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Tragic Accidents or Mysterious Murders?:

A College Town Struggles to Frame Responsibility For River Drowning Deaths

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Abstract

This paper focuses on an ongoing debate in La Crosse, Wisconsin, over recent river drowning incidents involving college-aged men. While some in the community contend the deaths were tragic but unrelated, other citizens argue that the collective set of circumstances points to a series of mysterious murders – perhaps committed by a “River Killer” that local authorities are unable or unwilling to bring to justice. An examination of local newspaper narratives and claims from a televised town meeting shows the narratives resulted in establishment of two contrasting frames. Each offers a different explanation and has a different perspective of responsibility for the tragedies. The contradictory frames complicate the efforts of community leaders who missed a prime opportunity to build a consensus of opinion that could have lead to much-needed resolutions.

## Introduction

### The deaths

On April 15, 2004, the body of college student Jared Dion, 21, was pulled from the Mississippi River in La Crosse, Wisconsin. The discovery of the body ended a five-day search for the student, who had disappeared from a crowd of his University of Wisconsin-La Crosse peers while waiting for a bus outside a local tavern. Dion was the sixth young man and the fourth college student to have drowned in this stretch of the Mississippi River since 1997, and the 23rd such victim since 1974. The discovery of Dion's body re-energized community debate that has been simmering for years over allegations that a "River Killer" loose in the community is preying on young men.

The other victims included Richard Hlavaty, 19, found drowned after a street brawl in July, 1997; Charles Blatz, 28, an out-of-town college student found drowned during the city's Oktoberfest celebration that same year; Anthony Skifton, 19, found drowned after leaving a house party two days after Blatz's death; Nathan Kapfer, 20, a college sophomore found drowned in 1998 after receiving multiple citations for underage drinking; and, Jeffrey Geesey, 20, a college student found drowned in 1999 after leaving a downtown bar.

### The community

La Crosse, Wisconsin, with a population of 51,000, is the 228th largest metropolitan area in the U.S. and the 12th largest community in Wisconsin. Alcohol is available in dozens of La Crosse restaurants, sports venues, and at least one laundromat. In 2004, the city had more than 130 licensed taverns – one of the highest proportions of licensed liquor establishments per capita in the state, according to local experts (Pappe,

2004). The city has three institutions of higher education. They include the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, with an enrollment of approximately 8,000; Western Wisconsin Technical College, with an enrollment of more than 6,000; and Viterbo University, a Catholic university with about 2,000 students. All three schools are located within a one-mile radius from the riverside downtown district, where many of the city's largest taverns attract students with 'all you can drink' specials for as little as \$4 per person.

In the early fall, the city heavily promotes its Oktoberfest, a celebration that begins with the public opening of a golden beer keg. Oktoberfest is ten days of city-sanctioned revelry that triples the city's population with parties, parades, concerts, and numerous gatherings where public alcohol consumption is expected and even encouraged. Over the years, many faculty and staff, campus organizations, and student groups from the three higher education institutions have played an active role in Oktoberfest.

The literature demonstrates that heavy drinking among college athletes is the norm rather than the exception (Thombs, 2000) and this is certainly true in La Crosse. UW-L surveyed its students in 2000, and found 81% were consumers of alcohol; 75.3% reported at least occasional binge drinking. More than half (50.4%) reported drinking six or more alcoholic drinks during the last occasion they "partied" (Vanvoorhis & Sullivan, 2000).

This paper examines narratives put forth in early 2004, as the community struggled to make sense of the most recent drowning death and put that death in context with earlier incidents. The examination reveals two competitive but equally compelling sets of narratives through which frames have been established that offer competing

explanations of the drowning deaths – as well as competing perspectives on responsibility.

One frame presents the deaths as tragic accidents, occurring by coincidence, fueled by alcohol consumption, involving irresponsible youth, and taking place in a binge drinking culture in which individuals are culpable for their actions. This frame suggests increased personal responsibility is the solution to preventing future tragedies.

The alternate frame presents the deaths as mysterious murders, occurring with some measure of conspiratorial circumstances, involving alcohol consumption, victimizing innocent youth, in a culture where binge drinking is a norm, in which authorities are shirking their responsibility to protect citizens from dangers. This alternate frame identifies increased community protection as the solution.

