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Author(s): Amy Binder

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CONSTRUCTING RACIAL RHETORIC: MEDIA DEPICTIONS OF HARM IN HEAVY METAL AND RAP MUSIC*

AMY BINDER
Northwestern University

The literatures on social movements, the media, and the sociology of culture have addressed how ideological frames are imposed on social events and cultural texts. I extend this work on "social framing" by describing the construction and selection processes that explain why media writers appropriate some frames but not others, and why some frames "resonate" with broader cultural beliefs. I analyze the rhetoric in media accounts from 1985 to 1990 of the dangers posed to children and society by heavy metal music and rap music. I also examine the images used to amplify each genre of music. Although both genres have lyrical and performance elements focusing on sex and defiance of authority strong enough to evoke a moral outcry, they evoke quite different reactions. I argue that the racial composition of the music's audiences and producers shape the way the two genres are perceived.

In September 1985, a group of politically well-connected "Washington Wives" calling themselves the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) was invited to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. Led by Tipper Gore (wife of then Senator Al Gore of Tennessee) and Susan Baker (wife of then Treasury Secretary James Baker), the group's objective was to reveal to committee members the current state of rock music lyrics—particularly the lyrics of heavy metal music. The PMRC and its expert witnesses testified that such music filled youthful ears with pornography and violence, and glorified behaviors ranging from suicide and drug use to occultism and anti-patriotic ac-

tivities. The mass media covered the hearing in great detail, provoking debate in the national press over the alleged harmfulness of rock music lyrics and whether the proposed labeling of music lyrics constituted censorship.

Almost five years later, another event again focused the nation's attention on music lyrics—the lyrics in rap music. In June 1990, a U.S. District Court judge in Fort Lauderdale, Florida found the 2 Live Crew album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* to be obscene in the three counties under his jurisdiction. This was the first recording ever declared obscene by a federal court (*New York Times* 17 June, 1990). During the following week, authorities from one of those counties' Sheriff's Department—Broward County—arrested a local record storeowner who had continued to sell the album and took into custody two members of the 2 Live Crew band when they performed material from the album at an adults-only show in the area. The arrests and impending trials again galvanized heated public debate over whether the lyrics in contemporary music harmed listeners and warranted restriction.

These two widely publicized debates about contemporary music, both of which concerned "harmful" lyrics and occurred within five years of each other, provide comparative cases for examining how the mass media serve as an ideological vehicle. In both cases, writers in the mainstream press expressed concern about the harm that could result from exposure to lyrics

* Direct all correspondence to Amy Binder, Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, 1810 Chicago Avenue, Evanston, IL 60208. I am grateful to the Department of Sociology at Northwestern for its Summer Fellowship Program which supported me during data collection. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 1992, Pittsburgh, and at the annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, October 1992, Chicago. I thank Alan Dahl, Wendy Espeland, Jim Ettema, Paul Hirsch, Douglas Holt, Aldon Morris, and Art Stinchcombe for their helpful suggestions, and three anonymous *ASR* reviewers, whose comments greatly improved the paper. I reserve very special thanks for Nicola Beisel, who helped design this project and has read and commented on several drafts of this paper.

containing sexual and violent themes, and called for action against such content. Despite these similarities, however, the substance of media arguments changed significantly as the controversy shifted from heavy metal music to rap music. Foremost among these differences was the change in emphasis regarding whom the music was harming: the individual listener or society as a whole.

I suggest that two factors drove the changes in the media discourse surrounding the dangers of heavy metal music versus rap music. One factor is the difference in the content of the lyrics themselves. In general, the controversial rap lyrics were more graphic than their heavy metal counterparts, and discussions in the media reflected this variation.

Second, the broad cultural context in which the “white” music and “black” music were being received also significantly affected changes in the discourse. Rather than asserting a simple reflection model (i.e., the media only mirror “what’s out there”), I argue that the pronounced shift in the discourse about lyrics cannot be explained by differences in the cultural objects alone. Instead, the shift reflects opinion writers’ perceptions of the populations represented by these two musical genres. Writers who were concerned about heavy metal lyrics and rap lyrics did not address the content of the music alone; embedded in their discussions were reactions to differences in the demographic characteristics of the genres’ producers and audiences—music made by and for working and middle-class white youth versus music they perceived as predominantly by and for urban black teenagers.¹ In a cultural landscape marked by divergent perceptions of black youths versus white youths, different concerns emerged in the mainstream media about the impact of each group’s form of cultural expression. I show that rap music—with its evocation of angry black rappers and equally angry black audiences—was simultaneously per-

ceived as a more authentic and serious art form than was heavy metal music, and as a more frightening and salient threat to society as a whole than the “white” music genre.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Interest in the mass media as a primary site for the construction and dissemination of dominant ideologies was first formally developed in the writings of theorists associated with the Frankfurt School (Adorno 1957; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). Writers working from this perspective argued that the mass media—as key members of the culture industry—were the principal channels for ideological discourse in contemporary society (Thompson 1990). As originally set forth, this thesis subscribed to a hegemonic conception of the media as purveyors of a single dominant ideology. This theory has been widely contested on empirical grounds (Cantor 1980; Schudson 1989a). In the past several decades, sociologists and other researchers interested in the mass media have developed a subtler and more nuanced explanation of ideological communication.

Building on this thesis, recent studies have demonstrated that the news media actively construct the events they report by responding to economic and organizational considerations in producing the news (Tuchman 1972, 1973; Gans 1979) and, more important for the purpose of this study, by providing the available means through which audiences make sense of events or objects. This perspective suggests that the news media’s impact is not so much the result of outright statements about what audiences are to believe, but rather comes from the selection and application of the cultural lenses (Geertz 1973) through which events are portrayed. To examine how the media influence audience perceptions, the codes the media use to frame public discussions of events or objects must be examined.

