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Communication Research published online 6 January 2011
DOI: 10.1177/0093650210387124

Communication Research
XX(X) 1–17
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DOI: 10.1177/0093650210387124
http://crx.sagepub.com

Effects of Popular Exemplars in Television News

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Abstract

Common people that are apparently randomly selected by journalists to illustrate a news story (popular exemplars) have a substantial effect on what the audience think about the issue. This effect may be partly due to the mere fact that popular exemplars attract attention and act as attention commanders just like many other speaking sources in the news. Yet, popular exemplars' effects extend well beyond that of other talking sources. Due to their similarity, trustworthiness, and the vividness of their account, popular exemplars have significantly more impact than experts that are being interviewed or, in particular, than politicians that are quoted in the news. We show this drawing on an internet-based experiment that uses fake television news items as stimuli and that systematically compares the effect of these talking sources in the news. We also find that taking into account preexisting attitudes changes the findings substantially. The effects are more robust and yield a more nuanced picture of what type of exemplars have what kind of effect on what type of public.

Keywords

exemplification, media effects, experiment, popular exemplars, media sources

Although politicians, spin doctors, movement spokespersons, and corporate communication specialists are wearing themselves out to get access to the news, journalists seem to be in love with just about everyone else. The use of normal people in television news reports, the "men and women on the street," "vox pops" or "exemplars," has become common journalistic practice (Arpan, 2009; Daschmann & Brosius, 1999). People without any specific representative function or expertise who appear to be randomly picked—we will refer

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to them as "popular exemplars" throughout this text—frequently appear in the news to give their opinion or tell their story. Gibson, Gan, Hill, Hoffman, and Seigler (cited in Zillmann & Brosius, 2000) investigated the prevalence of exemplification in the U.S. television news and found that half of all news reports contained at least one exemplar. And the trend seems to be upward. In Belgium, the share of popular exemplars in the main newscasts has grown from 27% to 37% of all speaking actors during the 2003-2007 period (De Swert, Walgrave, Hooghe, Uce, & Hardy, 2008). The same study showed that in France, Canada, Turkey, and the Netherlands, the balance has shifted even more toward common people, whereas in the U.S., Ireland, and Germany, television news is featuring only slightly less common people. In a sample of 11 countries, only Norway proved to have a consistently low amount of popular exemplars in its main television newscasts.

The fact that popular exemplars are increasingly used raises questions about their effects on the audience. Are these interviews with common people just illustrating a story and making it more attractive for the public? Or, are popular exemplars influential and do they have an effect on what the audience thinks about the topic the "ordinary" source is talking about? The available experimental work in communications research clearly points in the latter direction. Popular exemplars have effects on what people think about an issue.

This study speaks to the exemplification literature and makes three contributions. Other than most extant studies, we focus on the effects that popular exemplars on *television* have on the viewers. Second, we do not compare popular exemplars with base-rate information but with *other sources* that give their opinion on the same issue; this allows us to look at the specific effect of the *popular* exemplar. Third, previous studies often did not measure the *preexisting attitudes* of the subjects about the issue; we do and can assess the relative contribution of the popular exemplar treatment on top of what people thought before treatment.

The study aims to answer two basic research questions: (a) does the use of exemplars in television news have an effect on the opinion of the viewers about the issue at stake?; (b) to what extent is the popular exemplar-effect different from the effects of interviews with other sources like politicians or experts? To tackle these questions, we draw on an internet-based experiment in Belgium in the framework of which respondents were treated with six different TV-news items containing ordinary people, experts, and politicians giving different statements in different configurations.

Why and How Do Exemplars Affect the Public?

