTV as a tool to systematically identify all entertainment programs that feature organ donation themes or plots ensures that we have gathered a comprehensive set of materials for analysis. Although the findings of this study demonstrate that the framing of organ donation is primarily negative and highlights moral and material corruption in the medical and organ allocation systems, the situation is certainly not hopeless. Both Greenfield (1988) and Matesanz (2002) point out that the media may be our best hope of educating the public about organ donation. "The best way of influencing public opinion is the media. . . . Misconceptions must be addressed openly, and at the same time emphasizing and highlighting the positive and life-saving aspects of organ donation and transplantation (Matesanz, 2002, p. 988)."

There are two key recommendations that are offered as a result of this research. First, the organ procurement

community (e.g., individual Organ Procurement Organizations (OPOs) and the Coalition for Donation, which conducts national public education about organ donation) as well as government agencies that support organ donation (Human Resources Services Agency, Division of Transplantation) should attempt to work more closely with the entertainment industry to insert prodonation storylines into television programming.⁴ Similarly, publicizing the availability of organ donation experts to all Hollywood film studios may help to ensure that more accurate portrayals of organ donation and transplantation are included in major motion pictures.

Conversely, greater assertiveness may be necessary to counter inaccurate portrayals of organ donation in the mass media. A public relations firm may need to be engaged to assist with this function, or this task might be taken on as part of the Coalition on Donation's mission. Just as AIDS and cancer activists demanded that the media cease feeding public fears about these diseases, we also should be consistently and persistently objecting to the sensationalized portrayal of organ donation. The consequence of playing into public fears about organ donation is that the public may become less willing to donate organs, which in turn will cost people on transplant waiting lists their lives.

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⁴As of this writing, Hollywood, Health, and Society has been engaged to conduct outreach with television writers and producers. Thus far, they have been able to provide consulting services for two episodes of entertainment programs.

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