Ethical Guidelines for Coverage of Harmful Social Media Trends

March, 2018

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Acknowledgments
Abstract

Ethical guidelines have been created and put into effect for media coverage of suicide. Similar guidelines have been drafted regarding coverage of school shootings. However, the media contagion effect is still spreading dangerous trends. This study will use agenda-setting, framing, media contagion and network theories as framework to investigate the ways in which trends which may otherwise be isolated and relatively innocuous can spread to the larger population and become physically or psychologically harmful; even life-threatening. In an analysis of a case-study of the phenomena, the “Tide Pod challenge,” this paper examines the media’s role in spreading this trend through sensationalist headlines. A guideline is proposed for identifying, covering and diffusing the effects of potentially dangerous copycat trends.

Keywords: media contagion, journalistic ethics, agenda-setting, reference groups
In 1947 the Commission on Freedom of the Press, otherwise known as the Hutchins Commission, performed the first scientific study of the freedom of the press and formulated the ‘social responsibility theory of the press’ (1947, p. 125-128). Media theorists have taken up the cause, McQuail (1992, 2000, 2003) being preeminent among them. Guidelines have been put in place for responsible coverage of suicide (Pirkis, Blood, Beautrais, Burgess, & Skehans, 2006) and other organizations and theorists are pushing for similar precautions to be taken for mass shootings. Suicide and murder are surrounded by many cultural and social taboos, besides being outright illegal. However, other harmful and potentially life-threatening behaviors are also spread by the media contagion effect, but are not already subject to such strong social biases. These behaviors may be seen as innocuous or even humorous at face-value. These trends must also be examined in the light of media effect theories and taken into account by any ethical media producer.

A recent examples of one of these ‘viral’ trends is the so-called ‘Tide Pod Challenge’ wherein people film themselves biting into or consuming laundry detergent pods. These pods contain a cocktail of toxic chemicals which have contributed to the accidental deaths of eight people since their introduction in 2012, not to mention tens of thousands of reported cases of poisoning (“Consumer Product Safety Commission,” n.d.). The trend of intentionally consuming this colorfully wrapped liquid poison began as an online joke in 2014 and was brought to the attention of mainstream media in January 2018. Data shows, and this paper argues, that the coverage of this viral trend is correlated with a huge upsurge in cases of ingestion of the detergent pods and may be responsible for this increase in dangerous behaviors. Yet, certain
media outlets, particularly YouTube, Google and Facebook, played a part in containing and de-escalating the trend by removing content.

This paper first examines media effect theories in the light of new media as well as how mass media spreads these trends, specifically to teens and young adults. Based on this, it explores how media ethics and responsibilities must consider users’ propensities for risk-taking and reward-seeking behavior. I will use sensationalism, profit-driven media and factors of newsworthiness to support my claims. The case-study itself analyzes the media’s response using the single case-study method. This involves content analysis and drawing conclusions based on the findings relating to the media’s role in spreading the trend, as well as the efficacy of its attempt to mitigate the effects. I seek answers to the questions: Can the rise in Tide Pod Challenge videos posted online be correlated with the media coverage of the trend? Did the media sensationalize the case in its coverage or was the coverage accurate and neutral? How can the media improve its treatment of such cases in order to prevent the spread of such trends? I use the data and information gathered in the preceding sections to draw up a proposed guideline for identifying, covering and containing these harmful trends. This is the heart of the research as it offers a groundwork for further development and application of such guidelines in the current dynamic media environment and seeks to protect against future harm to members of the internet age.
1 Literature and Theoretical Framework:

1.1 Concepts and Research Parameters

Before I begin to analyze the existing literature, a few key concepts must be defined, and the parameters of the research question must be established. Social contagions are “sociocultural phenomena (which) can spread through, and leap between, populations more like outbreaks of measles or chickenpox than through a process of rational choice” (Marsden, 1998) and it follows that a media contagion is a social contagion spread through media. A ‘potentially harmful social media trend’ is used throughout this paper to define any behavior spread virally through individuals’ posts on social media which could cause physical damage to anyone who engages in the activity. “Public interest” will refer to McQuail’s (1992) definition of “the complex of supposedly informational, cultural and social benefits to the wider society which go beyond the immediate, particular and individual interests of those who participate in public communication, whether as sender or receiver” (p. 3). This term comes into play when we turn to media responsibility and ethics. The parameters of the research will be limited to online media, as this is the realm wherein the trends reach a wider audience.

Harmful pranks and dares have existed for decades, long before social media and even the internet. This point is particularly relevant when discussing risk-taking behaviors as adolescents have been performing such peer-influenced conduct on and offline. Additionally, my research is a single-case study and, although I include other examples of trends to compare and
contrast, the findings should be regarded as preliminary and suggestive of further research on other cases.

