THE CLOCK FINALLY READS 5 P.M. TIME TO HEAD FOR HOME.
WHAT A DAY! THE OFFICE WAS BUZZING WITH RUMORS ABOUT
LAYOFFS AFTER NEWS REPORTS ABOUT THE POUNDING YOUR
COMPANY TOOK ON WALL STREET. > WHILE DRIVING HOME
YOU TUNE TO THE LOCAL NEWS RADIO STATION TO GET
THE TRAFFIC REPORT. THE REPORTER’S VOICE IS DRONING
ON ABOUT THE LATEST ATTACK BY A GROUP OF CRIMINALS
STAGING “HOME INVASION” ROBBERIES IN YOUR CITY.
EARLIER TODAY THEY KILLED A WOMAN. A COMPANION STORY
COVERS A LIST OF PREVENTATIVE ACTIONS SUGGESTED BY
LOCAL POLICE TO HELP PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY.
> HOME AT LAST. YOU HUG YOUR WIFE AND KIDS AND TURN
ON THE TELEVISION. THE LOCAL NEWS IS JUST BEGINNING.
UP FIRST IS A 1-MINUTE STORY ON HOW LOCAL SCHOOLS
ARE FALLING BEHIND THE NATIONAL AVERAGE, HOW LOCAL
KIDS AREN’T LEARNING, AND A LIST OF WHAT YOU NEED
TO DO ABOUT THE PROBLEM. > NATIONAL NEWS IS NEXT.
THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM GRINDS ON. NEW SECURITY
PROCEDURES ARE GOING INTO EFFECT AT THE AIRPORT.
FIGHTING CONTINUES IN MANY COUNTRIES. NATIONAL LEADERS
DISAGREE ABOUT HOW MUCH PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE AND
WHAT SHOULD BE DONE NEXT. > YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED.
INFORMATION FLOWS AT YOU FROM EVERY DIRECTION;
AT WORK, IN THE CAR, AT HOME. IT NEVER STOPS. YOU’RE CON-
 Tinuously BOMBARDED BY THE PROBLEM OF THE WEEK,
THE DAY, EVEN THE MOMENT. IN A WAY, YOU’VE BEEN FRAMEd.
Morality Re-Play

One of the keys to David Altheide’s view of the mass media is the understanding of what he calls the “problem frame.”

The “problem frame” is not a political bias to either the left or right, says Altheide, Regents Professor of Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. Altheide says that “The Problem” is also more than just the topics or issues covered by David Altheide. Regents Professor of Criminal Justice at Arizona State University. Altheide says that “The Problem” is also more than just the topics or issues covered by the media. Researchers use the method to study the content of news reports and popular culture. Altheide argues that the media have become both an information source as well as a source of entertainment.

The results from lots of opinion polls indicate that many Americans remain fearful despite clear evidence. The news business has an accepted way of doing things,” he says. “The most successful and profitable news programs tend to be those that use the news frame as a way to attract an audience. One of the keys to success is the entertainment element. If you’re not entertaining, people won’t watch.”

The difference is easy to see. Altheide suggests looking at the contrast between past and current television newscasts. Baby boomers grew up watching relatively simple newscasts dominated by anchormen such as Walter Cronkite or David Brinkley. Today’s newscasts place a much larger emphasis on entertainment. Perfectly coiffed news readers laugh and giggle as they provide the latest gossip about celebrities. They also devote lots of time to stories about food preparation, hot new restaurants, or updates on the latest fashions and fads. “The entertainment elements are now dominant,” Altheide says. “It is now built into the very structure of how news is reported and presented in America.”

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David Altheide

Universal and Moral: The story could or does affect many people.

Specific time and place: a specific location and time is involved, providing urgency.

Unambiguous: the event is wrong and there is a solution, culturally resonant: the story is something that people can identify with easily.

Narrative structure: there is a story that can be told.

Focus on disorder: whether the story is about crime, drugs, missing children, or terrorists.

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Altheide identifies six elements that make up the “problem frame.” Each element also appears in morality plays.