Exemplification theory is a well-established theoretical field in mass communication (Zillmann, 1999, 2002; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). News coverage does not only provide base-rate information (e.g., general statements, authoritative and reliable information, facts and statistics, etc.). Base-rate information is usually systematic and representative (of reality) but it lacks vividness and clarity. It is relatively difficult for the journalist to bring and it is difficult for the viewer to absorb (Daschmann & Brosius, 1999). Therefore, news often also contains other types of information: individual cases/statements (examples or exemplars) that are used to illustrate the scope of the phenomenon described in the news

story (Zillmann, Gibson, Sundar, & Perkins, 1996). Exemplars should be seen as case reports used to represent characteristics typical of a group of events (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). An exemplar statement thus suggests that a whole group of people supports this stance or shares this experience. As mentioned above, this process of exemplification (Zillmann, 1999, 2002) and the effects of the use of exemplars have been well-studied over the recent two decades (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Arpan, 2009; Aust & Zillmann, 1996; Brosius, 1996, 2003; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Daschmann, 2001, 2004; Daschmann & Brosius, 1999; Gibson & Zillmann, 1998; Hu & Sundar, 2007; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Zillmann et al., 1996; Zillmann, Perkins, & Sundar, 1992). The effects of exemplars in these studies are defined in different ways, ranging from the perceived news credibility over news persuasiveness to (perceived) public opinion. The main conclusions of these studies were that (a) the use of exemplars has an effect on public opinion formation and that (b) this effect is much stronger than the effect of base-rate information such as statistics or official information. Even if the latter kind of information has greater validity and is more representative, people tend to rely more on individual illustrative stories to form their opinion (Daschmann, 2000; Daschmann & Brosius, 1999).

One important difference between our study and the majority of existing research on exemplars is that we do not focus on perceived public opinion, but rather on people's personal opinion: The former is a cognitive effect (how do people think the majority of the public thinks), whereas the latter is a persuasive effect. Though existing research has focused mainly on how exemplars, which exemplify public opinion, alter the perception of the public, the persuasive effect of exemplars should not be overlooked. Perry and Gonzenbach (1997) tested the effects of exemplification versus base-rate information on perceived and personal opinion. Their findings indicate that both perceived and personal opinion vary positively with the distribution of exemplars in the news; combining conflicting base-rate information and exemplars in the same item, Brosius and Bathelt (1994) found that people's own opinion moved away from base-rate information. As such, we do have reason to believe that exemplification cannot only have effects on perceived opinion, but can actually have persuasive effects on personal opinion as well. Furthermore, in the studies we mentioned the direction of the effect was equal for the two dependent variables (perceived and personal opinion). As Perry and Gonzenbach argue, effects on personal opinion are quite consequential, since we are dealing with persuasive effects.

Why do exemplars affect the audience? Media content in general and in particular the input of media sources featured in news content can cause changes in the receivers' level of knowledge and their perceptions. As Graber (1988) argues, televised news is highly credible and authentic because people trust what they see more than what they hear. In Graber's research, respondents stated that the visuals allowed them to form more complete and accurate impressions of people as well as events. Visualizing people as interviewees in a news report is therefore bound to enhance media effects and persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Speaking news sources work as attention commanders and facilitate an effect on the audience's evaluation of the subject the news source is talking about. Consequently, the effects of a message that is mediated by a visible news source are larger than the effects caused by an unmediated message. Gibson and Zillmann (1998, 1993) find

this effect even for direct citations compared to paraphrasing in newspaper coverage. The fact that speaking sources in the news have a greater impact than base-rate information has, in our opinion, been quite well-documented. We are mainly interested here in looking at the effects that different types of sources have on opinion formation. So, we expect differences depending on the *type* of news source being interviewed in the news. The source credibility theory states that the more credible the source is, the more likely it is that the information brought by the source will be recalled by the receiver and the more probable it is that it will induce persuasion toward the advocacy (for an overview of studies confirming this, Pornpitakpan, 2004). Among the many factors that have been found to determine source credibility, two factors stand out: Expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Expertise obviously is most relevant for experts speaking, and it is certainly less attributable to popular exemplars. Trustworthiness mainly refers to the perception of the audience about the extent to which speaking news sources are trying to persuade them. Experts are supposed to be neutral and therefore trustworthy, but popular exemplar statements are generally considered to come from the heart. As such, popular exemplars are not meant to be persuasive either. Politicians are less trustworthy because they, by nature, try to convince people. Another attribute that is worth mentioning, is similarity between source and receiver. Feldman (1984) found perceived similarity to enhance source credibility effects. Hence, source credibility theory suggests that both popular exemplars (trustworthiness, similarity) and experts (trustworthiness, expertise) have their advantages in the process of persuasion, whereas politicians, scoring low on all these characteristics, should be least effective.