1.2 Framing and Agenda Setting

The most vital set of theories to the structure of my research are the media effect theories of framing and agenda-setting. These provide the framework for my analysis of the media’s coverage and response to the Tide Pod Challenge. The foundational study of agenda-setting theory, carried out by Shaw and McCombs (1972), illustrated the media’s integral role in issues the public discuss and deem important in American politics. This theory posits that the media’s coverage of certain issues decides their salience in the public eye (Wanta & Wu, 1992). Later studies extended the theory outside the realm of politics, establishing the foundation for application of the theory in every facet of the mediatized environment we inhabit today (Kliger-Vilenchik, 2011; Bantimaroudis, Zyglidopoulos & Symeou, 2010). The agenda-setting theory becomes important in analyzing the diffusion of harmful trends in that the media’s coverage brings trends to the public discourse, thereby increasing their reach and potential for contagion. The operational definition this paper assumes for agenda-setting is that defined by McCombs, Shaw and Weaver as the social media issue agenda (2014). This definition contains within it the co-constitutive nature of the public agenda and the media agenda. This two-stage process examines how the news media utilizes information about the public agenda gleaned from social media in order to build its agenda, which in turn stimulates the public agenda, and so on (Meraz, 2011a; 2011b).
Following in the agenda-setting theory, framing becomes essential. Frames have been defined as, “conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 60). The process of frame building is described as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987: 143). Frames are, therefore, not simply the domain of the media itself but are also found in the audience, the culture in which the message is conveyed, and the message itself (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015). With these definitions in mind, we can apply framing theory as a tool for analysis of the media (the sender), the audience (the receiver) and the message (the information). The focus of this study remains on the messages transmitted by the mass media. Existing ethical guidelines regarding suicide stress the importance of framing the coverage of the events in such a way as to prevent any copycat behaviors as this is where I argue that the most effective changes can be made in order to mitigate the spread of these dangerous trends. This perspective is supported by the World Health Organization (Preventing suicide, 2008).

1.3 Media Contagion

Here I turn to network theory to explain how these trends spread through social and media networks. Van Dijk has commented on the increase of connectivity when discussing the rate at which trends and ‘hypes,’ which have always existed in social networks, spread through the hyper-integrated network that is the internet. He observed that “their speed is multiplied many times in contemporary media networks,” admitting that “the exchange of ideas may spread
too fast” (Dijk 2006, p. 208). As these social contagions depend heavily on the amount of nodes “infected’ by the idea (Dijk 2006, p. 208), it follows that if they infect more central nodes, in this case popular media outlets, they will be able to reach and infect more individuals. Imitative suicides, or the “Werther Effect,” have been illustrated to have a strong relation to newspaper and television reports of suicides (Bollen & Phillips, 1982; Phillips, 1974, 1979; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986). These behavioral contagions have been defined as phenomena in which a certain behavior spreads through groups rapidly and spontaneously (Gould, 1990). This definition can also apply to the trends analyzed in my case-study, and it is with this that I justify the comparison of the virality of suicides with that of the Tide Pod Challenge, as well as the employment of guidelines drawing from those implemented for coverage of suicides in this context.

1.4 Other Literature

Although media’s role in the spreading of these trends is imperative and worthy of study, there are other factors involved. Here, another facet of network theory applies to my case study-Merton’s work on reference groups. Merton defines reference groups as any groups of which one is a member, or a non-member which becomes a point of reference in how one shapes one’s values, attitudes and behaviors (1967, p. 287). His functional typology of these reference groups contains two main types- normative and comparative. The former establishes and maintains standards and the later provides a “frame of comparison relative to which the individual evaluates himself and others” (Merton, 1967, p. 337). I will employ the concept in my case study
when discussing possible explanations for taking part in self-destructive and dangerous copycat behaviors. It would still be overly simplistic to distill the spread and popularity of these trends to just media effect and network theories.

In order to fully grasp the facets of the phenomena we must ask ourselves why certain groups are more susceptible to translating these messages into action. The overwhelming majority of participants in the Tide Pod Challenge have been teenagers (“AAPCC Warn About Potential Poison Exposure to Single-Load Laundry Packets,” 2018). Adolescence has been theorized to be an especially sensitive part of life, where young people are hyper-aware of the complexities of interpersonal relationships (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Furthermore, teens’ special propensity for risk-taking has been discussed from a neurobiological perspective in that it is an imbalance between the parts of the brain dealing with cognitive control and inhibition (the Prefrontal Cortex), which does not fully develop until the early twenties, and the area central to reward-seeking (the nucleus accumbens) (“Risk-taking behavior in teens caused by imbalanced brain activity,” 2016). Steinberg, a neuropsychologist, explains that the “overlap between the neural circuits that mediate social information processing and reward processing helps to explain why so much adolescent risk-taking occurs in the context of the peer group” (2007). Peer influence has been illustrated to extend online (Smith, Chein, and Steinberg, 2014) in a replication of a study finding that the physical presence of peers increases risk-taking and neural activity in the reward circuitry of the brain (Chein, Albert, O’Brien, Uckert, & Steinberg, 2011). In an extreme example of risk-taking behavior, studies on suicide have found that teens are predisposed to “cluster suicides” (Gould, Wallenstein, Kleinman, O’Carroll, & Mercy, 1990). Criminologist and specialist in school shootings Dr. Eric Madfis’ observation that the
demographic of most of the mass shooters in the US suggests that young adults are also inclined to copying these violent acts (2014).

