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Title The thought of death, national security values and polarization of attitudes toward freedom of information.

Volume 5 Issue 1

Abstract

This study applies terror management theory from social psychology to test the effects of death thoughts on attitudes toward the press' right to access government records. Results from an experiment ($N = 158$) indicated that those who most value national security express less support for freedom of information. Further, under a death thought condition attitudes are amplified such that people who most value national security demonstrate even lower support for press access to government records and people who least value national security demonstrate increased support for access to public records when confronted with their own mortality. The results provide one potential explanation for the polarization of public attitudes toward access to public records during times of mortal strife. Implications are discussed, including theoretically based suggestions for preventing polarization during troubled times.

The thought of death, national security values and polarization of attitudes toward freedom of information

Introduction

Press and public access to government information is vital to a functioning democracy for citizens and decision makers to have the facts they need to make appropriate decisions (Altschull, 1990; Blasi, 1977; Cross, 1953; Meiklejohn, 1948). Informed decision-making is particularly important during times of mortal strife, such as war or the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States. Yet, it is at those times when debate over civil liberties and public policies are sometimes the most contentious (Jacobson, 2005; Stone, 2004).

It is important to understand public attitudes toward freedom of information (FOI) during times of societal tension because citizen views can affect the willingness of government officials to disseminate information, and can

Assistant Professor David Cuillier, Assistant Professor Blythe Duell and Associate Professor Jeff Joireman (2008) The thought of death, national security values and polarization of attitudes toward freedom of information. Volume 5 Issue 1. Published January 2009

influence, at least indirectly, public policy (Monroe, 1998; Page & Shapiro, 1983). Scholars suggest that after 9/11 a divided and complicit public allowed the Bush administration to impose more secretive policies that constricted the flow of government information to the public (Domke et al., 2006; Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002; Huddy & Feldman, 2002).

This study attempts to identify a potential psychological explanation for why people's attitudes toward freedom of information change during times of crises, and propose suggestions for minimizing attitudinal shifts toward secrecy in the future.

To apply empirical psychological methods to FOI we look to terror management theory, which posits that when people are confronted with the thought of their own mortality they react through self-esteem-boosting actions, such as clinging to cultural worldviews more dearly, opposing out-groups, and finding solace from leaders (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). More than 300 published studies conducted over the past 20 years have demonstrated that the thought of death, including reminders of 9/11, strengthen one's values, such as charitable giving, religiosity, political affiliation, and disdain for immoral behavior. In the case of people with diverging world views, studies have found opposing opinions are amplified under a death-thought condition. The amplification of world views is relevant to FOI because support for access is moderated by a variety of factors, including civic engagement, confidence in leaders, and trust in others (Cuillier, 2007; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007). The thought of death may cause some people to more strongly favor FOI and other people to more strongly oppose it.

This paper proposes that those who value national security the most are less likely to support FOI, perhaps because they are more trusting of government and perceive open-government laws as threats to authority and security. Furthermore, this study hypothesizes that when primed to think of death, people's attitudes are amplified, causing people who value security to be even less supportive of FOI, and those who least value security to be more supportive of FOI. To test this hypothesis, we employed an experiment at a U.S. university employing 158 college students, finding that the thought of death did indeed amplify views toward FOI, moderated by the extent one values national security.

This paper discusses the implications for these attitude shifts on public debate and policies regarding FOI. Even though a portion of the population may become more supportive of FOI during times of crises, we suggest that

it is the security-minded people who speak loudest, and it is those who argue for security who are more likely to be received favorably by those who are listening, particularly by those government officials who would like to reduce public oversight through increased secrecy.

Finally, we offer open government advocates suggestions for preventing or minimizing such attitude shifts during times of crises. Psychologists have identified inoculations to death-thought-induced attitude change, such as priming people for tolerance or providing boosts to self-esteem (Greenberg et al., 1992; Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Ultimately, it is our hope that this study provides greater understanding of the forces that shape citizen attitudes toward FOI and offers practical suggestions for increasing support for FOI, even during times of mortal conflict.

Literature review

Support for FOI. The bulk of research in freedom of information has relied on qualitative methods, such as legal analysis, organizational analysis, case studies, and descriptions of FOI law effectiveness (Arellan-Gault, 2008; Bannister, 2008; Cooper, 1986; Heald, 2003; Holsen, MacDonald, & Glover, 2007; Kirtley, 2006). Few scholars, however, have empirically studied the public's attitudes toward freedom of information.

Understanding public sentiment toward access is important because of its potential influence on public policy and disclosure. Studies indicate that political leaders are influenced by the will of the people as measured through polling. For example, Monroe (1998) found that changes in public policy follow changes in public opinion, particularly regarding political issues and civil liberties. Increased public demand for government accountability since 2005 (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2008) could be a factor in improved FOI legislation, including passage of the 2007 OPEN Government Act and bolstered state laws in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Rhode Island, and New York in 2008 (see www.rcfp.org for descriptions of recent advances in state FOI laws in the United States). Also in recent years, the world has witnessed dozens of new freedom of information laws, including the United Kingdom's Freedom of Information Act 2000 and federal FOI laws in Mexico, Germany, and China (see www.freedominfo.org; Banisar, 2006).