### Literature Review

#### The narrative

This research begins with use of the narrative paradigm in recognition of the narrative's tremendous power to shape and define experience. The narrative is used by a writer or speaker with the specific intent of getting an audience to identify with people and situations (Hybels & Weaver, 1989). The narrative is an important tool for establishing claims because it can provide "succinct, irrefutable evidence for an issue" (Rottenberg, 1997, p. 342).

The study of narratives is a valid and reasonable method for reaching conclusions about communication (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). It "leads to critique, to a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (Fisher, 1987, p. 90).

This is because narratives are not just aesthetic elements. Narratives have social function. They are “the way we organize experience and resist disorder” (Gould, 1989, p. 83).

The frame

The use of narratives in journalistic coverage of public happenings allows for the creation of a frame – at both the individual level and the community level. Framing allows people to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative text” in order to define, interpret, and propose solutions to a communication problem (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Certainly this is something done by individual citizens as well as by the community in general, as it struggles to make sense of complex issues.

A frame serves as a means for organizing information from a variety of sources so that the community can adopt particular beliefs. A frame can organize key words, phrases, or themes (Scherer, 2002); audio/ visual messages (Hung, 2001); graphic images such as photos or cartoons (Ragan, 1979); or sources from which information originates or to whom it is attributed (Entman, 1983). Frames can be used to describe or characterize the communicative relationships that take place as a result of gender (Devitt, 2002) or ethnicity (Moody-Hall, 2002) or any of numerous other explicit or implicit variables (Hung, 2001) that result in- and result from- communication.

It has been common practice to analyze frames that are established at least in part through media content. This is because choices about “language, quotations, and relevant information lead to emphasis upon certain features of a news story and, in turn, significantly structure citizens’ responses to public events and issues” (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002, p. 370).

## The public discourse

Framing allows those who would hope to control community dialogue to define their leadership roles (Bensimon, 1987). Typically, an individual seeking to maintain a leadership position in the public sector uses framing as a way “of going ‘one up’ in the situation” by taking on the role of interpreter of public events (Simons, Morreale, & Gronbeck, 2001, p. 127). Significant risks are involved, though, because the individual can easily be perceived as “intrusive, disruptive, contentious, or evasive” (p. 128). In some situations, the communicator who tries to take political advantage through interpretation can actually cause the public to be more intense in its support for a non-interpreted, or un-reframed, issue (Shah, Watts, Domke, & Fan, 2002).

Appropriate use of framing allows a leader to isolate issues that are salient for public discussion from those that are not (See Tankard, 1997) and to engage in “selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of experience or ideas over others” (Andsager & Smiley, 1997. p. 2). At its most basic, the use of framing in allows leaders – especially those in the public sector - to deliver bad news without damaging relationships with key constituents (Manzoni, 2002).

While much of the research on framing focuses on frame choice and construction by members of the media, it has also been argued that members of the public seek out order or “organization of experience” that framed messages provide (Jah-Nambiar, 2002). In other words, the public can be expected to look for – and then support – frames that present social, cultural, and economic beliefs in ways that people can logically and emotionally identify with (Tucker, 1998).



The purpose of this study is to illustrate how members of a community, when faced with a logically and emotionally challenging series of public events, seek out their own “succinct, irrefutable evidence” that comes by way of a set of framed narratives (See Rottenberg, 1997, p. 342). In this particular case, community members in La Crosse, Wisconsin, basically split into two groups of believers – each seeking the comfort of a framed narrative that would help explain its perspective on the drowning deaths of college-aged men in a way that other likeminded people could logically and emotionally relate to.

The study will end with a discussion of the tremendous challenge that would be involved in re-uniting these different groups of believers. In this particular case, the issue of reunification is itself questionable because – despite plenty of opportunity – no one has stepped forward to assume community leadership on this issue.

### Methodology

In an effort to examine the two perspectives taken in community debate, this research uses a fixed time period for reference. The beginning date of April 15, 2004 is the date law enforcement officers discovered the body of drowning victim Jared Dion. The time period of reference extends through July 15, 2004, 90 days after that discovery.

The author examined all newspaper stories, editorials, columns, and letters to the editor published in the La Crosse Tribune during the time frame of reference that addressed the drowning deaths in any way. The author identified 17 newspaper stories, 10 editorials and columns, and 24 letters to the editor that were published in print and / or on the newspaper’s web site (<http://www.lacrossetribune.com/>) during that time and were therefore qualified for inclusion in this study.