Steps have been taken to mitigate the effects of copycat suicides and shootings but harmful social media trends have not been treated with the same precautions. As these trends are generally covered as teen trends, therefore associating the peer group or demographic with the behavior, adolescents are placed heavily at risk. The fact that these at-risk groups are largely not adults in the eyes of the law helps to justify prescriptive guidelines as they would be put in place to protect a demographic which cannot legally make many decisions for themselves. In my content analysis of media content regarding the Tide Pod Challenge in particular, this propensity for risk-taking behavior and desire for social reward as well as identification with the groups taking part in the Challenge will factor in heavily. I analyze the headlines of internet news media in order to determine if it is possible for consumers to identify the groups taking part in the behaviors, and thereby identify with these groups.

1.5 Profit Model of Media

1.5a Sensational Journalism

In addition to analyzing the headlines for mentions of age groups, I also look at the element of sensationalism. Following in the example of Brooks, who analyzed the coverage of Mad Cow Disease in the US and Britain, this paper will employ a critique of tabloidization as a driving factor in the spread of “new moral panics” (Brooks, 2000). The sensational and emotional reporting has a close relationship with market-driven profit models which encourage
editors and media companies to present their content and tailor it to their audience in such a way as to maximize views and, therefore, profits (Klaidman, 1987). Sensationalism has been defined as “a discourse strategy of ‘packaging’ information in news headlines in such a way that news items are presented as more interesting, extraordinary and relevant than might be the case” (Kozakowska, 2013). In order to operationalize this definition I stress the importance of interest, which is often provoked by appealing to emotions. I also borrow from the Oxford dictionary definition that sensationalist news often dispense with accuracy in order to obtain interest (“Sensationalism,” n.d.). My working definition of sensationalism can therefore be summarized as “the strategic use of language in news headlines to provoke public interest by appealing to emotions and often parting with accurate coverage.” In suicide media guidelines published on http://reportingonsuicide.org, sensationalistic headlines and such “strong terms” as “skyrocketing” and “epidemic” are recommended against, while “inform[ing] the audience without sensationalizing the suicide and minimize prominence” is the suggested tactic. The tabloid media has largely turned to “scandal and sensationalism, too frequently masquerading in perverse guise as human interest,” according to journalism studies academic Bob Franklin (1997). In that context, sensationalism has triumphed over rational judgement, positioning the trivial details of celebrities’ lives and sports as more important or newsworthy than actual significant events (Franklin, 1997).

These definitions and critiques are highly normative; a concern for public interest and quality of journalism have historically influenced the field of media performance. The normative value of stories in the press concerning issues as weighty as suicide and mass shootings is more obvious than those which concern my case-study. However, I justify the application of similar
frameworks and guidelines in the study and search for solutions to both issues in that the social media trends such as Planking and the Hot Water Challenge, not to mention my main trend of interest, have caused physical injury and even death, as in the case of Planking.

Sensationalist coverage of these trends boosts the readership and therefore reach of the story, which then increases the chance of copycat behaviors. Therefore, in this competitive media environment, every news outlet must consider their demographic very carefully. As mentioned previously, Franklin has accused tabloids of promoting sensationalist content on the pretense of the public good. This criticism will be returned to in my case study as the coverage of these trends often comes in the form of warnings to parents, public service announcements and pleas to possible copycats to refrain from the behavior. Although these headlines may at first seem to take the parents’ and at-risk groups’ interests to heart, if we frame it in the context of media economics, we see these groups as target consumer demographics and the messages as goods offered on a competitive market.

1.5b Newsworthiness

While sensationalism plays a part in deciding how news is framed and profit-seeking behavior of media outlets is a guiding tenant of what reaches the news, many other factors define what is newsworthy. For example, an average of 241 people die every day in the US alone of alcohol-induced causes (Murphy, Xu, Kochanek, Curtin, & Arias, 2017). Why is this fact rarely reported whereas the Tide Pod Challenge, which has not resulted in a single death, dominates the news? Why does the death of one puppy in an overhead bin cause an immediate public outcry and political response (Perez, 2018), whereas 1.25 million human deaths in just 2013 due to road
traffic have not elicited a similar response ("Global Health Observatory (GHO) data,” n.d.)? These issues are given completely different treatments by the media. Whereas these are all cases of ‘bad’ news which tend to be more newsworthy (Shoemaker, 2006), they differ in other ways. According to some studies, events with high deviance from social norms are more likely to be covered in the mainstream media (P. Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991). This deviance becomes important when analyzing the content of the media coverage. Our society considers drinking alcohol and driving cars to be normal, and killing a puppy or intentionally eating known toxic products to be deviant. By contrast, there were 274,998 dietary supplement exposures in the US alone between 2000 and 2012 (Rao et al., 2017), but since consuming vitamins and supplements are a norm there was little outcry from the media. This tendency of the news media to define newsworthiness by the factor of deviance and to utilize language conoting judgement of these actions is returned to in my methodology.

