Issue and research questions

This study explores cyberbullying coverage in the US mainstream media through content analysis. Bullying can be defined as aggressive, typically repetitive behavior among school-aged children that conveys a real or perceived power imbalance (Pepler & Craig, 2009). Likewise, cyberbullying is bullying that takes place using electronic technology: cell-phones, computers and social media (Vandebosch & VanCleemput, 2009). Present research suggests that cyberbullying can be more insidious than offline bullying because it is more difficult to escape; it can take place in addition to regular bullying, providing bullies with unlimited access to the victim, a wider audience to witness the humiliation and a persistent digital record (Katz, 2012). Cyberbullying has negative effects on school performance and children's self-esteem, which can later result in substance abuse and other forms of maladaptive behavior (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2011). Most recent statistics available from the National Center for Education Statistics show an increasing trend in the number of cyberbullying cases ("National Center for Education Statistics, 2013").

This research implements a content analysis of US mainstream print and TV coverage to explore how cyberbullying has been framed from 2006-2013, **primarily** in terms of who and what causes cyberbullying (causal responsibility) and which individuals, institutions and policies are responsible for taking care of the issue (treatment responsibility). Despite the rising frequency of this phenomenon, to this author's best knowledge, apart from several studies examining individual bullying cases (Ryalls, 2012; Thom et al., 2011; Batacharya, 2004) a content-analysis of this kind has not yet been conducted. A content analysis of cyberbullying coverage would reveal which aspects of cyberbullying garnered media attention, which is an important indicator of how the public might come to understand the phenomenon. By demonstrating ways in which frames can influence public opinion, literature from the field of communication plays an important role in explaining how the public can perceive this new phenomenon, and which prevention and intervention policies it might support.

Of particular interest when it comes to causal is responsibility is the framing of **technology.** Is blame attributed to the internet, smart phones and social media? Cyberbullying literature shows that when parents blame technology they tend to restrict children's access to various platforms, which does not solve the problem (Katz, 2012). On the contrary, it increases the likelihood that the child will not speak to the parent about a cyberbullying incident for the fear of being denied access to technology, which tends to aggravate the problem. Parents in the audience might resort to such restrictive practices under the influence of framing that puts the blame on technology.

Secondly, this study analyzes "issue frames"- those that are specific to literature on cyberbullying, with the following research question: which aspects of cyberbullying that are discussed in literature are covered in the media? For instance, does media emphasize that cyberbullying can be more dangerous than regular bullying because of anonymity? Or is there a mention of the fact that it is not clear who is responsible for treating cyberbullying incidents when they happen outside of school? Is cyberbullying framed as a harmless issue (e.g. "words can do no harm") or as a serious issue that can result in depression or suicide?

Theoretical framework used in this study is that of "episodic and thematic framing" (Iyengar, 1990). Episodic framing is triggered by individual cyberbullying incidents; it attributes causal responsibility to individuals involved in these incidents or to technology; and is overall a

simplistic way of covering complex issues. Thematic frames, on the other hand, would not be triggered by incidents and would analyze cyberbullying as an issue with multiple factors that cause it; and examining social, cultural or political complexities of treating the problem.

Methodological framework

Relying on FACTIVA database, the content analysis included the entire population of print stories and TV transcripts where any of the following search terms was present in the entire story (not just headlines and lead paragraphs): "cyber-bull* OR "cyberbull*" OR "cyber bull*" OR "online bullying" OR "electronic bullying" OR "web bullying." The study spans dates between January 1st, 2006 and December 31, 2012. Such choice includes dates before the cases that garnered a lot of media attention had happened (for instance the case of suicide of Megan Meier, triggered by a cyberbullying incident, which happened in October 2006, but received media attention only after subsequent court case in 2007 and 2008; and the case of suicide of Tyler Clementi in 2010). The goal with such sampling was to gain insight into how coverage of cyberbullying might have changed in response to these cyberbullying-related incidents with tragic denouements. A total of 775 stories were analyzed, excluding duplicates. In print: 266 articles for the following newspapers: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today, which were chosen as representative of the US mainstream print media based on previous influential media studies that considered them as agenda setters (Entman, 2004; Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, 2007); as well as based on their high circulation. As for the TV population, the search yielded a total of 509 TV transcripts, excluding duplicates. ABC, NBC and CBS represented the network channels; FOX and CNN channels represented the cable news. The unit of analysis was the entire story or TV transcript. Inter-coder reliability was conducted with another coder and it was above 0.8 for every variable.

Findings and significance

Results show that cyberbullying coverage is primarily episodic in nature: triggered by cyberbullying incidents that garnered media attention because they resulted in suicides or court cases. There is little thematic discussion about social and cultural factors that may be influencing cyberbullying. TV coverage is more episodic than print coverage. Technology, however, is not cited as a causal factor behind cyberbullying –only 7% of the total number of stories frame causal responsibility in this way, which is a welcomed finding, given the above referenced caveats in cyberbullying literature. Coverage tends to attribute blame to individuals involved in cyberbullying incidents: 26% of print and 44% of TV stories do so. Factors outside of individual blame receive relatively negligible attention: only 3.1% of the total number of stories framed parents and family values as causes behind cyberbullying and anonymity as a contributing factor was discussed in 3.9% of stories; such findings indicate a limited breadth of the debate on cyberbullying. Discussion on treatment responsibility is of equally limited scope, focusing on parental responsibility and resolution of cases in courts. When it comes to issue frames (specific to cyberbullying), findings reveal that cyberbullying is most frequently framed as a serious issue that results in depression and suicide, and not as a harmless issue. All other issue frames were present in less than 10% of the stories. According to framing theory, frames can influence public understanding of this relatively new phenomenon; a narrow scope of media debate focused on individual blame can result in public support for intervention policies centered around punishing individuals, rather than on initiatives that use technology for educational purposes.

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