In addition, the author viewed, videotape recorded, and then transcribed the complete audio narrative from a live broadcast Town Hall meeting that aired on WKBT-TV (La Crosse) on the evening of April 22, 2004. The meeting was called by the city police department with the intent of disseminating factual information about the drowning cases and obtaining feedback from the community (Paape, 2004).

Taken as a whole, the stories, editorials and columns, letters, and narrative comments from the televised broadcast provide two alternate “stories of living” (See Fischer, 1987, p. 58) that solidified in the community after the discovery of Dion’s body. Narrative comments have been selected and are represented here to illustrate the two contradictory frames that have become established.

<u>Frame A</u>	<u>Frame B</u>
Tragic accidents	Mysterious murders
Coincidence	Conspiracy
Alcohol fueled	Alcohol involved
Irresponsible youth	Innocent youth
Binge drinking culture	Binge drinking norm
Individuals as responsible	Authorities as responsible
Solution: Personal responsibility	Solution: Community protection

### Findings

#### Tragic accidents v. Mysterious murders

The most striking difference between the contrasting framed narratives is on the issue of what caused the deaths of the six young men. With few exceptions, the newspaper editorials, columns and news stories support Frame A, that the deaths were tragic accidents. This is the position taken by the police department and the newspaper’s

editorial staff – that the deaths were accidents, precipitated by a number of different pre-existing conditions, such as the fact that each victim was intoxicated at the time of his death, the prevalence of binge drinking in the community, and the number of bars in the downtown area.

“Is there a serial killer? Police don’t have any evidence to indicate it. Medical officials and school officials believe the real issue is the amount of alcohol consumption. We don’t think there’s a serial killer either.” [Editorial, May 14]

The letters to the editor, taken as a whole, support the opposing framed narrative – that the deaths are mysterious murders, and that the police department and other authorities are to be blamed for not addressing the incidents as such. The letters express a variety of opinions about the competency of the local authorities. Most suggest the authorities are unwilling or unable to examine all facts.

“I would like to know why it is so far out of the realm of possibility for the La Crosse Police Department, the media, and anyone else who had a say over how this tragedy was presented to the public, to acknowledge that we have had a very odd series of events take place and that these deaths could very well be linked in some way.” [Letter, April 19]

“[H]ow many college-age males, drunk, during spring months drowned during the years of 1960s through the 1980s? If none, then what makes this time frame (late 1990s through present day) different from the 1960s through the 1980s?” [Letter, April 20]

“[I]t would be easy to coerce an intoxicated individual to the river throw him/her into the river without any visible trauma or signs of struggle. [sic]” [Letter, April 26]

“Not only were all males and college age, there was a reason they went to the river.” [Letter, May 20]

The Town Hall meeting was moderated by the publisher of the La Crosse Tribune. The meeting was emceed by the La Crosse Police Chief Ed Kondracki, who answered questions from the audience or addressed questions to a panel of eight experts.

The panel included a representative of the Wisconsin Department of Criminal Investigation, several experts on alcohol and other drug abuse, two university student services representatives, an alcohol prevention specialist, and the county's medical examiner. All agreed that the deaths were tragic accidents.

“These rumors go on and on and on. Simple fact though, is there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that any crime has been committed.” [Police Chief Ed Kondracki]

In contrast, most members of the Town Hall audience indicated disbelief in the framing of the deaths as accidental. During the audience comment portion of the program, a succession of speakers came forward to challenge the position of the experts on the cases – often through argumentative speculation, or questioning of investigating officers' competence or authority to make judgments. Speakers were frequently interrupted with applause, and occasionally with shouts and cheers from the audience.

“What kinds of accidental deaths are we comparing to these rather mysterious ones?” [Audience member]

“Some of us who do believe that maybe somebody they got a uniform of a police officer or some type of security guard who's pulling these kids away without causing a big distraction.” [Applause] “And that's how they're sneaking away, and the killer is getting away with it. That's how I feel. I feel somebody is dressing up like them, he or she is going this, security guard, anything that has some form of a badge.” [Audience member]

“And there is someone who is very sophisticated who may be indeed involved in transactions with these people that eventually lead to their death.” [Audience member, followed by cheers and applause]

“I am Jared's mom, I am not naive. I unturned every stone I possibly could, and I have that right. That was my son. I have every right to believe any story that I hear, and to pursue them.” [Audience member, mother of drowning victim Jared Dion]

### Coincidence v. Conspiracy

The newspaper editorials, columns and news stories support the perspective of Frame A – that the deaths were tragic, but coincidental. Still, the editorial content does appear to be balanced, because it does include representations of the opposite viewpoint.