While FOI laws do not necessarily result in actual transparency (Holsen, MacDonald, & Glover, 2007; Hood & Heald, 2008), support for freedom of information also provides for openness when it is internalized by

government employees (Piotrowski, 2007). For example, Bush Kimball (2003) found that law enforcement clerks in Florida were more likely to provide records to citizens if they supported disclosure and felt the need for disclosure was worthy, regardless of the legal requirements to provide the records to the public.

Most attitudinal research involving access to government records has been based on survey data to examine correlates and predictors of support for access. For example, during the past decade journalism scholars have examined citizens' attitudes toward the press' right to access government records, finding that support for access is greatest among men, depends on who is requesting the records, is negatively related to fear of privacy invasion, and is positively related to civic engagement (Cuillier, 2004; Cuillier 2007; Driscoll et al., 2000; Phelps & Bunker, 2001). Typically, surveys ask respondents to rate their agreement on whether a particular government records should be made available to the press or public, such as crime reports, public employee salaries, or city budgets.

Public administration researchers also have examined attitudes toward access, usually couched as support for government transparency. Piotrowski and Van Ryzin (2007) found that people conceive of government transparency in different ways (e.g., fiscal transparency, safety transparency), and that political liberalism, mistrust of others, and lack of confidence in local leaders predict support for transparency.

Some studies have focused on overall support for freedom of information, or one's own right to access government records. Other studies have examined the public's attitudes toward the *press'* right to access government records, even though journalists account for just 5-10 percent of records requesters (Attallah & Pyman, 2002; Coalition of Journalists, 2006; Heritage Foundation, 2001). This study will focus on the public's attitudes toward the press' right to access records for several reasons. First, previous research indicates that people indicate strong support for their own access to information, but are less supportive of others' right to access information, and a strong indication of whether someone truly supports freedom of information is whether he or she approves of someone else having access to records (Cuillier, 2004; Phelps & Bunker, 2001). Second, at least a third of front page news stories rely on government information (Society of Professional Journalists, 2001), so the press' right to access records – and the public's support or nonsupport of that – is important to understand, particularly for journalists. Finally, when freedom of information

policies are debated in public, sometimes in the context of a newspaper suing for public records or the press lobbying for transparency-based legislation, the situations often are framed for the public as a “press” issue.

While survey-based research has examined basic correlates for explaining citizen attitudes toward access, scholars have yet to analyze what *causes* people’s attitudes toward access to change, particularly during times of societal strife.

FOI attitudes during crises. Scholars have examined public attitudes toward democratic principles since the 1930s, often finding that levels of support fluctuate in response to national threats or crises (Blanchard, 1992; Blanchard, 2002; Erskine, 1970; Erskine & Siegel, 1975; Prothro & Grigg, 1960; Siebert, 1952; Smith, 2002). Stouffer (1955), for example, examined people’s views toward expressive rights and political tolerance in relation to communists and other “harmful” groups, showing that threats lower support for expression by disliked groups.

While little empirical research has examined attitudes toward FOI during times of crises, similar to attitudes toward other democratic principles, it appears to fluctuate. This was particularly noticeable following the U.S. terrorist attacks of 9/11, where pollsters noticed a change in attitudes toward civil liberties, security, and holding the government accountable through transparency – specifically, an overall greater acceptance by some people for government secrecy and intrusions on civil liberties (Huddy, Khatib, & Capelos, 2002; Huddy & Feldman, 2002).

Many citizens accepted greater secrecy and intrusion on their personal lives, such as through warrantless wiretapping and increased airport security screening, if it meant making the nation safer. That doesn’t mean, however, that U.S. citizens unanimously favored secrecy and increased government power. While times of death can bring people together to support one another, research also indicates that strife can cause polarization and volatile swings, depending on the issue (Public Agenda, 2002). For example, the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that partisan division in the United State expanded dramatically following 9/11 (Pew, 2005; 2007). Furthermore, polling shows that in September 2001, U.S. citizens’ attitudes were amplified and polarized regarding a variety of issues, including going to war, civil liberties, and government openness (Pew, 2001; Pew 2003).

In other words, some people became more supportive of secrecy and others became more supportive of openness. It appeared, however, that the U.S. government was most receptive to the opinions of those who favored increased secrecy. Following 9/11, the Bush administration implemented policies that restricted access to government information, including removing data from government Web sites, creation of a secret network of prisons, exempting critical infrastructure from disclosure through the Homeland Security Act of 2002, increasing the use of the state secrets privilege to hide information from the courts and Congress, expanding the use of pseudo-classifications, and issuing the Ashcroft and Card memorandums that favored secrecy over disclosure (Altheide, 2006; Cassel, 2004; Feinberg, 2004; Gup, 2007; Haiman, 2002; Kim, 2007; Kirtley, 2006; Piotrowski, 2007; Risen, 2007; Roberts, 2006; Stone, 2007; Waxman, 2004).