1.6 Descriptive Norms

This idea of deviation from social norms becomes vital when we search for solutions to these issues. The aforementioned theories, specifically the media contagion effect and sensationalism, problematize the issue. This paper aims to not only illustrate the problem but to seek a solution. In order to reach this goal, we must construct an approach to promoting prosocial behaviors while discouraging participation in harmful trends. For this I turn to psychologist and influence expert Dr. Robert Cialdini’s (2007) work on compliance and descriptive social norms. He posits that strong formal controls can result in resentment and the belief that these regulations
exist in opposition to people’s preferences. He suggests instead instrumentalizing norms to promote certain conduct (Cialdini, 2007). Descriptive social norms are based on social information about which behaviors are likely to be adaptive and effective (Cialdini, 2007). Although, from an outsider perspective, taking part in these challenges appears to be anything but adaptive and effective, I argue that many young adults inhabiting the internet age see these trends as ways in which they can enter into popular culture and the virtual community. Therefore, changing these norms, or at least the way in which they are perceived by the media audience, becomes of vital importance when considering how to prevent additional participation in social media trends.

1.7 Existing guidelines

1.7a Suicide

Strong evidence points to a connection between suicide reporting and copycat suicidal behavior (Beautrais, 2000; Pirkis, Burgess, Francis, Blood, & Jolley, 2006). The idea that the media’s coverage of suicide may cause mass cluster suicides appeared in medical literature as early as the 19th century (Leonard, 2001). In their systematic review of media roles in suicide preventions, Sisask and Varnik, scholars of law and behavioral studies, respectively, at Tallinn University reviewed 899 publications relating to suicide and media, specifically focusing on how media may affect suicidality (2012). They found some evidence that changing reporting habits can be accomplished and be effective in preventing suicides (Niederkrotenthaler & Sonneck, 2007; Hawton & Williams, 2001). Furthermore, they reported that “more research is available...
about how irresponsible media reports can provoke suicidal behaviours (the ‘Werther effect’) and less about the protective effect media can have by newspaper blackout or by changing the quality and content of media reporting (the ‘Papageno effect’)” (Sisak and Varnik, 2012).

I will use four sets of guidelines on suicide reporting as a basis for writing my own ethical handbook for covering harmful social media trends. These include that of the IPSO (“Editors’ Code of Practice,” 2017), the Samaritans (Samaritans, n.d.), the WHO (Saxena, Krug, Chestnov, & World Health Organization, 2014, p. 50) and those published on ReportingonSuicide.org. I return to examine these in detail in the section entitled "Ethical Guidelines.

1.7b Mass shootings

Johnston and Joy, writing for the American Psychological Association (APA) have claimed that “if the mass media and social media enthusiasts make a pact to no longer share, reproduce, or re-tweet the names, faces, detailed histories, or long-winded statements of killers, we could see a dramatic reduction in mass shootings in the span of one to two years” (p.28). This statement released on the APA website (apa.org) calls to attention the seriousness of the copycat effect in the domain of mass murder. The impact of the media contagion effect has been indicated by recent analysis of media coverage of copycat incidents of mass shooting and computer models relating mass and social media coverage of homicide to similar events clustered in time and space (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). These studies support the claim that media coverage guidelines such as those applied to suicide would be useful and may be necessary in other areas of public interest reporting. Certain
examples of social media trends have resulted in arrests of those who took part in the behaviors. (Pheifer, 2016; Smith, 2017; Tobitt 2018). Although I do not imply that mass shootings and ingesting toxic chemicals for a joke can be equated in seriousness, these trends can encourage young people to take part in illegal and/or dangerous actions, harming those around them and resulting in enforcement of criminal law. The recent outcry for ethical reporting of mass shootings highlights the media’s responsibility in discouraging underage and adult members of their audience from taking part in illegal and violent actions. With that, I turn to the case at hand.

2 Methodology

The methodology of my research is the single-case study approach, the case being the Tide Pod Challenge. I integrate descriptive case study analysis with quantitative data and examples of the discourse as well as content analysis, which is employed to analyze four distinct variables: terms indicating reference groups, sensationalism, newsworthiness based on norm deviation, poison control assistance information. For the last variable I determined if the articles themselves contain useful information for those who may have intentionally or unintentionally been exposed to the detergent pods. For this I searched for contact information for the Poison Control Centers or emergency numbers. The other three variables were explored via analysis of the headlines and were described using five indicators. Reference Group Codes were operationalized with two indicators: Does the word ‘teen’ appear in the headline? Does the headline refer to locality? Sensationalist Code also received two indicators: Does the headline contain language appealing to emotion? This would include exaggerations, pleas to stop, fear
mongering. This would not include the words dangerous or harmful, as these are accurate, but rather warnings of death, pain, etc. Are there statistics, data or false references to the TPC as ‘deadly’ in the headline? If so, the article was consulted to see if the references were inaccurate and/or explained in a way which may mislead the reader into a false understanding of the situation in a cursory reading of the article. Finally, factors of newsworthiness as related to deviance from norms was examined using one indicator: Does the headline imply judgement? Examples of this would be using words like ‘stupid, ‘ridiculous,’ expressing shock, exacerbation, condescension, etc. All these indicators were binary. Two indicators were qualitative, that of emotional language use and implication of judgement. I was assisted by Anna Humphreys in the capacity of co-coder. Coder’s reliability was found to be 76% and 80%, respectively.