“It’s way too coincidental, and none of them are female. I think it’s a serial killer.” [Citizen quoted in news story, April 16]

With a few exceptions, the letters to the editor are much more supportive of Frame B – that the deaths are somehow linked, and that there is perhaps some implicit or overt conspiracy at work to keep the cases from being solved. Support for this perspective shows up in even the slightest ways – such as a letter [April 26] that suggests the body of drowning victim Jared Dion “was placed there” in the spot where it was found at the river’s edge.

Most of the first half of the Town Hall meeting was structured to address the issue of whether the drowning deaths were coincidental or represented some pattern of criminal activity. The police chief opened the meeting with a PowerPoint-slide assisted presentation. This presentation gave an overview of each drowning death, presented related crime statistics and correlative national data, along with photographs of the downtown area intended to support the position that the evidence did not support any suspicious link between the drowning deaths. The chief’s arguments were supported by the panel members, including the county medical examiner who investigated the cases and said: “There is nothing that we are hiding.”

Despite this strong show of unity by experts from throughout the community, the Town Hall audience expressed little support for anyone who would not presume the deaths to somehow be related.

“Many times audience members shouted down speakers who tried to talk about the dangers of alcohol, the possibility that the deaths were unrelated and things that could be done to make the river area safer. When Kondracki called for a 20-minute “brainstorming” session at the end of the two-hour forum to discuss safety precautions, easily one-third of the audience, mostly college-aged people, left. Others complained loudly and said they wanted their questions answered.” [News story, April 23]

The accusation was made frequently that police were withholding evidence from the cases.

“Certain people, myself included, and being blunt is the only way I can do this. We sorta view the police department as incompetent.” [Audience member]

“How much evidence is not going to be seen? How much evidence is going to be hidden from files?” [Audience member]

Although no eye witness account of any of the deaths had been reported to police, several members of the Town Hall audience claimed to have knowledge to the contrary.

For example:

“That one guy was afraid of the water. The guy at Oktoberfest, people actually seen a uniformed officer run him in.” [Audience member]

Alcohol fueled v. Alcohol involved

The perspective that the drowning deaths were alcohol-fueled takes its support from the fact that each of the victims had been seen in the bar area of downtown La Crosse in the hours before his death. Forensic testing showed each victim was intoxicated well beyond the legal limit. The newspaper editorials of April 21, May 14, and July 8 each argue strongly that over-indulgence in alcohol was the single most significant factor in each of the drowning cases.

This argument was bolstered during the Town Hall meeting when the police chief noted that his department had issued 11,623 liquor law violation tickets since 1997, and

one of the university representatives pointed out the fact that there are 42 licensed taverns within a one-mile radius of the spot where the body of the most recent victim was found.

One of the health care representatives on the Town Hall panel said: “Those of us who work in the field are just at a marvel that there aren’t a couple of deaths a month. If you talk to any clinician, anybody who practices medicine and emergency work, you will hear these stories every day. . . this is really about the whole issue of consuming alcohol.”

[Panel member]

But the alternate perspective holds that alcohol was simply involved, and not directly responsible for the fatal outcomes. Much of this sentiment was been expressed, both in print and at the Town Hall meeting, with a sarcastic undertone.

“I went to college here, I partied downtown here, and not once have I ever thought about taking in the natural splendor of the Mississippi River while I was three sheets to the wind.” [Audience member, followed by applause]

Irresponsible youth v. Innocent youth

Closely related to the issue of alcohol’s involvement in the deaths is the issue of whether the victims should be seen as irresponsible or innocent. This issue is not directly addressed in any of the newspaper editorials, columns, or stories dealing with the deaths.

At the outset of the Town Hall, the police chief said: “We are not here blaming any dead young men for putting themselves in danger” [Police Chief Ed Kondracki]. None of the panelists who spoke following the chief’s introduction addressed the need for young people to be more responsible. In fact, the word ‘responsible’ only appears two times in the audio transcript. But at the same time, the implication was made that those who died contributed to their fate in large measure through their actions. This idea was

voiced through an off-duty police officer in the audience whose nephew was among the victims.