Framing and Media Discourse Theory

Frames and frameworks are “schemata of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label” events they have experienced directly or indirectly (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986, p. 464; see also Goffman 1974, p. 21). Frames help receivers make sense of social occurrences be-

¹ In my data, the vast majority of media writers—particularly those who thought that rap music was dangerous—assume that rap music is produced and consumed exclusively by black youths. The popular assumption about all-black rap audiences was refuted in a cover story in the *New Republic* (11 Nov. 1991), in which the author David Samuels demonstrated that, in absolute numbers, more white suburban youths consume rap music than poor black youths.

cause they organize events into recognizable patterns and help individuals understand what actions they can then take in light of these events.

Frames are also used by cultural producers like social movement activists or media writers to describe social phenomena. Sociologists interested in how the media construct reality have described how media writers use frames to selectively represent certain elements of their stories (Gamson and Modigliani 1989) and to emphasize some information to the exclusion of other data. Framing an issue by using a repertoire of arguments creates a dominant reading of the text, thereby reducing readers' capacities to comprehend the text differently (Entman 1991). This framing effect serves an ideological function when the frames reinforce unequal social relations by those institutionally empowered to do so (Hall 1982; Thompson 1990).

The study of framing must consider not only the *effects* of framing, but also how the media choose certain frames for events and objects in the first place, and why a subset of these frames "work" (i.e., become the dominant mode of discussing a particular issue in the mass media and by the general public). In other words, researchers must also ask how and why certain frames resonate with cultural beliefs in the society at large.

Gitlin (1980), Gamson and Modigliani (1989), and Beisel (1993) have suggested that frames imposed on events or objects resonate when they can be confirmed, bolstered, or otherwise reinforced by the interpretive schemata of larger cultural frames. A frame has a much greater chance of success if it draws on some conscious or subconscious, unified or disorganized belief held in the culture at large. To create an account that resonates, a writer must at least tell a story that makes sense according to these beliefs, or "cultural givens" (Schudson 1989a). For example, in their analysis of the debate about nuclear energy, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argued that the *progress* frame is powerful because it draws on American beliefs and values about the desirability of scientific and technological progress.

Similarly, in his comparative analysis of media reports on the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 by the Soviet military versus the U.S. military's downing of Iran Air Flight 655, Entman (1991) examined events that could have been framed similarly, but were discussed

using very different frames. Essential to the present research is Entman's (1991) examination of how successful frames "cohere with an established discursive domain, a series of associated idea clusters that form a way of reasoning about a matter that is familiar to audiences from other cultural experiences" (p. 11).

By specifying the connections made between frames present in media accounts and larger cultural frames, these studies have increased our understanding of how resonance works. However, in their efforts to identify those frames that resonate, researchers have too often relied on a tautological argument, arguing, in effect, "I know this frame is resonant with cultural beliefs because it is used often; this frame is used often because it is resonant." This tautology can be avoided and our understanding of framing practices enhanced by redirecting research in either of two ways.

First, researchers could examine how frames resonate with beliefs in the culture at large by focusing on the *audience* side of framing, accomplished through sustained qualitative work with audiences (as Radway [1984], Press [1991], and Shively [1992] have done for other cultural objects). Alternatively, researchers could more carefully study the *writer/production* side of framing by studying the techniques used by media writers to build these linkages. Writer techniques would include the tropes, narrative structure, or "emplotment" (White 1978) employed in the frames. I follow this second route and look at the elements that make up successful frames, specifically, the images that are used to construct frames.

Referent Images

Media writers frame events and objects in a rhetorically forceful manner (Schudson 1989b) by using arguments that have empirical credibility, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992). Cultural frames are abstractions that writers and their audiences use to make sense of their experiences. Thus, a crucial rhetorical hurdle for the media writer applying a frame to a particular issue is to demonstrate the relevance of the frame to the reader and to bring the frame to life. I argue that one central technique used by media writers to demonstrate such relevance and to amplify the importance of the object under discussion is to invoke *referent images*.

Writers make sense of an issue by conjuring up beliefs and values the larger culture takes for granted. They do this by comparing the object to images of past events in the collective memory or to revered cultural icons. Such referent images are used as metaphors to frame the meaning of the event at hand and provide a compelling interpretation of it (Fine and Sandstrom 1993). Following the writer's lead, readers recall these memories or images, try to apply them as the media writer indicates, and to some degree, either accept or reject this framing of the social phenomenon. (The reader's application of these images and frames is reminiscent of Swidler's [1986] tool kit metaphor.)

By calling up these images and memories, media writers connect the specific event or object being discussed to general cultural frames. I argue that the ability of a media frame to resonate depends on the specific images used to construct it. Because a set of referent images is always available for a writer to choose from and because there is nothing "natural" about selecting one image or cultural memory over another, the writer's choice of referent images is a potential site of ideological discourse, as is the choice of frame.

A comparative study of media discourse is an ideal venue for examining how the media select from available cultural frames to make sense of controversial events, and how they select particular referent images to add rhetorical power to their choice of frame. For the heavy metal and rap genres, the lyrical content at issue was controversial enough to evoke a clear moral outcry in the press. But while the controversies were similar in content, the frames and referent images that media writers selected to discuss rap lyrics differed markedly from those previously used to portray heavy metal lyrics.

METHODOLOGY

I examine the national discourse surrounding the harmfulness of music lyrics by analyzing nationally distributed mainstream publications that target a range of audiences. Demographic profiles as of 1991 provided by these publications show that readerships varied along socioeconomic lines: the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine have the wealthiest and most highly educated readers, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News*

Table 1. Distribution of Articles by Type of Music for Mainstream Publications and African-American Publications, 1985–1990

Type of Publication and Year	Type of Music			Total
	Heavy Metal	Rap	Heavy Metal and Rap	
<i>Mainstream Publications</i> ^a				
1985	13	1	1	15
1986	1	5	0	6
1987	4	7	0	11
1988	6	7	0	13
1989	5	5	5	15
1990	5	33	10	48
Total	34	58	16	108
<i>African-American Magazines</i> ^b				
1985	0	0	0	0
1986	0	1	0	1
1987	0	0	0	0
1988	0	2	0	2
1989	0	1	0	1
1990	0	6	0	6
Total	0	10	0	10

^a The *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Reader's Digest*.