The sample size was 104 headlines. These were taken from Google News search engine using the following criteria: search field- Tide pod, language- English, date range- between Jan 1st and Jan19th, 2018 (two days after Youtube released statement saying it has begun taking down videos (Zara, 2018)), excluding- opinion and blog posts. Those located were then further filtered for relevance as many articles arose under this criteria because of ads or links appearing on the page. Duplicates were not included and the first appearance of article was taken and other instances discarded. Headlines were chosen as the focus of my content analysis as they are the most easily viewed. Only four in ten people surveyed by the American Press Institute in 2014 reported having investigated a news subject beyond what they read in a headline in the last week (“How Americans get their news,” 2014). Therefore, headlines are a valid unit to measure what news the average American is exposed to and how that information is framed.
3 Case Study: The Tide Pod Challenge (TPC)

In this section I examine the case of the TPC in light of the theories outlined above. I also address the following questions: Can the rise in TPC videos posted online be correlated with the media coverage of the trend? Did the media sensationalize the case in its coverage or was the coverage accurate and neutral? I also begin to answer the question: how can the media improve its treatment of such cases in order to prevent the spread of such trends? I begin with a basic outline of the events as they unfolded.

Tide PODS are only one iteration of single-load laundry detergent packets which appear in a variety of colors and shapes. Laundry detergent packets have been on the market since 2010. Procter and Gamble, makers of Tide, released their patented version in 2012 (“About Us,” n.d.). The pods contain a concentrated dose of toxic chemicals which according to the Centers for Disease Control and Protection cause vomiting, choking, coughing, drowsiness and nausea. Some patients have required tracheal intubation after exposure (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). There have been 8 confirmed deaths due to these detergent pods, not mention thousands of unintentional exposures leading to hospitalization. Ninety-nine percent of these cases, and all the cases resulting in death, have been consumption by children or elderly people suffering from dementia (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). However, these pods are almost always used responsibly for their purpose: cleaning laundry.

The Tide Pod Challenge is only one version of social media trends which involve consumption of dangerous cleaning products, but it is the one which has resulted in the most public outcry. By comparison, bleach drinking, an internet insult-turned-prank, has resulted in a
negligible amount of mass media coverage, as well as a negligible number of video uploads of people completing the challenge. The difference between drinking bleach and eating laundry pods may be in the packaging: laundry pods bear a striking resemblance to candy. This likeness has been noted since their appearance on the market and is blamed for most of the cases wherein children bite the pods, mistaking them for a snack (Interlandi, 2018). As early as December 2013, this uncanny and dangerous resemblance had been discussed on web forums (“People eating Tide pods - Straight Dope Message Board,” 2009). In 2015, satirical newspaper The Onion published an opinion piece from the perspective of a toddler entitled “So Help Me God, I’m Going to Eat One of Those Multicolor Detergent Pods” (Monico, 2015). A year later the subject hit YouTube when user Cyr published a video about eating the pods. The video has since been removed by YouTube. Then, on March 31, 2017, CollegeHumor.com, posted a video titled “Don’t Eat the Laundry Pods” in which an adult male binge eats the pods and is rushed to the hospital. This video was viewed over 2.5 million times by 2018 (CollegeHumor, n.d.). In July 2017 the trend made it to online forum Reddit (“Bite into one of those Tide Pods. Do it.,” n.d.) and on the following day, another satirical article on The Onion described a new Sour Apple flavor of Tide PODS (“Tide Debuts New Sour Apple Detergent Pods,” 2017). Twitter saw the first mention of the consumption of the pods on December 9th when user @mineifiwildout posted the joke “no more eating Xanax in 2018 we eating tide pods from now on,” which received 25,600 likes and 7,100 retweets in two weeks (tan, 2017). Up until this point there had been little to no mass media coverage of the phenomenon, although the danger posed by the pods to children and the cognitively impaired was covered widely. The first article found within my
search criteria (listed in methodology) relating to the intentional consumption of the pods is from December 28, 2017 (Tesema, 2017). The meme tracking page knowyoumeme.com explains:

“The earliest iteration of the Tide Pod Challenge, a series of videos in which people eat or pretend to eat Tide PODS was posted on January 7th, 2018 by YouTuber theAaronSwan669, who published a video entitled “TIDE POD CHALLENGE.” In the video, he pretends to participate in the challenge of eating Tide PODS before saying “just kidding.” Over the next week, more videos featuring the “Tide Pod Challenge” appearing online. Several media outlets, including The Washington Post, CBS, The Chicago Tribune and more, reported on the videos.”

On January 7th, as can be seen in Figure 1, the number of articles published about the TPC was still negligible. No articles were found on the 7th or 8th. However, after the 9th, on which two articles were found covering the TPC, the mainstream media finally seemed to have caught on. Five articles published on the 10th and 13 two days later on the 12th. On that day Procter and Gamble released a video of one of their most famous spokespeople, NFL star Rob Gronkowski, warning people not to eat the pods. That video garnered some internet attention, receiving more than 20,000 views in the next four days. In contrast, on that same day a Facebook user uploaded a recording of himself taking part in the challenge. This footage received 3.3 million views in five days and has since been removed. As the media sensation took off, so did uploads of videos of participants of the TPC.
At the same time, calls to the American Association of Poison Control Centers (AAPCC) for intentional ingestion of laundry pods began to surge.