“My family has to be dragged through this over and over and over again and I have to listen to people applaud at the thought that my nephew was killed by a serial killer. . . Our young people drink too much. They get dangerously intoxicated, and they die in all kinds of manners because of it. Thirty years in law enforcement, I’ve watched the tragedy after tragedy after tragedy and denial after denial after denial, and I don’t know what to tell you people.” [Audience member]

While almost no one wanted to discuss the idea of youth as irresponsible, many people expressed the opposite viewpoint – that those who drowned in the river were innocent youth. In letters to the editor, and in the Town Hall meeting, several members of the community came forward to defend the innocence and naïveté of youth.

“Oktoberfest during the 60s was an invitation for every college student in the Midwest to come to La Crosse. I’ve seen comments about drinking and unfamiliarity with the river. A great majority of those people were unfamiliar with the river. They tented in Riverside Park. They tented in Cameron Park. They wandered the streets all night. Never did we have an incident like this.” [Audience member, followed by lengthy applause]

It seems like alcohol is just waiting for the young adults on our community [sic] to make the mistake of having a good time.” [Letter, May 14]

#### Binge drinking culture v. Binge drinking norm

Wisconsin has been ranked by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control as the state with the highest rate of binge drinking among adults, and the second highest rate of binge drinking among college students (Hodnett, 2005). In 1998, alcohol consumption in Wisconsin was 20% above the average of all states (Per capita alcohol consumption databases, 2002). In the year 2000, one in four Wisconsin adults reported a history of binge drinking. The chair of the UW-La Crosse psychology department has previously referred to a “generational support for large levels of drinking” in the state (Morgan,



2002). This is certainly true in La Crosse, where the production and sale of beer is critical to the local economy (See Swanson, Zegers & Zwaska, 2004).

Frame A takes the position that, in La Crosse, binge drinking is culturally acceptable – and because of that acceptability, tragic accidents can and will continue to happen. This point was made succinctly in the Tribune, both before and after the Town Hall meeting.

“The real killer in La Crosse is alcohol abuse. It has been the killer for decades.”  
[Editorial, April 21]

“La Crosse has a binge drinking problem and a dangerous river nearby.”  
[Column, April 25]

“[C]hronic alcohol abuse. . . happens routinely in this town.” [Editorial, May 14]

While few of the letters to the editor published during the 90 day time period of this research directly addressed binge drinking at length, one Town Hall speaker seemed to defend binge drinking – much to the delight of the audience.

“But binge drinking is not new. Through my college years of bar tending and my [bar] ownership, I dealt with many, many drunks. And they were either fighters or lovers.” [Audience member, followed by lengthy applause and cheering]

Later, the county medical examiner told of witnessing drunk Oktoberfest goers in 2003 skinnydipping from a houseboat at the downtown levee in 42 degree water. As the medical examiner tried to make a point about the behavior being contrary to the norm, he was shouted down by members of the audience.

“How many of them were by themselves?” [Audience member]

“How many of them drowned?” [Audience member, followed by shouts and laughter]

## Individuals as responsible v. Authorities as responsible

Frame A takes the perspective that, in the end, individuals must be responsible for their actions. This point of view was taken in several of the Tribune editorials and in a column published on the day following the discovery of Jared Dion's body.

La Crosse has a downtown packed with bars, college students and drink specials. Many of those bars are within three blocks of the largest river in North America. Yes, Riverside Park is beautiful and Riverfest is outstanding and the fireworks on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July will leave you breathless. But the downside of all that beauty is a powerful river that doesn't know any better. It's not a sparkling little lake that you tumble into, crawl out and have a good laugh. There is a reason it happens more here than anywhere else. We have the perfect set up for a tragedy. [Column, April 16]

Only one of the letters to the editor took a strong position in support of personal responsibility consistent with that of Frame A.

"What I heard from the [Town Hall] audience is, don't stop us from partying, just keep us safe when we are too drunk to take care of ourselves. I'm sorry, but each of us needs to accept a little responsibility for our own actions." [Letter, April 26]

On the other hand, several other letters suggested that local authorities need to accept responsibility for the drownings.

"We are in a college town and we need to offer a certain amount of security and safety for the college students who are part of our city." [Letter, April 19]

"Where are the police?" [Letter, April 29]

"Where are the police officers on horses at these times?" [Letter, May 14]

Solution: Personal responsibility v. community protection

The examination of the contradictory frames ends with the opposing answers to a final question – what is the appropriate solution to prevent future drowning deaths?