^b *Ebony* and *Jet*.

and *World Report* represent an intermediate socioeconomic level, and the readership of the *Reader's Digest* has low levels of annual income and education. The publications also vary politically: the *New York Times* is considered one of the most liberal large newspapers, the *Reader's Digest* is considered conservative, and the other three publications fall somewhere in between.

For comparison to this mainstream debate, which was written for a "general" (primarily white) American readership, I also examined the discourse in two popular middle-class publications that serve a predominantly black readership: *Ebony* and *Jet* (hereafter referred to as black or African-American magazines). The articles in these African-American magazines were coded to determine if the race of the readership made a difference in how the music genres were framed.

The articles published in the five mainstream publications and the two black magazines were located in the *Reader's Guide to Periodicals* and the Lexis/Nexis data bank. Between 1985 and 1990, these publications printed more than 1,000 news and opinion articles that concerned heavy metal music or rap music. Of these, 108

of the mainstream articles and 10 of the black magazines' articles were opinion pieces that specifically addressed the lyric content of the music. As shown in Table 1, 34 articles in these five mainstream publications addressed heavy metal music (13 of them written in 1985, the year of the Senate hearing), 58 articles addressed rap music (33 of them written in 1990, the year of the 2 Live Crew arrests), and 16 articles addressed both genres. In the African-American magazines, all 10 articles were written about rap music. Although all of the roughly 1,000 articles were read, for methodological and theoretical reasons I limited coding and analysis to these 118 opinion articles.²

The 118 opinion pieces were content-analyzed using coding categories constructed by the author. This first reading generated 68 categories, which were collapsed into nine frames. This set of nine frames accounts for the total discourse surrounding the issue of harm in lyrics in these publications from 1985 to 1990. Each article was then read again to determine which of the nine frames were used in each piece. The mean number of frames per article was 1.6.³

The official transcripts of the 1985 Senate Committee hearing and Tipper Gore's 1987 book, *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, provided a deeper understanding of the historical narrative concerning this issue.

To address the issue of whether frames were suggested by the cultural objects themselves, I also analyzed the lyrics of a representative sample of the most controversial heavy metal

² Methodologically, using opinion articles makes content analysis simpler, more precise, and more valid. Because the opinion writer's job is to "articulate and crystallize" a given issue (Gamson and Modigliani 1989), opinion articles have fewer conflicting assertions compared to news stories, which must present "both sides" of the story. Coding what the opinion writer "really means" in his or her story is considerably easier.

The theoretical rationale lies in the fact that opinion writers represent the most open expressions of subjective opinion in a news publication. If *encoded* messages occur in opinion articles, then they are probably present in "objective" news stories as well.

³ Some frames were often used alone to support an argument about music's effects, which suggests that these were particularly powerful frames. Other frames were more likely to be used in tandem with other frames.

and rap songs. To determine the universe of controversial songs from which to choose a sample, I compared "offensive" songs listed in the Parents' Music Resource Center's press packet with all songs cited in the 118 opinion articles. In these sources, 33 different songs were mentioned a total of 137 times, either by title or by the albums that contained them. I considered these the most controversial songs of the debate.⁴ I then randomly selected and coded 20 of the 33 songs.

HARMFUL OR NOT HARMFUL: FRAMING MUSIC LYRICS

Popular music has always been denigrated by adult society. Musical genres like the blues, jazz, and early rock and roll and dances like the jitterbug, samba, and rumba provoked complaints from the older generation about the perversion and general corruption of its children (Peterson 1972; McDonald 1988; Rosenbaum and Prinsky 1991). Thus, the controversy that made its way into the limelight in the late 1980s to early 1990s was one episode in an ongoing debate.

But to understand the specific nature of the controversy surrounding the lyrics in heavy metal music and rap music, it is necessary to examine the two defining events that shaped this media discourse: the Senate hearing in 1985 and the arrests and trials of rap musicians and record storeowners in Florida in 1990. The data in Table 1 indicate that these events focused the media discourse first on heavy metal music (in 1985, 13 of 15 mainstream articles addressed heavy metal) and later on rap music (in 1990, 33 of 48 mainstream articles addressed rap). In the intervening years, 1986 to 1989, mainstream media attention was more evenly split between the two music genres.

The Senate Hearing and Its Aftermath

Considered the "hottest ticket in town all year" (Gore 1987), the 1985 standing-room-only Senate hearing launched a maelstrom of media debate about music lyrics. The competing arguments introduced at the hearing were gener-

⁴ For each of the 137 mentions, I noted the year they appeared in the press or the PMRC list and determined how many songs from each year should be represented in the sample.

ally used to discuss heavy metal for the duration of the five-year debate.

One of the most frequent arguments made about heavy metal music throughout the five-year controversy was introduced in 1985 by members of the PMRC and its witnesses. This argument, which I call the *corruption* frame, stated that explicit lyrics—whether glorifying suicide, anti-authority attitudes, or deviant sexual acts—have a negative effect on children’s attitudes. This frame emphasized the music’s corrupting effect on young listeners rather than on the effects such listeners might have on the society at large. A five-minute speech delivered to the Senate Committee by PMRC witness Joe Steussy illustrates this frame:

Today’s heavy metal music is categorically different from previous forms of popular music. . . . Its principal themes are, as you have already heard, extreme violence, extreme rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion, and Satanism. I know personally of no form of popular music before, which has had as one of its central elements the element of hatred. (U.S. Senate Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation 1985, p. 117)

The *corruption* frame also appeared frequently in the national press. In an article titled “How Shock Rock Harms Our Kids,” one writer argued, “lyrics glamorize drug and alcohol use, and glorify death and violent rebellion, ranging from hatred of parents and teachers to suicide—the ultimate act of violence to oneself” (*Reader’s Digest* July 1988, p. 101). The idea that children’s values were corrupted by music received considerable play inside and outside the Capitol.