In late February 2018, AAPCC data showed that in 2016 poison control centers dealt with 39 cases of intentional exposures to the pods among 13 to 19 year olds, a number which rose to 53 in 2017. According to their website, “that number has increased to 191 among the same age group in 2018” (“Intentional Exposures Among Teens to Single-Load Laundry Packets,” n.d.). Figure 1 shows an increase from an average of 3.8 calls per month to almost 200 calls total in less than two months. That change can be seen in the graphs pictured. Figure 1 illustrates the correlation between articles published on mass media outlets and these calls to the AAPCC between January 1st and January 20th, 2018. Correlation does not denote causation, and yet the strong uphill correlation of \( r=0.82 \) deserves attention. The 10th to the 12th of January marks a significant increase of both calls and published stories. It also marks a quick rise in videos uploaded featuring the TPC, as seen in Figure 2. The visibility brought to the trend by mass media outlets coincides with a 500% increase in video uploads in a three-day timespan. The number of calls also shows a very strong correlation \( (r=.81) \) with the number of articles. With these figures my first question (“Can the rise in TPC videos posted online be correlated with the media coverage of the trend?”) can be answered in the affirmative.
Mass and social media’s two-step agenda-setting can be seen in full view here as the mass media, using information gleaned from social media, set the public agenda to red alert regarding the TPC, and in doing so brought the TPC to the attention of many who might not otherwise have known of its existence. Although just a month previously the only articles or videos posted had been satirical and were only known in a small corner of the internet, within a few weeks it had reached the public agenda so that it would be impossible for many media consumers not to think this trend was omnipresent. This agenda-setting was then reproduced in social media as an increasing number of users recreated the news they were exposed to.

This cycle did not abate until large social media and business conglomerates began to take note and act to stop the spread of the viral trend. Whereas mass media continued to cover it until even the time of this writing (March 18th, 2018), social media sites such as YouTube began taking down content relating to the TPC (Zara, 2018), and Amazon started to filter and delete comments encouraging people to eat Tide PODS (Cole, 2018). After this time it became increasingly difficult to find TPC videos on YouTube but this did not stop the news media from continuing to circulate the videos on their own platforms (Ritschel, 2018).

During the month of January memes, tweets, articles, opinion pieces, celebrity commentary and expert testimony of the trend proliferated. Social media was inundated with memes of recipes for preparing the pods (“Drop everything and invest in Tide Pods right now...,” n.d.), depictions of celebrities eating them (“Absolutely Delicious | Tide POD Challenge,” n.d.; “littlestwayne | Tide POD Challenge,” n.d.), integrations of Tide PODS into other products such as Hot Pockets (“‘Tide Pod Hot Pocket,’” n.d.) and Fruit Gushers (“OMG these gusher flavors are so good | Tide POD Challenge,” n.d.). The articles published were authored by shocked and
sarcastic authors who let their personal distaste for and disbelief in the topic show at every turn. Some headlines included: Millennials Are Eating Laundry Detergent Thanks to the Incredibly Moronic 'Tide Pod Challenge' (Friederich, 2018) and Sh*t Happened 1/16/18: Oh good, kids are chewing laundry detergent (Harell, 2018). Even such seemingly neutral headlines as An Anthropologist Explains Why We Want to Eat Tide Pods (Ewbank, 2018) contained jokes and irony, the first sentence being “It all started as a joke…”

According to a survey by the American Press Institute, only about six in 10 people ever make it past the headline (“How Americans get their news,” 2014). In the next section of my case study I apply content analysis to these headlines in order to better understand what impact they may have had on the readers and skimmers of the news media.

3.1 Content analysis

In the methodology section, I listed four variables to describe the content of the headlines. My aim is to determine whether headlines utilized sensationalistic language or were inaccurate, indicated newsworthiness based on norm deviation, described reference groups (by age or locality), and whether or not they contained poison control assistance information. As visualized in Figure 3, results indicate that all of the listed variables were present, to varying degrees.
Sensationalism, as discussed above, helps spread the headlines and infect more nodes in the networks. My operational definition included inaccurate reporting and using highly emotive language to seize readers’ attention. Inaccuracies were located in four headlines. Two insinuated that the TPC was deadly whereas no deaths have been linked to the challenge directly (Dapcevich, 2018; Nico, 2018). Another falsely reported that security was tightened around Tide PODS in stores because of the TPC (Beckman, 2018) and the last reported irrelevant statistics and failed to give it proper context throughout the article (Ingraham, 2018). The indicator of emotional language, was visible in 44% of headlines analyzed. From these results we can see that, although not all journalists and editors sensationalized the issue, a large proportion of these did employ sensationalization tactics enough to keep the public and social media agenda on the TPC for an extended length of time.