The differential effects of different news sources can also be grounded in other, similar theories. Brosius (1995) made a reception model of everyday rationality and claims that exemplars have some distinct features that makes them stick in people's memory. News consumers use cognitive heuristics to deal with the overwhelming flow of daily information coming to them (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Popular exemplars have the vividness that makes it easier for people to remember them and to relate to them. Busselle and Shrum (2003, p. 260) distinguish three attributes of exemplars: Vividness, realism, and distinctiveness. These attributes of exemplars work as attention commanders (Taylor & Thompson, 1982), which is a necessary step in the process of direct media effects (Perse, 2001). Once attention has led to a prominent place in memory (Busselle & Shrum, 2003; Wyer & Srull, 1989), exemplar information automatically becomes more available than pallid base-rate information, which has neither been noticed, nor stored in memory as well as the exemplars have. In short, popular exemplars create information that is more available to people (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). At the next decision moment, the easiest accessible information is (unconsciously) considered as the most valid information and will be used to form the opinion or judgment one needs to make. A statement is potentially most influential when it (a) attracts attention and (b) ends up in the "upper drawer" of the receiver's mind. Since the realism and vividness of popular exemplars is higher compared to other sources, the "upper drawer" will be full of these concrete exemplars, forming the sample on which a more generalized opinion is based. Combining the source credibility theory and the heuristic approach leads to the key hypothesis of this article:

Hypothesis 1: News reports containing popular exemplars affect the audience's opinions about the issue more than news items in which experts convey the same information and especially more than when it is conveyed by a politician.

Method

Our popular exemplar experiment was embedded in a large internet panel survey in the run up to the 2009 regional elections in Belgium: University of Antwerp Web based Electoral Panel (UAWEP09). The panel is not representative for the Belgian population, but it contains a diverse group of people in terms of sex, age, and education. The panel survey encompassed three waves. The first wave measured several preexisting attitudes toward the issue of mobility, as well as general media-related attitudes and sociodemographic variables. The media stimulus was embedded in the second wave, which also included the postmeasurements of the relevant attitudes.

The stimulus was a clip from a real news broadcast of the main television broadcaster in Belgium (*Eén*) in which a constructed, fake news item was embedded. Preceding the fake news item was a real news item that reported about important road works on a major Belgian highway (E19) connecting two key cities in Belgium. Following this real item, the news anchor made the transfer to the fake item that was closely related to the actual news item. The anchor explained that, following the decision to renovate the highway, the neighboring community of *Kontich* had decided to invest in local exits of the highway as well. However, this decision caused delay in the community's planned investments in bike paths. Following this introduction by the news anchor, an off screen voice reiterated the set-up as footage of the junctions and bike paths was shown. Depending on the condition, the off-screen voice was then followed by interviews with ordinary locals, apparently randomly picked from the streets and interviewed on the street, a local politician, or a university expert. Again depending on the condition, the actors in the fake news item either supported the decision of the *Kontich* municipality council or not. Some of them defended a procar position concurring with the local government's decision to prioritize investments in roads whereas others adopted the opposite position and voiced the opinion that the local government should have given priority to investments in bike paths (probike). For the popular exemplar conditions, three people in the streets each gave a very short quote. For the expert and politician conditions, only one expert or politician was interviewed. This inserts a possible confounding factor into our design, as some conditions have three people, and others have only one. This is hard to avoid, because in real news items it is unlikely that three experts or politicians are given an opportunity to voice their opinion, and a single popular exemplar is rare as well. The current design was aimed at creating the most realistic and externally valid stimulus possible. To minimize the confounding effect, we tried to keep the length of the total speaking time more or less equal across all conditions. Actual durations of the fragments in which sources were talking were 33 seconds (popular exemplar, probikes), 25 seconds (popular exemplar, procars), 32 seconds (expert, probikes), 33 seconds (expert, procars), 22 seconds (politician, probikes), 29 seconds (politician, procars). The

differences in duration were kept to an absolute minimum, but due to the fact that we could not abort a speaking source midquote, and the speed of speaking varied, some variation is unavoidable.

