

**An Overview of  
Altruism and Media**

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**Abstract:**

While violence and the mass media is a topic aggressively delved into by researchers in many fields, altruism has been less covered both in general in recent years as well as in relation to the study of mass media. This paper provides an overview of altruism and establishes three topics of interest to media psychology and future research: media as a tool of altruism, media representation of altruism, and media as altruism.

## **Altruism and Media**

Altruism became a topic of interest in the social sciences in the late 1960s, a late bloomer compared to its counterpart aggression, which was a highly covered psychological topic by 1928 (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985). Current research on altruism includes topics such as corporate marketing through altruistic causes (King, 2001), the importance of altruistic organizations (Healy, 2004), and changes in Western language away from altruistic terminology (Bahr & Bahr, 2001). There seems to be no research directly linking altruism with the media, however, and that is a topic this paper will broach.

### *1.0 Altruism*

The scope of altruism varies by theorist, based on “naïve theories concerning human nature and morality” (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985, p.1). While the foundation of theories is similar, differences arise in the division of what is categorized as altruistic behavior based on what is done and what is intended; time span to realization of the consequences; gross gains or losses versus net gains or losses; and physical or psychological effects (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985). Early theorists mainly concentrated on whether altruism existed in humans as a learned behavior or a trait (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985), and whether altruism could truly exist in humans when taking into consideration self-interest (Monroe, 1996).

Around the 1980s a revolution took place in the field, accepting altruism as part of human nature and replacing the question of self-interest with new topics such as the altruistic personality and motivation for altruistic action (Piliavin & Charng, 1990).

Arguments against the inclusion of self-interest in altruistic theories cited other human characteristics such as love and ideas of justice as examples similar to altruism that could not be explained by self-interest (Monroe, 1996). Monroe (1996) argues that assuming self-interest limits understanding of altruism and states that how an individual sees one's self in relation to others is the critical aspect to the study in altruism. Following this revolution in altruistic theory, four main criteria for defining altruism under the modern motivational theories are the intent to help another, presence of risk or sacrifice to do so, lack of external reward, and behavior being voluntary (Oliner & Oliner, 1988).

An earlier structures for defining altruism that's limitations tie to modern research is Darwin's biological perspective (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985). Darwin defines altruism as an act that helps others strictly at one's own expense (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985). According to evolutionary theory this self-sacrifice of personal fitness for the benefit of another should become extinct as the trait is bred out (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985). While the term "sacrifice" is not popular in current Western societies, with the rise of language instead emphasizing the individual, studies have shown that altruistic actions remain active concerns of Americans (Bahr & Bahr, 2001). The survival of altruism, despite evolutionary predictions and in contrast to Darwin's theory, is credited to the rise and strength of social groups (Lindzey & Aronson, 1985). When one member of a social group makes a personal sacrifice for the good of the entire group, the group benefits and therefore the altruism of the individual becomes a positive trait to that tribe rather than one to be weeded out.

An example of a group-benefiting altruistic act is volunteering. Voluntary work can be investigate with a combination of early theories and modern motivational

questions in that it could be carried out for a self-serving purpose (an internal feeling or making one look good to others), for purely altruistic motives, or a combination of both, and these motives could be positively or negatively linked together (Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine, 2004). A study by Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine (2004) aimed to determine if thermal climate and national wealth had an influence on volunteering based on previous research showing that “national wealth appears to influence social relationships differently in cold, comfortable, and hot zones of the earth” (p. 63). They concluded that regions with uncomfortably hot or cold climates with high national wealth had an especially positive link between self-serving and altruistic motivations (Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine, 2004). Wealthy and lower income regions with comfortable climates did not show a relationship between self-serving and altruistic motivations, but lower income regions with uncomfortably cold climates showed a negative link (Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine, 2004). However, “in depressed countries where the financial resources are minimal and the climate demands maximal, voluntary workers seem to subordinate their self-serving reasons to their altruistic reasons for doing unpaid work” (Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine, 2004, p. 78).

Volunteerism also ties into Healy’s (2004) theory that altruism has become institutionalized. With modern groups comprised of paid personnel working consistently to encourage altruistic behavior ranging from donations to activism, Healy (2004) points out that the large number of non-profit and activist organizations in our society do not merely benefit from altruism, they promote it by organizing opportunities for altruistic actions to be taken. Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine’s (2004) study found that most volunteer work fit into the categories of “assisting elderly or handicapped, acting as an

aide or assistant to a paid employee, baby-sitting, fund-raising, and serving on committees (Clary & Snyder, 1991, p.128)” (Van de Vliert, Huang, and Levine, 2004, p. 69). Each of these activities can be arranged, and is promoted, by organizations. High school clubs organize groups to assist in retirement homes, universities require internships which often translate as voluntary work as an assistant to a paid employee, Red Cross and Girl Scout troops train future baby sitters, and almost all organizations have fund raising activities and committees for members to serve on.