Like *corruption*, the *protection* frame was also introduced around the time of the Senate hearing and was prominent in references to heavy metal music throughout the five-year debate. Similar to the rhetoric found in *corruption*, this frame argued that parents and other adults must shield America’s youth from offensive lyrics. Reflecting on her campaign against graphic lyrics, Tipper Gore (1987) wrote:

We feel as we do because we know that children are special gifts, and deserve to be treated with love and respect, gentleness and honesty. They deserve security and guidance about living, loving, and relating to other people. And they deserve vigilant protection from the excesses of adult society. (p. 46)

While opinions varied over how best to protect children from the dangers of lyrics (some thought that lyrics should be labeled, while others thought laws should be enacted against harmful music), the underlying theme infusing this argument invoked adult responsibility, particularly as exercised by caring parents. In his discussion of heavy metal, William Safire wrote:

I am a libertarian when it comes to the actions of consenting adults, and hoot at busybodies who try to impose bans on what non-violent grown-ups can say or read or do. With complete consistency, I am anti-libertarian when it comes to minors. Kids get special protections in law . . . and deserve protection from porn-rock profiteers. (*New York Times* 10 Oct. 1985, sect. 1, p. 31)

Danger to society was a third theme that emerged around the time of the Senate hearing, although arguments containing this frame were used infrequently in relation to the “white” music genre. In contrast to the *corruption* frame, which warned of harm to the individual, the *danger to society* frame warned that when lyrics glorify violence, all of society is at risk. As applied to heavy metal music, the argument focused largely on the satanic influences inherent in some heavy metal music, and warned that vulnerable youths under the music’s spell might wreak havoc on innocent citizens. Paul King, a child and adolescent psychiatrist who testified at the Senate hearing on behalf of the PMRC, stated:

One of the most pathological forms of evil is in the form of the cult killer or deranged person who believes it is OK to hurt others or to kill. The Son of Sam who killed eight people in New York was allegedly into Black Sabbath’s music. . . . Most recently, the individual identified in the newspapers as the Night Stalker has been said to be into hard drugs and the music of the heavy metal band AC/DC. . . . Every teenager who listens to heavy metal certainly does not become a killer. [But] young people who are seeking power over others through identification with the power of evil find a close identification. The lyrics become a philosophy of life. It becomes a religion. (U.S. Senate Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation 1985, p. 130)

In addition to cult-like violence, this frame—when it was used vis-à-vis heavy metal—suggested that violence against parents, teachers,

and sometimes women could also result from listening to this music.

Of course, the serious charges brought against music lyrics by the PMRC and supportive media writers did not go unanswered, either at the Senate hearings or in the media. Music industry executives, outraged musicians, and media writers hastened to defend the content of contemporary music and the artistic integrity of its creators. These arguments appeared in the counterframes that were produced in this debate.

Frank Zappa, John Denver, and Dee Snider (of the heavy metal band Twisted Sister) kicked off the attack against PMRC activities and concerns when they served as opposing witnesses at the Senate hearing, where these counterframes first widely appeared. One common argument, termed the *no harm* frame, argued that lyrics were not harmful to young listeners. Covering a variety of ideas around this central theme, this frame claimed that youthful audiences know that the cartoonish lyrics are not meant to be taken seriously, that songs with explicit lyrics represent a small minority of music, that music lyrics are a negligible part of the culture's barrage of sexual and violent images in the media, and that there is no causal connection between music and behavior. This last point was picked up by the media—one writer suggested that “the social impact of a heavy metal concert is belching” (*Time* 30 Sept. 1985, p. 70). The *no harm* frame was often used in this sarcastic manner, where the writer argued that music was safe and belittled the concerns of the opposition.

Opponents of the PMRC also suggested that opposition to heavy metal's lyrics could be explained by the generation gap between Gore and her allies, and the youths they sought to protect. The *generation gap* frame was used at the Senate hearing and subsequently to point out that vulgarity, parental anxiety, and censorship are all perennial concerns, and that outrage expressed about music lyrics bespeaks a generation gap between parents and their children. Although this frame's rhetoric is clearly a subset of the *no harm* frame (e.g., the music isn't harmful, parents just perceive it as harmful), it differs from the *no harm* frame by making explicit the role of parents in the controversy surrounding lyrics. In an article that appeared two weeks after the Senate hearing, Russell Baker picked up the

theme of misplaced, but predictable, parental concern:

Stirred by the [PMRC] alarmed mothers, my mind began playing back the full repertory of bawdy, off-color, and just downright dirty songs it had gathered during years when my mother would have cringed if I let on that I knew a more emphatic way of saying “gosh darn it all to the dickens.” (*New York Times* 13 Oct. 1985, sect. 6, p. 22)

The *threat to authorities* frame, which is closely related to the *generation gap* frame, suggested that people in positions of political power felt most threatened by contemporary music. Using this argument to ridicule a competing critic's attack on music, one writer complained:

[Mr. Goldman, a writer for the *National Review*] hallucinates rather luridly: “You needn't go to a slasher film to see a woman being disemboweled in a satanic ritual—just turn on your local music video station.” No example is named. Such notions have been a right-wing staple for decades, and they'd be as risible as Mr. Goldman's article if legislators hadn't begun to take them seriously. (*New York Times* 26 Mar. 1989, sect. 2, p. 24)

Here, the conservative right, which traditionally has caused trouble for youth culture, is blamed for the condemnation of music.