To enhance realism, the off-screen voice was that of a journalist regularly contributing to the real news on *Eén*. A professional camera crew working for the news broadcaster shot the footage and interviews. The microphone used in the item is identical to the one used in actual news items, and the optical character recognitions (OCRs) were edited to be identical to the real ones as well. Put shortly, the fabricated news item was as real and credible as a news item can be and resembled a routine news item as much as possible. After the fake item, the news anchor started announcing the next item in the news, during which the image faded to black.

One of the possible problems with online experiments is controlling for actual exposure: One needs to be certain that respondents were actually sitting in front of the screen, and that they were exposed to the entire clip. As to the first problem, there is no way to accurately test this, but the fact that people had to actively press the "play" button to start the clip ensures that they were at least present at the time the fragment started. Pertaining to the second problem, we embedded hidden time measurements that allowed us to map the length of exposure for each respondent. Due to the fact that we used a custom-made media player that inhibited forwarding/rewinding, these two precautions should ensure that we have an adequate control for actual exposure. Only respondents spending at least the length of the stimulus in streaming video mode were retained in the analyses. Following the item, a few diversion questions were asked in the survey. Then, we included several key measurements: We asked the respondents about their opinion on the issue of cars versus bikes. Respondents had to indicate on a 5-point scale whether they were in favor of investments in bike paths or in favor of investments in highways. This variable is the dependent in our analysis. After the experiment, all respondents were debriefed by email and we explained to them that the news fragment they saw was fabricated.

Table 1 gives a summary of the experimental conditions as well as the number of subjects in each condition. As is customary in experimental designs, we assigned respondents to the conditions by randomly generating a number between 1 and 6 for each respondent. Based on this random number, respondents were assigned to one of the six experimental conditions. The reported *N* in the table is the number of people that were exposed to the full stimulus, and answered the questions that are relevant for our analysis.

We included two different popular exemplar conditions, each of them biased in one direction, containing only probike or only procar statements. We also created conditions with two other types of actors, two conditions with a politician speaking, and two with an expert interviewed, each time with a condition having an actor in favor or an actor against the decision. In each condition, at least 200 respondents watched the stimulus.

The diverse sample of subjects allows us to control for their preexisting attitudes regarding the issue at stake (cars vs. bikes). When people have existing experience or opinions about an issue, this may have a moderating influence on the effect of media exposure (Brosius, 2003). If the effects of exposure to exemplars remains intact after controlling for these variables, which was impossible for the bulk of the previous exemplification research,

Table 1. Overview of Experimental Condition and Amount of Respondents That Was Fully Exposed to the Stimulus

Condition	Actor	*N*
Popular exemplar probikes	Three ordinary people interviewed on various locations in the community, all of which disagree with the decision to invest in the highway junction	252
Popular exemplar procars	Three ordinary people interviewed on various locations in the community, all of which agree with the decision to invest in the highway junction	304
Expert probikes	A researcher of the University of Antwerp presents a mobility survey, of which the results show that a large majority of people prefer bike paths and durable mobility investments to solve mobility problems	264
Expert procars	A researcher of the University of Antwerp presents a mobility survey, of which the results show that a large majority of people prefer investments in highway infrastructure to solve mobility problems	292
Politician probikes	A politician of the local opposition states that the majority is ignoring the will of the people, and that most of the people in the community are against the investments in highway infrastructure and would prefer bike paths	281
Politician procars	A politician of the local government states that budgetary constrains force a trade-off, but that the investments in highway infrastructure should get the highest priority. The delay in bike path investments is only temporary	277
Total		1,670

we make more correct estimations of the size of the popular exemplar effect. Table 2 provides frequencies, means, and standard deviations of sociodemographic variables as well as the variables that will be used in the multivariate analyses.

Results

Let us first briefly take a look at our dependent variable, which is the distribution of opinions in favor of bike paths or highway infrastructure. Table 3 documents the opinion distribution per condition and after treatment.