The next variable was norm deviation. Headlines which stressed the abnormality of eating laundry detergent indicating judgement of the TPC participants or contempt for the behavior, accounted for 33% of cases. This illustrates the employment of deviant behaviors as a measure for newsworthiness. This research is limited to headlines and a cursory glance over the articles themselves surely reveals a higher ratio. As mentioned above, even seemingly neutrally titles articles can reveal an author’s bias.

Reference groups, mentions of age range or locality proved to be an interesting variable. Figure 4 shows the results by date. 33% of headlines indicated the adolescents as the groups active in the media trend.
There were also a few mentions of locality, although not enough to be significant. The peak in mentions of the age reference group on the 12th suggests a correspondence with the rise in YouTube videos uploaded after the 13th (See Figure two). Identification of teen mass media consumers with those purported by the headlines to be taking part in these trends puts this at-risk group in danger. The media creates both normative and comparative reference groups through which many teens shape their behaviors. They see the ‘standard’ behavior of people their age to be taking part in the TPC and so are more likely seek risk and through that reward.

The final variable was whether or not the articles themselves contain the direct number to an emergency number or poison control. This was simply to gauge if the media producer was acting in the public’s interest. Including this number shows that they are taking into consideration the possibility that someone who had intentionally or unintentionally ingested laundry detergent had chanced upon their article. Thirty-three percent of the articles were found to have planned for such a scenario. Suicide guidelines already contain a clause encouraging the inclusion of suicide hotlines in articles relating to the subject. As most media specialists should already be aware of the suicide guidelines, it is promising that many took the initiative and applied this suggestion to the cases of social media trends. There are many other aspects to these guidelines which were not taken into account, however, and it is these that I address in the next section.
4 Ethical guideline proposal

The WHO’s publication “Preventing Suicide: a global imperative” outlines the following:

“Important aspects of responsible reporting include: avoiding detailed descriptions of suicidal acts, avoiding sensationalism and glamorization, using responsible language, minimizing the prominence of suicide reports, avoiding oversimplifications, educating the public about suicide and available treatments, and providing information on where to seek help (56). Media collaboration and participation in the development, dissemination and training of responsible reporting practices are also essential for successfully improving the reporting of suicide and reducing suicide imitation” (Saxena, Krug, Chestnov, & World Health Organization, 2014, p. 50)

With this in mind, I now turn to the most pragmatic section of my research. The goal of this guideline is to prevent the proliferation of these trends in social and mass media through three phases: Identification, Covering and Removing Content.

Identifying harmful trends is the simplest of all the steps. In fact, when media outlets choose to publish pieces about these trends it is precisely because they are dangerous. In order to assess the potential risk these trends pose, the media producer should consider the groups involved. If these groups are under age they should be considered especially at-risk for performing copycat acts. In addition, the threat of physical harm or fatality should be weighed heavily and considerations must be taken to prevent the story from breaking without ethical deliberation. This is especially important in cases that may seem humorous as they tend to be overlooked for serious analysis.

When a responsible journalist or editor comes across a story involving such activities, they “must balance the public’s right to know with the need not to exacerbate the situation” in
deciding if or how to cover it (Grun, 2018, p. 58). Once a trend is identified as potentially harmful, the media producer must decide if or how to cover it. This responsibility involves a certain amount of insight into the minds of the readers and a sensitivity to public interest. The balance between a headline satisfying the public’s right to know and the necessity to contain the problem can sometimes be a difficult task. My main suggestions for do’s and don’ts in this case are outlined in Figure 5 and are modeled after the Samaritans’ Media Guide for Reporting Suicide (Samaritans, n.d.). This framework from the Samaritans is among the most exhaustive and inclusive sets of instructions for reporting on suicide. By modifying and expanding on the original document, these seven guidelines can be effectively applied to cases of potentially harmful to social media trends. Most retain their original title, with minor changes for relevance, excluding the seventh which is my own contribution. The detailed commentary is my own.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 5: Ethical Guidelines</th>
<th>General Rule</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Think about the impact of the coverage on your audience</td>
<td>● Any media publication will have intended and unintended outcomes. Think through all possible consumers of the publication and how their personal frame of reference may affect the message. Provide information on how to mitigate the effects of the trend such as poison hotlines, emergency numbers and/or applicable medical advice.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exercise caution when referring to the methods and context of a viral trend</td>
<td>● Giving too much detail about the trend, especially in the headline itself, should be avoided. This is especially stressed for unusual or new trends as potential participants may be able to gather all the information necessary to perform the act from a cursory glance at a home page.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoid risk of over-identification with the participants of trends.</td>
<td>Avoid risk of over-identification with the participants of trends. This includes omitting personal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>information and relatable details such as their desire for online popularity or trouble fitting in</td>
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<td></td>
<td>in non-virtual contexts.</td>
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<td>Avoid over-simplification</td>
<td>These trends do not appear out of nowhere overnight. Reporting the history of the trend could</td>
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<td></td>
<td>describe the creation of the norms in such a way as to dispel the compulsion to take part. If a</td>
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<td></td>
<td>potential participant sees that a trend began as a joke they may think twice about taking it</td>
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<td>seriously.</td>
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<td>Steer away from melodramatic depictions of the trend or its effects</td>
<td>Fatalities or permanent injuries associated with these situations must be treated delicately.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Families or communities suffering from these losses may not want the attention of the media, nor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>to be reminded of possibly tragic events.</td>
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<td>Aim for non-sensationalising, sensitive coverage</td>
<td>This cannot be stressed enough. The language the media uses can make or break a viral trend.</td>
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<td>Avoid implying that taking part in the behavior achieved results. This can be seen on social media</td>
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<td></td>
<td>as mentioning number of views, hits, comments, reactions, or offline as getting parental attention,</td>
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<td>gaining popularity or appearing on media mediums.</td>
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<td>Do not perform interviews with participants of trends. This increases the chance of copycat</td>
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<td>behaviors twofold: in that the same treatment may be desired and that the chance of identification</td>
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<td></td>
<td>with the participant is strengthened.</td>
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<td>Consider carefully the placement and illustration of reports</td>
<td>The goal of the publication should be to mitigate the effects of the trend. With this in mind,</td>
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<td>consider publishing the material in a section devoted to health or public service announcements. If</td>
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<td>the at-risk group is teenagers, the article should be aimed at informing parents to help them</td>
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<td>protect their children and so</td>
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| should be published in a section frequented by parents. Avoid front-page placement.  
| ● DO NOT include videos or photos of the behavior. This is counter-productive and will damage any efforts to wipe the content from the internet.  
| Create a positive norm  
| ● Stress how few of those exposed to these trends actually take part. Focus on positive behaviors such as those who stopped their friends from taking part or those who reported dangerous actions to authority figures.  
| ● Give publicity and draw public attention to the millions of members of the internet community who contribute with novel and artistic or educational or useful material. Move away from the ‘bad’ news as newsworthy model and circulate information and stories advancing a positive norm.  
|  
| Finally, removing content should be initiated only as a last resort. This should be a concerted effort in partnership with other media platforms. As pointed out previously, the efficacy of removing content from YouTube is undermined when news media articles contain the same videos and are not taken down. Although in these cases it becomes more difficult to access the content, content restrictions should be universally applied in order to totally prevent access.  
| By following these guidelines, any morally aware media producer may be able to avoid another case of media contagion like the Tide Pod Challenge.  
|
5 Conclusion