Due to the malleability of humans and the interpretations of altruism, almost anything can be seen as altruistic or the opposite, aggressive (Lindzey and Aronson, 1985). For instance, a movie depicting numerous explosions and gun-fights could be categorized as violent and therefore aggressive. However, if the main character is a “good guy” fighting the “bad guys” for a noble purpose and to save lives – does this aggression then become altruism? With most action movies containing a build up of the sacrifices made by the good guys to battle for the benefit of others, is Hollywood promoting aggressive altruism? As stated by Bahr & Bahr (2001), “Often the value of altruistic behaviors seems to depend not upon the activity itself ... but on whether the activity is valued by the wider society” (p. 1255).

## *2.0 Media*

While research has shown media does not necessarily change people’s attitudes or persuade them easily, the “CNN effect” of the media may be responsible for telling them what to think *about* (Fiorina, Peterson & Johnson, np). As a result, research on the link between violence and the media has become a popular topic of discussion even outside of

the academic arena. Recently in Orlando, FL, a person arrested for murder claimed the idea came from watching the movie *Wonderland* (Caldwell, 2004). Examples such as this and the desire to protect our lives from the violence portrayed in the media has led to much debate on the links between violence and the media, from video games to news programming. With exposure to media tied to “obesity, poor academic achievement, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder” (Primack, 2004, p. 1), this seems an appropriate venue for discussion.

Perhaps the most shocking is an example of the media causing post-traumatic stress disorder on large scales when “after the events of September 11, 2001, one study showed that increased television viewing was more strongly linked with symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder than any other factor, including actually having been in the World Trade Center on that day” (Primack, 2004, p.2). As the world’s most violent media (Primack, 2004), how then could the United States media possibly fit with the topic of altruism?

In linking altruism to media, I find three categories of interest to be explored. How is media used as a tool of altruism? What effect does media representation have on altruism? And can media itself be considered a form of altruism?

### *2.1 Media as a Tool of Altruism*

One recent and extreme example of altruism furthered by the media comes from the internet. By Thursday, December 30, 2004, more than \$20 million had been donated to the relief efforts of just five organizations for the survivors of the tsunami that hit 11 countries the previous Sunday (Gonsalves, 2004). The five non-profit organizations

included in this figure are Catholic Relief Services, Doctors Without Borders, American Red Cross Metropolitan Atlanta Chapter, U.S. Funds for UNICEF, and World Vision (Gonsalves, 2004). As only a few of the groups collecting for the relief efforts online, the total amount of relief funds donated by that time must have been far higher. Google placed a link on its home page to a list of online information and donation sites, and the Sri Lankan government's Distaster Management Unit set up a website of its own to take donations directly. Amazon.com collected funds through its site for the Red Cross which exceeded \$15 million as of January 9, 2005 (amazon.com, np).

The donations received on December 30, 2004, broke a record for UNICEF previously held by December 31, 2003 (Gonsalves, 2004). The 2003 high donor turnout was attributed to last minute donations for tax breaks (Gonsalves, 2004). Considering the timing of the tsunami, also at the end of a fiscal year, I wonder if this self-serving benefit was also influential to the large donations made for tsunami relief. Had the tsunami hit one month later, would as many people have donated to the relief efforts? Or was the tax break unexpected by many of the donors at the time they made the donations? This answer would need to be made on an individual basis, of course, and as some theorists point out – does it matter if there is a reward, especially unforeseen, when the end result is beneficial to others (Monroe, 1996; Oliner & Oliner, 1988)?

In addition to the popularization of an altruistic cause by the media, many organizations produce their own media, such as newsletters, to keep interested individuals current with their activities. Knowing how to get information to the press, in the form of press releases and events, is another important tool of altruistic organizations that want to be in the public eye. From antislavery campaigns in the nineteenth century,

the Civil Rights movement, and women's lib, to gay rights and environmental campaigns, many altruistic movements are found in the form of activism (Seidman, 2002). These movements are fought through the use of, and in the eye of, the media.