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The news media, says Altheide, Regents Professor of Criminal Justice at Arizona State University, is more than just the topics or issues covered by the media. Researchers use the method to study the content of news reports and popular culture. Altheide argues that the media have become both an information source as well as a source of entertainment.

“The blending of news/information values and entertainment values has gotten us to where we are today,” he explains. “New programs and newspapers are big business. They make a lot of money for corporations.”

Altheide says that comic book villain Lex Luthor, Superman’s arch enemy, says it all in a single phrase. Luthor’s pithy comment in the movie Superman IV is simple: “The more fear you make, the more loot you take.”

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News stories are often presented in what Altheide describes as a “problem frame.” The format allows reporters a platform on which to present news stories and attract and entertain an audience at the same time. “In an effort to attract larger and larger audiences, media people have gone back into our cultural history and adopted a format that is time proven—the morality play. Many religions used the morality play format to teach concepts of right and wrong,” Altheide explains.

The current “War on Terrorism” is a good example of how leaders use the morality play to generate fear-inspired news reports. President Bush speaks about “evil ones” and “evil doers.” The nation remains on “alert.” The next attack could come at any time.

“The morality play is simple. It is based on the idea that a problem exists. The problem can be solved,” Altheide adds. “The problem can be solved through the use of a moral principle.”

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This produces entertaining news and great propaganda. Altheide says that the problem frame can be applied to the same story many times. "The frame for the first is the actual event or problem and the actions of the first responders," he explains. "The frame is then applied to those who were directly affected by the event in the first place and the people who are hiding them. The third concerns on the search for the cause and possible solutions."

"By the fourth story, the frame is applied to possible solutions," he continues. "The fifth story is when a government body proposes to take action on a solution related to the problem of the event. The sixth is the reaction to the proposed solutions, and so on. In a way, the separate stories just add together and become like the frames in a motion picture."

Altheide says that nearly all of episodic television is based on the morality play model. A problem is presented at the beginning of the show. A solution is usually achieved by the time the program ends.

Crime dramas are the easiest to classify," he explains. "Over the course of a 30 or 60 minute program the following occurs: A crime is committed. The crime is investigated. A culprit is identified. The culprit is then apprehended, prosecuted, and sometimes punished, usually in time for the closing credits."

The most terrorism news reports are an adaptation of the "crime story." It works the same way in comedy programming. A situation develops. The situation has funny consequences. The situation is resolved in one way or another by the time the episode ends. The same format is used in a highly compressed format for television news programs. Shorter news paper and magazine stories follow similar formats.

"Our attention spans seem to be shorter," Altheide says. "As a result, the news story, both print and broadcast versions, keeps getting shorter and shorter." The result is a highly compressed version of the morality play. Instead of straightforward reporting, news media outlets seem to look for the cause of an event even as the event itself is continuing to unfold. At the same time, other commentators, news analysts, or guest experts, are looking for ways to prevent "the problem" in the future.

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David Altheide's newest book about the news media is called Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crises (Social Problems and Social Issues) published by Aldine De Gruyter.

During research for the book, the ASU scholar used electronic information databases and a method he calls "tracking discourse" to map how use of the word "fear" has changed since the mid-1980s. He found that the word "fear" is mentioned in news articles much more often in recent years. He also examined how certain news sources tend to prevail over others. The creative use of fear by the news media has produced what Altheide terms a "discourse of fear"—the awareness and expectation that danger and risk are lurking everywhere. Case studies in his book illustrate how certain organizations and social institutions benefit from the exploitation of such fear mongering.

Altheide says that one social impact is a manipulated public empathy: We now have more "victims" than at any time in our prior history. "When certain problems can be cast with TV formats as arenas for disputes, disagreements, conflicts and struggle, and when these can be visually illustrated, one has the formula for good entertainment, good audience ratings, constant awareness of problems, and a sense of a very troubled world."

Another, more troubling result is the role we have ceded to law enforcement and punishment," Altheide adds. "We turn ever more readily to the state and formal control to protect us from what we fear."