Witnesses at the Senate hearing and media writers frequently disparaged the concerns of the PMRC and its supporters by arguing that they advocated censorship. In one of the most colorful exchanges during the hearing, Frank Zappa charged that “the complete list of PMRC demands reads like an instruction manual for some sinister kind of toilet training program to house-break all composers and performers because of the lyrics of a few” (U.S. Senate Hearing Before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation 1985, p. 53). The *freedom of speech* frame maintained that labeling albums, printing lyrics on album covers, and encouraging musicians to use restraint restricted artists' First Amendment right to freedom of speech and created a “chilling effect” on expression. By arguing that “the real danger is presented not by rock music, but by those who want to control what should or should not be heard,” this frame minimized the perceived threat of graphic lyrics by focusing on the dangers of

abridging musicians' freedom of speech (*New York Times* 8 Dec. 1985, sect. 11, p. 40).

In a vivid example of how this discourse about music was a media dialogue, the *freedom of speech* counterframe spawned a counter-counterframe from media supporters of the PMRC, who claimed that they did not favor censorship. Writers sympathetic to the PMRC used the *not censorship* frame to defend their positions against accusations of censorship and presented themselves as providers of consumer information (to parents), not as enemies of free speech. Tipper Gore said:

We do not and have not advocated restrictions on [freedom of speech]; we have never proposed government action. What we are advocating, and what we have worked hard to encourage, is responsibility. (*Newsweek* 29 May 1989, p. 6)

Rap to the Fore: Framing 2 Live Crew

While most of the frames applied to heavy metal music were also applied to rap music, new concerns emerged as writers turned their attention to the "black" music genre. Some of these concerns were expressed in a frame new to the five-year debate, while others were voiced using frames already developed for heavy metal music.

For example, the *danger to society* frame was frequently used to talk about rap music following the arrests of 2 Live Crew in Florida. However, the concerns about the *types* of danger contained in rap lyrics differed sharply from the concerns about heavy metal. Rather than focusing on the dangers of one-in-a-million devil-worshipping mass killers, the *danger to society* frame as applied to rap much more pointedly emphasized that rap music created legions of misogynistic listeners who posed a danger to women, particularly because rap music depicted rape and other brutality. Providing a short inventory of women-harming abuses, one writer argued, "What we are discussing here is the wild popularity (almost 2 million records sold) of a group that sings about forcing anal sex on a girl and then forcing her to lick excrement. . . . Why are we so sure that tolerance of such attitudes has no consequences?" (*U.S. News and World Report* 2 July 1990, p. 15).

One counterframe that was specifically instituted for rap (although it later was occasionally applied to heavy metal) was the *important*

message/art frame, which was used most dramatically around the time of the government actions against rap music in Florida.

The *important message/art* frame, which argued against the "harmful" position, asserted that rap lyrics have serious content. The frame includes statements about the important messages and concerns of rap music, the artistic expression contained in the music, the lyrics as a reflection of urban reality, and the fact that rappers were positive role models for young black listeners. Foreshadowing arguments that appeared four months later in the trial over 2 Live Crew lyrics, one media writer stated:

In its constantly changing slang and shifting concerns—no other pop has so many anti-drug songs—rap's flood of words presents a fictionalized oral history of a brutalized generation. (*New York Times* 17 June 1990, sect. 4, p. 1)

This frame argued that the music itself is worthy of serious contemplation, and that all people—black, white, young, old—could benefit from its important messages.

With the injection of new concerns in the *danger to society* frame and the emergence of the *important message/art* counterframe largely for rap, the set of frames used to analyze the discourse surrounding these two genres of music in the years 1985 through 1990 is complete.

RACIAL RHETORIC: MAPPING THE SHIFT IN FRAMES

The top half of Table 2 presents a percentage distribution of types of frames applied to heavy metal and rap music genres in mainstream publications. Mainstream media writers used certain frames about equally in their discussions of heavy metal and rap, suggesting that some frames were applicable to both genres. The *freedom of speech* and *not censorship* frames, for example, were about equally frequent in the discourse about both music forms. Both frames were used in 1985 in reference to heavy metal and continued to characterize the discourse about rap. Other frames, however, were applied primarily to one genre and not the other.

"Music Is Harmful" Frames

A pronounced shift occurred in the frames used to construct the "harmful" discourse in the mainstream media: Frames that were used

most frequently to describe the dangers of heavy metal—*corruption* and *protection*—were rarely used to describe the harmfulness of rap music; conversely, the *danger to society* frame was prominent for rap music but not for heavy metal music. Thus, the frames used most often to decry heavy metal music were less salient for rap music, while the frames used most often to condemn rap music were less relevant for heavy metal music. The arguments represented by these frames may have been based on different referent images, given their disparate concerns.

The *corruption* frame, which accounted for more than one-third of all frames supporting the harmfulness of heavy metal music, concerned the music’s effects on young listeners’ values and behavior (e.g., the lyrics may lead some listeners to indulge in “self-destructive” activities). A corollary to this frame, the *protection* frame, urged parents and other adults to care enough about society’s youth to get involved in activities that would guarantee their children’s welfare. The *corruption* and *protection* frames together accounted for two-thirds of all “music-is-harmful” frames used in the mainstream press’ discussion of heavy metal music.