The first observation is that, in all conditions, the probike opinions largely outweigh the procar opinions; if we combine the numbers for being slightly and strongly in favor, they dominate with 52.9% (popular exemplar, procar condition) to 69.7% (expert, probike condition). The table, second, suggests that popular exemplars and experts do have the greatest

Table 2. Overview of Sociodemographic Variables and Variables Used in Analysis

Variable	Frequency	*M*	*SD*
Sex			
Male	70.5		
Female	29.5		
Age (18-82)		42.1	14.1
Level of education			
None	0.2		
Lower education	0.5		
Professional secondary, unfinished	0.8		
Technical secondary, unfinished	2.6		
General secondary, unfinished	1.5		
Professional secondary, finished	2.6		
Technical secondary, finished	7.1		
General secondary, finished	8.7		
Higher education, non-university	29.6		
University	46.3		
Political interest			
11-point scale from *no interest at all* (0) to *highly interested* (10)		8.7	1.7
Dependent variable: Poststimulus attitude			
Strongly in favor of investments in highways	10.1		
Slightly in favor of investments in highways	13.9		
No preference for investments in either highways or bike paths	14.3		
Slightly in favor of investments in bike paths	23.0		
Strongly in favor of investments in bike paths	38.7		
Pre-existing attitude in favor of bike paths			
Not in favor of bike paths	37.8		
In favor of bike paths	62.2		
Pre-existing attitude in favor of highways			
Not in favor of highways	81.1		
In favor of highways	18.9		
N			1670

effect on the public. After treatment with one of these conditions, the subjects are either relatively most probikes or most procars.

To test these apparent associations, we conducted a two-way ANOVA analysis with two independent factors: Speaking source (popular exemplar, expert or politician) and direction of opinion (probikes, or procars). By looking at the interaction between the two factors, we can assess whether the speaking source matters for the effect of direction that was portrayed. We report the estimated marginal means for the various groups in Table 4.

Table 3. Overview of Opinion Distribution on Scale Ranging From 1 (*Strongly in Favor of Investments in Highways*) to 5 (*Strongly in Favor of Investments in Bike Paths*), Per Condition (N = 1,670)

Condition	Strongly in favor of investments in highways (%)	Slightly in favor of investments in highways (%)	No preference for investments in either highways or bike paths (%)	Slightly in favor of investments in bike paths (%)	Strongly in favor of investments in bike paths (%)	*N*
Popular exemplar procar	14.1	16.4	16.4	23.0	29.9	304
Politician procar	6.5	13.7	18.1	24.9	36.8	277
Expert procar	10.3	16.4	13.0	22.3	38.0	292
Politician probike	12.1	12.5	14.2	22.8	38.4	281
Popular exemplar probike	8.7	10.7	14.3	23.0	43.3	252
Expert probike	8.3	12.9	9.1	22.0	47.7	264

Table 4. Estimated Marginal Means for Scale Ranging From 1 (*Strongly in Favor of Investments in Highways*) to 5 (*Strongly in Favor of Investments in Bike Paths*), Per Condition (N = 1,670)

		95% confidence interval	
Speaking source	*M* (*SE*)	Lower bound	Upper bound
Popular exemplar, probike	3.813 (.09)	3.645	3.982
Popular exemplar, procar	3.382 (.08)	3.228	3.535
Expert, probike	3.879 (.08)	3.714	4.044
Expert, procar	3.613 (.08)	3.456	3.770
Politician, probike	3.630 (.08)	3.470	3.790
Politician, procar	3.718 (.08)	3.558	3.879

As expected, speaking source as such did not significantly affect opinion, $F(3.043) = 1.633$, sig. = .196. Rather, the direction of the opinion that was expressed by the source mattered, $F(17.149) = 9.202$, sig = .002. On the whole, the expectation that the direction of opinion would matter is therefore confirmed by these results. Of interest to our study is the interaction between speaking source and direction of opinion. Confirming our hypothesis, this effect is significant as well, $F(9.810) = 5.264$, sig = .005. These results prove that it is not merely the direction of opinion that matters, but *who* is giving the opinion matters as well. If we look at the estimated marginal means reported in Table 4, the clear and significant effect of popular exemplars is immediately noticeable. Though experts seem to have an effect, the 95% confidence intervals of the two conditions overlap; this result indicates that experts do not have a significant effect on opinion. For politicians, the results are even more striking: We find an effect that goes in the opposite direction of what we would expect. To present this graphically, we plotted the interaction between the two factors of the ANOVA in Figure 1.