The Tide Pod Challenge is a stunning example of how a hitherto unnoticed, niche internet joke can be taken to the extreme. The media’s complicity in the scope and longevity of this foolhardy dare is undeniable. My results, including comparisons between media coverage and calls to poison control centers, among other factors, indicate that the mass media publicity was the tipping point for the Challenge. Once the news was inundated with headlines painting a shocking picture of the reach of the Tide Pod Challenge the floodgates opened and teens rushed forth to join the fad. Reference groups and reward-seeking behavior played pivotal roles in this sudden upswing in participation, as did basic network virality.

The mass media is not an isolated medium and future research should strive to take this into account. Studies of how these trends diffuse in social media as well as offline could provide insight into new ways to prevent their viral spread. Additionally, parents can be an important influence group in the lives of teens and their role in both protecting their children and bringing attention to the trend, albeit with good intention, deserves study. My research was highly limited to simply headlines and quantitative data and should be seen as preliminary findings. Hopefully we will never see another viral trend as senseless as the Tide Pod Challenge, but this necessitates a change in the way social media issues are publicized.

In looking to the future, we must work to create positive descriptive and comparative norms for young people today. By sensationalizing the reckless actions of a few internet denizens, the media has once again reproduced the concept that teens are foolish trend-followers always seeking attention and danger. Instead, through publicizing praiseworthy behaviors and
novel contributions of adolescents to society, the media can construct an image of the youth as innovators and individuals. The youth are the future of our communities, they should not be painted with one brush. Peer pressure should not come from the media, adolescents already have enough as it is.
References


CollegeHumor. (n.d.). *Don’t Eat the Laundry Pods. (Seriously. They’re Poison.*)* Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pM6wanZOLtk


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Appendix: Code Book

1. Reference Group Codes
   a. Does the word ‘teen,’ ‘adolescent,’ ‘kid,’ ‘millennial’ or ‘young people’ appear in the headline? Y/N
   b. Does the headline refer to locality? Y/N

2. Sensationalist Codes
   a. Does the headline contain language appealing to emotion? This would include exaggerations, pleas to stop, fear mongering. This would not include the words dangerous or harmful, as these are accurate, but rather warnings of death, mentions of pain, etc. Y/N
   b. Are there statistics or data in the headline? If not, mark this field ‘not applicable’. If so, are they inaccurate and/or explained in a way which may mislead the reader into a false understanding of the situation in a cursory reading of the article? Y/N

3. Factors of newsworthiness as related to deviance from norms-
a. Does the headline imply judgement? Using words like ‘stupid, ‘ridiculous,’ expressing shock, exacerbation, condescension, etc. Y/N

4. Link to poison control within article? Y/N

Acknowledgments

My gratitude and appreciation upon the completion of this project go to three people, without whom it would not have been possible. Thank you.

MartonRetvari: Supervisor

Anna ‘PP’ Humphreys: editor and co-coder

Erdost Akin: bringer of snacks and insight