The power of these frames derived from the referent images they evoked. Articles in which the *corruption* frame appeared often referred to the writers’ own children (or children like theirs) being exposed to this dangerous material and the potential suffering because of it. Writer Kathy Stroud reported:

My 15-year-old daughter unwittingly alerted me to the increasingly explicit nature of rock music. “You’ve got to hear this, Mom!” she insisted one afternoon . . . , “but don’t listen to the words,” she added, an instant tip-off to pay attention. The beat was hard and pulsating, the music burlesque in feeling. . . . Unabashedly sexual lyrics like these, augmented by orgasmic moans and howls, compose the musical diet millions of children are now being fed at concerts, on albums, on radio and MTV. (*Newsweek* 6 May 1985, p. 14)

And in another article titled “What Entertainers Are Doing to Your Kids,” the following passage was one of many that charged that decent children were being exposed to obscene lyrics so that the music industry could profit:

President Reagan stepped into the fray in mid-October, venting outrage over music’s messages.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Frames by Type of Frame, for Mainstream Publications and African-American Publications and Type of Music, 1985–1990

Type of Publication and Frame	Type of Music		
	Percent Heavy Metal	Percent Rap	Percent Heavy Metal and Rap
MAINSTREAM PUBLICATIONS ^a			
(Chi-square = 72.1, 16 d.f., <i>p</i> < .01)			
<i>“Music Is Harmful” Frames</i>			
Corruption	34	0	31
Protection	31	14	23
Danger to society	13	64	38
Not censorship	22	21	8
Total	100	100	100
Number of frames	32	14	13
<i>“Music Is Not Harmful” Counterframes</i>			
Freedom of speech	18	14	37
No harm	39	22	16
Threat to authorities	4	1	21
Generation gap	25	3	5
Important message/art	14	60	21
Total	100	100	100
Number of frames	28	65	19
AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAGAZINES^b			
<i>“Music Is Harmful” Frames</i>			
Corruption	0	0	0
Protection	0	0	0
Danger to society	0	0	0
Not censorship	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0
Number of frames	0	0	0
<i>“Music Is Not Harmful” Counterframes</i>			
Freedom of speech	0	6	0
No harm	0	24	0
Threat to authorities	0	6	0
Generation gap	0	17	0
Important message/art	0	47	0
Total	0	100	0
Number of frames	0	17	0

^a The *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Reader’s Digest*.

^b *Ebony* and *Jet*.

"I don't believe our Founding Fathers ever intended to create a nation where the rights of pornographers would take precedence over the rights of parents, and the violent and malevolent would be given free rein to prey upon our children," the President told a Republican political meeting. According to growing numbers of critics, irresponsible adults in the entertainment business are bedazzling the vulnerable young with a siren song of the darker sides of life. Violence, the occult, sadomasochism, rebellion, drug abuse, promiscuity, and homosexuality are constant themes. (*U.S. News and World Report* 28 Oct. 1985, p. 46)

The frame's implicit message to the reader was that even privileged children from good homes were at risk from the lyrical content of heavy metal music. These arguments contended that *our own kids* were endangered by this music, a message that was absent from the frames used to discuss rap.

While the *corruption* and *protection* frames clearly emphasized the music's harmful effects on individual listeners, writers using these frames expressed little concern that the lyrics would have an unfortunate effect on other members of society. Except for a few references to satanic murders and abusiveness to women, articles using these two frames rarely mentioned the possibility that young listeners might violently direct their new-found rebellion, anti-authority sentiment, and heightened sexuality on the society at large.

The *danger to society* frame argued that changes in attitudes and behaviors stemming from lyrics endangered society as a whole (i.e., listening to lyrics that extol violence and the brutalization of women and police would lead to rape and murder). Nearly two-thirds of the "harmful" frames applied to rap music were the *danger to society* frame, compared to about one-tenth of the frames applied to heavy metal music.

It might be expected that in turning their attention from heavy metal to rap, media writers would have continued using the *corruption* frame and would have argued that rap lyrics harmed young black listeners by spreading messages that would lead to self-destructive behaviors. Because most writers considered rap lyrics to be even more explicit than the heavy metal messages, rap lyrics should have been framed as even more harmful to their young audience. Yet, rather than warning the American public that a generation of young

black children was endangered by musical messages, the writers argued that the American public at large would suffer at the hands of these listeners as a result of rap music. Clearly, the listener's welfare was no longer the focus of concern.

Unlike the referent images of "my daughter" and "our own kids" that appeared in articles about heavy metal, the prominent rap frames referred to a very different young listener: a young, urban, black male, or more often a group of urban, black male youths. George Will, drawing on the same images, invoked in the Summer 1990 trial of the alleged Central Park rapists, wrote:

Fact: some members of a particular age and social cohort—the one making 2 Live Crew rich—stomped and raped [a] jogger to the razor edge of death, for the fun of it. Certainty: the coarsening of a community, the desensitizing of a society will have behavioral consequences. (*Newsweek* 30 July 1990, p. 64)

An article called "Some Reasons for Wilding," which appeared approximately one year before Will's, used the same referent image of the Central Park rape. In this article, Tipper Gore and Susan Baker stated:

"Wilding." It's a new word in the vocabulary of teenage violence. The crime that made it the stuff of headlines is so heinous, the details so lurid as to make them almost beyond the understanding of any sane human being. When it was over, a 28-year old woman, an investment banker out for a jog, was left brutally beaten, knifed, and raped by teenagers. . . . "It was fun," one of her suspected teenage attackers told the Manhattan district attorney's office. In the lockup they were nonchalantly whistling at a policewoman and singing a high-on-the-charts rap song about casual sex: "Wild Thing." (*Newsweek* 29 May 1989, p. 6)

In this passage, the teenagers—who from media accounts were known to be black and Hispanic—"non-chalantly" whistle and sing rap lyrics following their alleged crime spree. The image of listeners here (minority, urban youths) differs dramatically from the listeners portrayed in articles about heavy metal (white, middle-class teenagers). Furthermore, the referent images of the threats posed by these two groups of youths also changed. Whereas "our

kids” listening to heavy metal lyrics might stray off their expected social tracks because of their incited disrespect for authority or early interest in sex,⁵ listeners to rap music were lamented not because their self-destructive activities were of great importance or concern, but because they would probably travel in packs, rape women, and terrorize society.