Figure 1 paints an even clearer picture: The difference in opinion is largest between the two popular exemplar conditions, slightly less outspoken for the expert conditions, and even inverse for the politician conditions. The conclusion is candid: Popular exemplars have the greatest impact on people's own opinion. This implies that journalists using this type of format in their items should thread carefully because the subsequent swings in opinion are substantial. Experts have a smaller effect on opinion; the effect of politicians in the news is insignificant, the distribution of opinion even goes against the direction portrayed in the news item. Our key hypothesis is clearly confirmed.

Most prior studies do not control for preexisting attitudes when assessing the stimulus effect: Though news coverage may have substantial effects on public opinion, people often hold preexisting notions on the subject that may severely impact the effect of such coverage. To test whether this was the case, we added preexisting attitudes (either in favor of cars, bikes, or without a clear preexisting attitude) to the model as a quasiexperimental factor. Preexisting attitudes were measured a month earlier in Wave 1 using different questions than those in Wave 2. We feared asking identical questions might prime the respondents

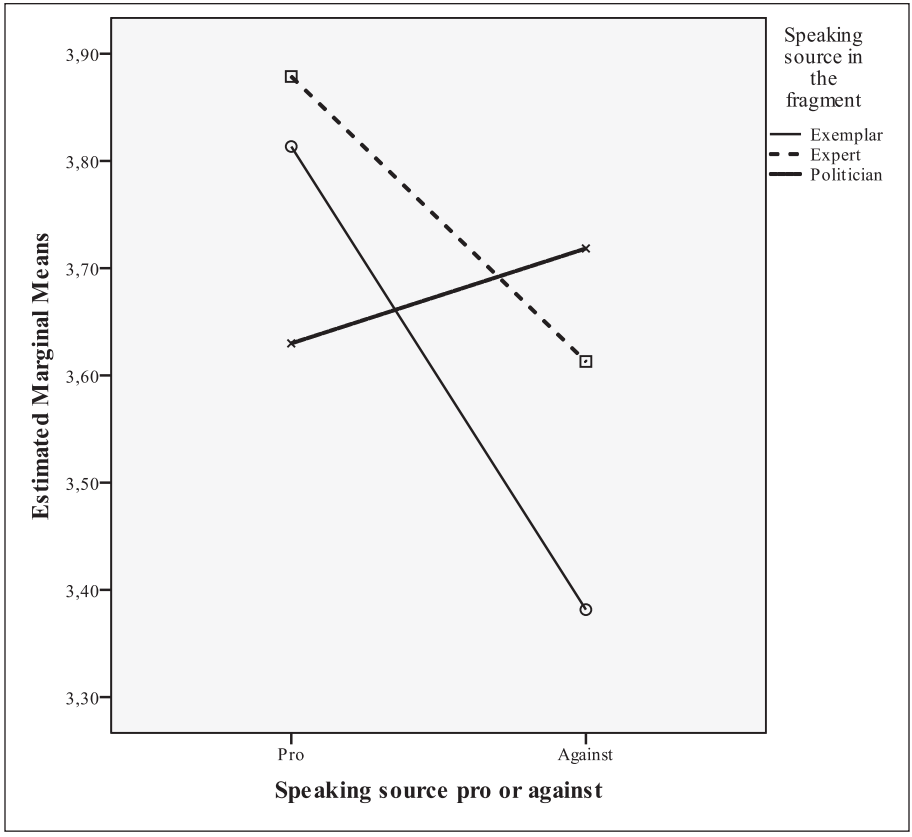

Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of opinion distribution of respondents, on scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly in favor of investments in highways*) to 5 (*Strongly in favor of investments in bike paths*; $N = 1{,}670$)

for the stimulus in Wave 2. The preexisting attitudes (Wave 1) were measured via two 5-point scales (*totally disagree* to *totally agree*) on two separate statements: "The issue of mobility should be solved by creating more bike paths" and "The traffic problems should be solved by investing in more highways." From these preexposure measurements, the fact that the overall distribution of opinion toward bikes is skewed toward bike paths was already clear: of those respondents that had a clear preference, more than 70% were in favor of bike paths. To ease interpretation, these scales were transformed into three quasiexperimental conditions: being in favor of bike paths, being in favor of highways, and not being in favor of either. This allows us to test whether a clear preexisting direction of opinion in favor of either one of the proposed solutions affects the stimulus effect. In Table 5 we again report the estimated marginal means for the factors direction and speaking source, this time controlling for preexisting attitudes.