Frame A takes the perspective that an increased awareness of personal responsibility is

the answer, particularly among college students. This perspective is reflected in a newspaper editorial published several days after the Town Hall meeting

“The biggest problem I have with the idea that a serial killer is stalking young men along La Crosse's riverfront is that it eliminates the need for any personal responsibility.” [Editorial, April 25]

The editorial goes on to argue that the issue of personal responsibility had been missing from the community debate over the drowning deaths. This does seem consistent with the overall tone of the letters to the editor – which, in most cases were more directed toward fixing blame than finding solutions.

“Is it fair to the taxpayers to have to pay to baby-sit irresponsible drinkers?” [Letter, May 11]

Frame B takes the position that increased community protection is the optimum answer to preventing more drowning deaths. And there was certainly no lack of suggestions, both in print and in the Town Hall meeting. Some of the suggestions seem to have widespread acceptance by all parties involved – specifically, the installation of surveillance cameras and emergency telephones at the river's edge. Other proposals seemed much less plausible.

“Install laser lighting or motion detector systems all along the boardwalk that would light up the whole park if someone gets too far off the shoreline, and then possibly sets up a detection system back to 9-1-1. This would . . .light up the whole park and possibly wake up the person that's gone too far.” [Audience member]

“Put infrared cameras. . . in the bars so that we can see who's serving the drinks, and the bartenders will be held responsible, and the owners.” [Audience member]

“Maybe an experienced psychic should be brought into the investigation.” [Letter to the editor, April 26]

Other citizens called for the installation of a fence around the river to prevent access to the water, installation of a series of ropes and ladders in the water to allow

people who fall in to climb out, and the establishment of a volunteer group called “Students Against Alcohol Related Drowning Deaths” to demonstrate “genuine concern and a sense of responsibility” for the incidents [Letter, June 23].

But even these suggestions of specific ways to make the river side area safer brought criticism from a speaker at the Town Hall meeting – who alluded back to the mysterious circumstances seen by many in association with these drowning deaths.

“You talked about cameras being a solution. You should have never mentioned it. Because now if there is somebody who’s doing this, now they know that the cameras are going to be there, and they’re going to move down river or to a different town.” [Audience member]

### Summary

Narrative frames offer the opportunity for stories to be clarified, focused, enhanced, and distinguished from other, competing stories. Unfortunately, this process also lends itself to the creation of a situation where those who support particular framed narratives see increasingly less reason to look outside those frames for answers they might not have previously considered. The potential for this would seem especially great when no community leadership steps forward to lead in consensus-building.

Sadly, drowning deaths of a college-aged men in La Crosse, Wisconsin, are not new. These deaths have been happening since the late 1990s. What does seem to be new is that the community has split into two very intransigent factions – one of which believes that the deaths are tragic accidents of coincidence, and the other which believes that the deaths could represent murders that may or may not be happening under conspiratorial circumstances.

The April 22, 2004 Town Hall meeting opened with a rambling, 417-word introduction by the chief and proceeded to a PowerPoint presentation that plodded

through a number of slides filled with facts about particular cases and data about drowning deaths in general. Throughout, the chief made repeated promises that the meeting would result in “some sort of positive plan” – a promise that was clearly impossible from the start, given the large crowd, high level of emotion, and two-hour format of the televised broadcast. When the two-hour program had ended and the chief’s continued promises of problem-solving never came about, it was no wonder that “half of the audience got up and walked out” [Letter, April 27].

The police chief and the panel of experts in the Town Hall meeting had the facts on their side. All the evidence, applied logically, points to the perspective identified here as Frame A. Had the experts in the Town Hall quickly, authoritatively, and decisively dismissed the speculative questions and inflammatory comments from audience members, there might have been an opportunity for the city officials, law enforcement officers, and other experts to ratify their position of authority and build the consensus needed to unite the community to prevent another tragic drowning. Despite their support for what is identified here as Frame B, members of the audience clearly indicated that they wanted the authorities to take charge, to accept responsibility, and commit to additional protection of the community to prevent more drowning deaths.

The authorities in the Town Hall meeting should have accepted that challenge. They should have taken responsibility, offered new means of protection – and as the same time, re-framed the dissenting perspective (as suggested by Simons, Morreale, & Gronbeck, 2001) to fall in line with what is offered here as Frame A.

In the weeks that followed the Town Hall, the Tribune’s letters to the editor, though they varied in topic and focus, were mostly aligned with Frame B – still holding

to the idea of a mysterious conspiracy and demanding better protection from local authorities. One can only wonder if the letters might have taken a different direction – toward agreement with Frame A – had there been a more assertive, authoritative response from the officials who participated in the April 22 Town Hall meeting.

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