“Music Is Not Harmful” Counterframes

The arguments proclaiming that music was not harmful also shifted as the discussion turned from heavy metal to rap. While the *freedom of speech* and *threat to authorities* frames were used about equally for heavy metal and rap, the mainstream press used the three remaining frames (*generation gap*, *no harm*, and *important message/art*) differently for the two genres. The *generation gap* frame, which derided parents for following the age-old tradition of disliking their children’s music, made up 25 percent of the “not harmful” frames applied in the discourse about heavy metal, but only 3 percent of the frames used in the discourse about rap. Thus, writers on the “not harmful” side of the debate also detected the *parental* concerns that infused the debate about heavy metal—concerns that were largely absent in the debate about rap. That mainstream writers on the “not harmful” side rarely used the *generation gap* frame to defend rap against parental assaults is another indication of the invisibility of “parents” and “our kids” in the discourse about rap music.

Just as the *generation gap* frame was used disproportionately to defend heavy metal, so the *important message/art* frame was used asymmetrically by the mainstream press to defend rap. Led by the *New York Times*, 60 percent of the “not harmful” frames used for the “black” genre were the *important message/art* frame, compared to only 14 percent of the frames used for the “white” music form. Mainstream opinion writers described heavy metal music as exaggerated, cartoonish buffoonery that posed no danger to listeners (the *no harm* frame) while they legitimated rap as

an authentic political and artistic communication from the streets (the *important message/art* frame). Various described in the media as “folk art,” a “fresh musical structure,” a “cultural barometer,” and “a communiqué from the underclass,” rap was valorized as a serious cultural form by the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* (but not *U.S. News and World Report* or *Reader’s Digest*). As suggested by other authors (Bourdieu [1979] 1984; Thompson 1990), elites, such as writers and readers of the *New York Times*, seem to have exerted a pervasive effort to adopt rap as an “authentic” cultural form (just as jazz, country music, and comic books had been adopted previously), but to dismiss heavy metal as inconsequential—the politically empty macho posturing of white males.

As shown in the lower half of Table 2, the *important message/art* frame also received considerable play in the two African-American magazines, *Ebony* and *Jet*. Of the 10 articles published about music lyrics in these magazines from 1985 to 1990, all were about rap (presumably the “white” genre was not of concern to black readers’ children), and all argued that music was not harmful to children or society. Eight of the ten articles contained the *important message/art* frame.

Articles in *Ebony* and *Jet* consistently valorized rap music, assessing its lyrics as harmless and containing only positive and important messages from and for black youths. The African-American magazines also argued that the older black generation could learn something from rap: By listening to the lyrics of the music, black adults could comprehend the daily lives of their own children.

FRAMES SUGGESTED BY AND IMPOSED ON THE CULTURAL OBJECT

What accounts for the shifts in rhetoric about these two music genres, both of which present ostensibly “harmful” messages to listeners? If they are both so explicit, why did the mainstream media frame the two genres differently and use such divergent images to make their claims? One plausible explanation is that the lyrics in heavy metal are radically different from those in rap, and media writers merely reflected those differences. To examine this hypothesis, I looked at the lyrics that writers were responding to.

⁵ This rhetoric is similar to that used to describe the danger obscenity posed to wealthy children in the late nineteenth century (Beisel 1990).

Content of Lyrics

The content analysis of the lyrics of the 20 controversial songs sampled⁶ supports many media writers' claims that rap lyrics are more explicit than the lyrics in heavy metal. Although both genres contain potentially offensive elements, rap songs tend to have a higher frequency of offensive themes and to be more explicit than heavy metal songs. As shown in Table 3, two of the ten heavy metal songs and nine of the ten rap songs included hard swear words (e.g., "fuck," "shit," and "dick"), one heavy metal and seven rap songs depicted graphic sex, and no heavy metal songs and two rap songs portrayed violence against the police. While the lyrics of controversial heavy metal songs dealt primarily with anti-authority statements (against parents and teachers for the most part) and sometimes with violent metaphors for sex (such as "the rod of steel injects"), the majority of rap songs in the sample alluded to violent street scenes and graphic sexual behaviors. While heavy metal songs used double entendres and thinly-veiled symbolic allusions to refer to sexual acts and male domination of women, rap made these acts more graphic and explicit. An example of graphic sex in heavy metal lyrics occurs in the Van Halen song "Black and Blue" from the album *OU812*:

Slip 'n' slide, push it in,
Bitch sure got the rhythm.

⁶The heavy metal song list included:

"One in a Million"	Guns 'n' Roses
"Now It's Dark"	Anthrax
"Black and Blue"	Van Halen
"You're All I Need"	Motley Crue
"Let's Put the X in Sex"	KISS
"Suicide Solution"	Ozzy Osbourne
"We're Not Gonna Take It"	Twisted Sister
"Eat Me Alive"	Judas Priest
"School Daze"	W.A.S.P.
"Necrophobic"	Slayer

The rap song list included:

"Dick Almighty"	2 Live Crew
"Fuck tha Police"	N.W.A
"The Fuck Shop"	2 Live Crew
"Gangster of Love"	Geto Boys
"Girls L.G.B.N.A.F."	Ice-T
"The Iceburg"	Ice-T
"Me So Horny"	2 Live Crew
"Put Her in the Buck"	2 Live Crew
"Straight Outta Compton"	N.W.A
"Wild Thing"	Tone Loc

Table 3. Content of Lyrics of a Representative Sample of Controversial Heavy Metal and Rap Songs, 1985-1990

Content of Lyrics	Type of Song	
	Heavy Metal	Rap
Hard swear words	2	9
Sex, graphic	1	7
Violence or murder of police	0	2
Rebellion against teachers/parents	2	0
Degradation and violence to women	3	6
Sex, indirect references (innuendo, double entendre)	2	1
Grisly murder, violence, torture	1	0
Sex, group	2	1
Drugs and/or alcohol	1	0
Incest	1	0
Prejudicial slurs	1	1
Suicide	1	0
Number of songs	10	10

I'm holding back, yeah I got control,
Hooked into her system.
Don't draw the line,
Honey, I ain't through with you.