Table 5. Estimated Marginal Means for Scale Ranging From 1 (*Strongly in Favor of Investments in Highways*) to 5 (*Strongly in Favor of Investments in Bike Paths*), Per Condition, After Adding Pre-Existing Attitudes as a Quasiexperimental Factor to ANOVA (*N* = 1,670)

		95% confidence interval	
Speaking source	*M* (*SE*)	Lower bound	Upper bound
Popular exemplar, probike	3.542 (.08)	3.390	3.695
Popular exemplar, procar	3.066 (.07)	2.921	3.211
Expert, probike	3.592 (.08)	3.442	3.742
Expert, procar	3.230 (.08)	3.083	3.378
Politician, probike	3.300 (.08)	3.151	3.449
Politician, procar	3.397 (.08)	3.249	3.544

When we add the preexisting attitudes as a factor to the ANOVA, the results indicate that controlling for preexisting attitudes further strengthens the net effect of exposure. This is confirmed in Table 5: Whereas the results of our basic model would have resulted in an insignificant effect of the expert conditions, this time the effects of the conditions are greater—the 95% confidence intervals show that both popular exemplars and experts have a significant effect on opinion. The effect of politicians remains insignificant. Looking at the significance of the various factors, speaking source remains insignificant, $F(1.341) = 1.006$, sig = .366, direction of opinion becomes more significant, $F(21.312) = 15.989$, sig = .000 as does the interaction effect between the two factors, $F(10.716) = 8.040$, sig = .000. As one would expect, the preexisting attitudes constitute the most important factor in the ANOVA, $F(444.526) = 333.501$, sig = .000. However, none of the interaction terms with either speaking source, $F(0.383) = 0.287$, sig = .887; direction, $F(0.190) = 0.142$, sig = .867; or both, $F(0.514) = 0.386$, sig = .819 are significant. This indicates that although preexisting attitudes have an expected effect on postexposure opinion, they do not significantly alter the overall effect of stimulus exposure. The fact that controlling for them in the ANOVA causes the expert conditions to reach significance shows the importance of including them in the analysis, especially when the distribution of opinions is skewed as it was in our design. Overall, the conclusion we draw from these analyses is that popular exemplars have the greatest impact in general, experts have some success and politicians do not seem to have any effect at all. On top of what most previous research did, we can compare between a model that controls for preexisting attitudes, and one that does not. Without including the skewedly distributed preexisting attitudes in the ANOVA we would have wrongly concluded that experts do not have an effect, whereas in fact they do. Moreover, our results indicate that controlling for these predispositions does not nullify our initial findings: The effects of popular exemplars do not become smaller when taking preexisting attitudes into account, even on the contrary. This is proof of the fact that popular exemplars matter on top of what people thought before exposure. Still, the impact remains modest compared to the strong impact of the preexisting attitude.

Conclusion and Discussion

Our evidence shows that common people that are apparently randomly selected by journalists to illustrate a news story have a substantial effect on what the audience thinks about the issue. This effect may be partly due to the fact that popular exemplars attract attention and act as attention commanders just as many other speaking sources in the news do. Yet, popular exemplar effects extend well beyond the effects of other talking sources. Due to their similarity, trustworthiness, and the vividness of their account, popular exemplars have significantly more impact than experts that are being interviewed and, in particular, than politicians that are quoted in the news. We showed this by drawing on an experiment that used fake television news items as stimuli and that systematically compared the effect of different talking sources in the news. Controlling for preexisting attitudes qualifies the findings to a certain extent. The popular exemplar effects are more robust and yield a more nuanced picture of what type of popular exemplars (e.g., procar popular exemplar) have what kind of effect on what type of public (e.g., on a probike public). Other than the fact that including preexisting attitudes in the model strengthens our initial findings, it also helps put the effects we find in perspective: Exposure to the various types of exemplars has an effect, but as one would expect this effect does not occur on a blank slate. One qualification for these results is the fact that our design utilized three popular exemplars versus one expert or politician. Future research efforts could avoid this confounding factor by keeping the number of exemplars constant across conditions. Still the finding that popular exemplars have a greater effect on the opinion of respondents compared to politicians and experts, is in itself an important finding.