Activists, volunteers, and one-time donors can all be influenced into action by the media, or the use of the media. Where the complaints of being followed by the media and becoming the topic of gossip magazines were once the tie between fame and the media, now the media's spotlight is being used as a tool to popularize personal goals and forward altruistic activities. Celebrities get on stage at concerts, award ceremonies, and talk shows to voice their opinions. Recent examples of this type of celebrity media use are Sean Penn, Michael Moore, and the Dixie Chicks. The Dixie Chicks' controversial statements about President Bush led to Clear Channel censoring their music from all channels they owned. Are media uses of censorship, such as Clear Channel's, to promote a goal they saw as beneficial to the state of the country altruistic? The company was voluntarily sacrificing content for the concept of a greater good. The struggle between two forces using the media for opposite altruistic goals leads to the question: Is all altruism good?

## *2.2 Media Representation of Altruism*

As well as the internet providing a method of donating, other forms of media also play a large role in the organization of altruistic groups. As seen in the example of donations to tsunami relief, people are made aware of issues through the media and are also able to become active. However, in media's representation of altruistic individuals we are presented with overviews of who to think of as altruistic but often left without the

details that would enable us to decide if this altruism was self-serving, unselfish, or a combination of both—a prime example of the aforementioned “CNN effect.” Do we hear more about rich philanthropists, who may be donating to charity to lower their tax bracket, than we do about those who donate their time and effort for smaller causes? And in general, how much of this optimistic news is even a part of the daily media programming?

Altruistic acts are often painted as unusual and heroic events by the media. However, based on popular interest in activist causes, the number of existing altruistic organizations, and the survey cited by Bahr & Bahr (2001) showing Americans rate duty and altruism with a high level of interest – is it really an unusual occurrence?

In the entertainment area of media, there are a sparse number of films and books highlighting true stories of whistleblowers, volunteers, or activists and the struggles they go through for the benefit of others in comparison to the action-packed, aggressive altruism films. Yet these films’ main characters *are* still aiming to help others. Should these films be counted among media representations of altruism?

### *2.3 Media as Altruism*

“A common theme running through all major religions of the world is that human beings should concern themselves with the well-being of other people. When societies find it necessary to establish explicit religious rules to ensure desirable helping motives and behaviors, one can reasonably surmise that there is a natural tendency for people to behave selfishly (Schroeder et al, a995).” (Van de Vliert, Hunag and Levine, 2004, p. 69)

Before its repeal in 1987, the FCC had explicit rules ensuring that political candidates received equal time on television stations as well as requiring the stations to provide “balanced political viewpoints” (Fiorina, Peterson & Johnson, np). Before the Telecommunications Act of 1996 further deregulated the industry (Fiorina, Peterson & Johnson, np), the media was forced into helping motives and behaviors by the FCC regulations. Does the removal of the legislation hint that the media itself has become less self-serving and no longer needs regulation to promote altruism, or that altruistic motives are no longer expected of the media? Could the media itself be an altruistic organization?

The newspaper publisher’s original intent was to inform the public of important and possibly controversial issues of the time (McChesney, 2002). Ground breaking reports were achieved with in-depth often time-consuming investigation into topics. Under-cover reporting and strong documentaries were the highlight of journalism.

With the shift in media to an industry aimed at entertaining rather than informing the public, our news corporations now find themselves competing with Hollywood, the music industry, and video games for advertising dollars (McChesney, 2002). The old standard has been replaced with cost-cutting techniques. When the news cannot outdo the entertainment business (or is a sister company under the same owner), it simply enfold this business into the content — making our CNN top entertainment story a review of Outcast’s latest CD and music video. These changes have led to mergers on mass scales and resulted in industry control by a small number of corporations.

Despite shifts in the industry, the idea of hard-working, under-paid reporters fighting to bring the truth to the masses could bring one to entertain the idea that working for the media is a self-sacrificing endeavor. If the same talents could be used for a higher

salary, does working for less money constitute enough of a sacrifice for others to be altruistic? What motivates these individuals to become journalists, sometimes risking death to bring a story to the public? Are independent media sources more altruistic than corporate media sources?

On the other hand, if working for less money to promote a cause is altruistic, is working for more money on a cause one does not believe in, or believes may be harmful to others, aggressive or violent? Are aggression and altruism still polar opposites in this case? Or does egoism now become the opposite of altruism?

There are many areas to be addressed in the area of altruism and media. With so much emphasis being placed on violence and the media, it seems a balance could be attained by finding out more about the role of altruism in the media. Similar to optimism and pessimism, both sides have their pros and cons to be fleshed out.

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