In comparison, 2 Live Crew's rap song, "The Fuck Shop" from *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*, is more explicit:

Please come inside and make yourself at home.
I want to fuck 'cause my dick's on bone.
You little whore behind closed doors,
You would drink my cum and nothing more.
Now spread your wings open for the flight.
Let me fill you up with something milky and white.
'Cause I'm gonna slay you rough and painful.
You innocent bitch, don't be shameful.

As Table 3 shows, lyrics depicting rebellion against authority take crucially different forms in heavy metal and rap. Two of the heavy metal songs in the sample ("We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister and "School Daze" by W.A.S.P.) proclaim a strong aversion to and mistrust of the older generation, while no rap songs in the sample state these antipathies. Heavy metal music addresses the frustrations of the child against parental and teacher authority, as the following lyrics from "School Daze" suggest:

A blackboard jungle, I toed the line the rulers made.
 A whole work hell house screams at me like the grave.
 Tic toc 3 o'clock I'm sittin' here and countin' the days.
 A 5-bell is ringin', hell, and I'd sure love to see it blaze.
 Burn it down!

While heavy metal lyrics stake a claim for the autonomy of the young person against school and adult officials, anti-authoritarian rap asserts independence from the authority of the police and white power structures in general. Two rap songs in the sample by "gangster" rapper Ice Cube and his group at the time N.W.A (Niggers With Attitude) depict graphic scenes of anti-authoritarianism and violence against police. The following lyrics from N.W.A's "Fuck tha Police" pose a striking contrast to W.A.S.P.'s sentiments above:

Fucking with me 'cause I'm a teenager
 With a little bit of gold and a pager.
 Searchin' my car, looking for the product,
 Thinking every nigger is selling narcota.
 Ice Cube will swarm
 On any mother fucker in a blue uniform.
 Just 'cause I'm from the CPT
 Punk police are afraid of me.
 Young nigger on the warpath,
 And when I'm finished, it's gonna be a bloodbath
 Of cops, dying in LA.
 Yo, Dre, I got something to say: Fuck the Police.

Framing Symbolic Expression

To some extent, then, media writers on both sides of the debate used frames based on the messages in the lyrics of the two genres. Writers on the "harmful" side frequently bemoaned the anti-authority themes in heavy metal music (saying that youths would become corrupted in their attitudes about school, parents, and sex from listening to these songs), and they were generally outraged by the unprecedented explicitness of rap (arguing that rap lyrics would cause listeners to wreak havoc on police and women). Writers on the "not harmful" side, meanwhile, argued that the rebellion in heavy metal music was absurd, exaggerated, puerile fun, while the heightened anti-authoritarian rebellion and graphic sexual activity in rap music indicated a serious political stance and an

artistic subversion of the stereotyped sexual images of black men.

Yet the discourse about these cultural objects reflected not only the symbolic meanings residing in the objects themselves, but also the social context in which the objects were produced and received (Griswold 1987; Pollock 1988; Beisel 1993). In applying such markedly different frames to heavy metal and rap, media writers were responding to the cultural and historical currents of the day. On the one hand, the media went out of their way to valorize "black" rap as art and, relative to heavy metal, avoided discussing its negative side (as indicated by the smaller number of "harmful" articles written about rap). Yet when they did address the negative aspects of rap, their framing selection revealed a subtle ideological shift: Mainstream writers were no longer concerned about the detrimental effects of the graphic music on teenaged listeners, as they had been for heavy metal, but were concerned about the dangers these black youths posed to the society at large. The societal belief that black kids pose more of a threat to society than "our kids" was reflected in the arguments about "black" teenagers' cultural objects.

CONCLUSION

I argue that media writers use frames selectively to represent the stories they tell. They choose from a set of social-cultural images to make their accounts convincing, compelling, and familiar to themselves and to their audiences. Although there are many different icons and memories that could be used to catch readers' imaginations, writers choose the same cultural images and memories over and over again to relate their concerns about an issue. This repeated use of certain images produces recognizable patterns of frames, which media writers use to comment on socially important issues.

In the discourse surrounding the harmfulness of music lyrics from 1985 to 1990, media writers in the mainstream press invoked different frames to address the "white" genre of heavy metal music than they used to discuss the "black" genre of rap music. They constructed images of race and adolescence to tell separate stories of the dangers lurking in the cultural expressions of the two distinct social groups. In doing so, they called upon memories of his-

torical events and cultural icons to demonstrate the detrimental effects of these objects on their audiences and on society as a whole. These racially-charged frames were most powerful when they built on the stated or unstated fears and anxieties of readers and tapped into their audience's understandings of what white youths and black youths were like.

Finally, in using these frames, writers provided audiences with a map for understanding what was wrong with the younger generation—whether it was their “own kids” or urban, poor, black kids. This map portrayed a causal relationship between music and behavior and explained phenomena like teen suicide, sex, and violence as consequences of explicit lyrics. These explanatory frames made no reference to such existential conditions as teens' feelings of hopelessness or powerlessness, or to material concerns like diminishing economic prospects. In short, these media accounts made sense of issues that adult readers desperately wanted to comprehend without introducing more nebulous factors. That these frames depended on racial rhetoric to make the explanations comprehensible reflects the degree to which race shapes our understanding of the world.

AMY BINDER is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University. She has begun her dissertation which explores how the meaning of post-secondary education is constructed by various social actors—high school students, parents, school staff, and employers. She is interested in the sociology of culture and the sociology of education.

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