Popular exemplars have a distinct effect on what people think. This raises serious questions about the increased use of popular exemplars by journalists to illustrate their story. These voices of common people are chosen to illustrate and not to represent. But because they are presented as a random sample of people, the illusion/perception of representation is held up. Popular exemplars are (at least unconsciously) taken seriously by the audience because they see them as representative of public opinion. Journalists should be aware of this and account for it in their daily decisions. And at first sight harmless journalistic practice can easily lead to distortions in the public perception of social problems and situations (Arpan, 2009). Looking at the evidence from this study and others (Aust & Zillmann, 1996) on television news, and the indications from many studies in exemplification research using printed media stimuli, one could conclude that news consumers of generally trusted media take (popular) exemplars a little more seriously (representative) than intended by the journalist. A question that remains is whether this effect would also be found in the newer media. With modern information technology, the door is open for many people to do citizen journalism and to produce “news” on their own and put it online. It would be interesting to know to what extent the influence of popular exemplars is related to the trustworthiness of the medium they are featured in.

Apart from the effects popular exemplars may have on the public, the informative content of news is not increased by using popular exemplars either. The addition of this specific type of exemplars is aimed at making news stories more interesting, not at adding

informative content to it. They limit airplay for representative actors whose messages tend to be more informative and yield information with a general relevance. In addition, popular exemplars give journalists increased power over the news content. More than other news sources, popular exemplars are puppets on a string held by the journalist. The pool of people on the street is so large, that the journalist can easily go cherry picking. The use of popular exemplars empowers the journalist especially when, as we showed, popular exemplars have significant effect on public opinion.

The increased use of popular exemplars by journalists is rooted in media's need to attract an audience in a climate of increased commercialization and competition. For Dovey (2000), this has led to a bottom-up news source selection by media outlets favoring, among others, a more frequent use of recognizable ordinary men and women in the street (Biltereyst, 2000, pp. 14-15). At the level of the individual journalist, increased market competition has fostered reliance on popular exemplars as well. Niven (2005) considers journalists as economic actors trying to minimize costs while maximizing benefits. One of the main ways for journalists to minimize costs in their daily job is "apparent objectivity." It implies the use of two or more news sources in a word–counterword setting, creating the illusion of balanced news coverage and objectivity. Already decades ago, Gaye Tuchman (1978) described how journalists prefer to bring news stories with conflicting voices to create an image of objective coverage. As long as their work appears to be objective, colleagues, bosses, and audience are not likely to challenge them. The question whether these sources reflect real and representative voices in society is sometimes neglected. Popular exemplars are ideal instruments to yield apparent objectivity. They are easy to get (the street is everywhere) and the setting (random interviews) suggests representativeness.

The results of this study question the use of popular exemplars based on such stylistic or economic reasons. The study supports a plea for a better monitoring of the fairness of exemplifying opinions in television news. Not only what is being said matters, but also who is saying it. Being a, for the audience, recognizable and unsuspicious person on the street yields considerable effects; experts, and especially politicians, have to live with lower credibility and persuasiveness. Media should be advised to give a range of interviews with common people that corresponds to the real world division of opinions or, as it often is not known what the public thinks, reduce the practice of popular exemplars in daily news reporting altogether.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This research was funded by the PARTIREP consortium. PARTIREP (2007-2011) is an Interuniversity Attraction Pole (IAP) funded by the Belgian Science Policy. It involves the universities of Antwerp (UA), Brussels (VUB and ULB), Leiden (Universiteit Leiden), and Leuven (KULeuven).

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