Ironically, one could argue that access to government information is more important during times of crises (see Fuchs, 2006). With the exception of disclosure of troop movements and military tactics, among other things, a society that is informed about potential threats can make more reasoned decisions. Transparency engenders trust in government decisions, facilitates the marketplace, reduces corruption, increases accountability, and can actually make citizens safer (**CITES**). The 9/11 Commission report, for example, suggested that the terrorist attacks might have been prevented had the government been more transparent (National Commission, 2004). And excessive secrecy can undermine the need to keep truly sensitive information hidden, as Justice Potter Stewart noted in the Pentagon Papers case: "When everything is classified, then nothing is classified..." (*N.Y. Times v. U.S.*, 1971).

Yet, following 9/11, because of the increased secrecy journalists reported more difficulty in obtaining documents to hold the U.S. government accountable and inform the public (American Society of Newspaper Editors, 2003; Bluemink & Brush, 2005; Reporters Committee, 2005; Weitzel, 2004). A lack of accurate and complete information regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq likely contributed to U.S. citizen support for the Iraq War, a decision that 57% of Americans now regret (Pew, 2008).

While political communication researchers and pollsters have described attitude change during times of crises, scholars do not agree on the causal underpinnings of attitude change during these circumstances. Some scholars have examined "rally-around-the-flag" effects, where public

support increases for government leaders during times of conflict (Mueller, 1970). For example, following the 9/11 attacks, President Bush's approval rating as measured by Gallup Polls increased from 51% to 86%, the largest rally-around-the-flag effect ever recorded. Scholars have conjectured a number of reasons for the cause, such as a surge in patriotism when focusing abroad or political and societal motivations of individuals (Baum, 2002; Mueller, 1970; Parker, 1995).

Rally-around-the-flag effect, however, does not explain why people become more polarized at times. While Bush's support increased dramatically following 9/11, the public also became polarized in its support and criticism of the president, as well as in its views toward civil liberties, more so than at any time in history (Jacobson, 2005). Some studies suggest fear and anger are at the root of the phenomenon, (Dillard & Meijnders, 2002; Nabi, 2002; Pratkanis & Aronson, 2001). But is it more than that? To attempt to answer that question, we turn to terror management theory in social psychology.

Terror management theory. An emerging area of research in social psychology is based on terror management theory, which emerged from the writings of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1962, 1973). Becker noted how humans are the only creatures aware of their own impending demise and that through time have developed psychological defense mechanisms to deal with such unpleasant thoughts. In his Pulitzer-Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Becker wrote: "Of all the things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death." (1973, p. 11).

Becker believed that humans, like animals, developed over time physical and psychological systems designed for self-preservation. Humans, unlike other animals, however, know they will someday die, and to avoid dwelling on that unpleasantness they developed psychological defense mechanisms, such as clinging more strongly to cultural worldviews, increasing affiliation with ingroups, and increasing prejudice toward outgroups.

Inspired by Becker's writings and psychological research in self-esteem, Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon (1986) introduced terror management theory to social psychology. The theory posits that if a psychological structure, such as a cultural worldview, protects against the terror of contemplating one's own death, then reminders of mortality should increase the need to maintain that structure (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). In other words, when people are reminded of their own deaths they are more likely to cling to their cultural worldviews, respond more

negatively to those who would threaten that view, and demonstrate greater support for those who support their worldview.

In more than 300 studies,¹ psychologists have tested the theory to find that thinking of one's death increases support for national symbols (Greenberg et al., 1995), one's own religion (Greenberg et al., 1990), and charity (Jonas et al., 2002). Death thoughts also have been found to make people more hostile toward opposing political parties (McGregor et al., 1998), other races (Greenberg et al., 2001), senior citizens (Martens et al., 2004), and even prostitutes and others who threaten one's worldview (Rosenblatt & Greenberg et al., 1989).

These effects are triggered by making a person cognizant of his or her own death, called "mortality salience." Usually, the effect is caused by instructing people to think about what it would feel like to die and instruct control group participants to instead think about something else unpleasant, such as dental pain. Yet, even indirect primes regarding someone else's death, or death in general, have been found to trigger mortality salience effects, including seeing the photo of an elderly person (Martens et al., 2004), filling out a questionnaire in front of a funeral home (Jonas et al., 2002), viewing a video that includes a fatal car accident (Nelson et al., 1997), reading a news story about a murder (Konty, Duell, & Joireman, 2004), and thinking about the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Landau et al., 2004).

Studies have found that mortality salience causes people to more closely associate with their in-group, including their nation or religion. For example, Greenberg et al. (1995) found that people primed for mortality salience had a more difficult time using cultural icons, in this case a flag and crucifix, in inappropriate ways, than people in a control group. In contrast, dozens of studies have found that priming people to think about their own deaths causes increased prejudice toward other religions and countries (Greenberg et al., 1990), increased aggression (McGregor et al., 1998), and preferences for stereotypes (Schimel et al., 1999). In all of the studies, researchers control for mood to ensure that detected differences are not a result of being angry, sad, or depressed.

¹ See an online bibliography of hundreds of these published studies at <http://www.tmt.missouri.edu/publications.html>, compiled by Jamie Arndt, an associate professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Some research has begun to examine the effect of mortality salience on political attitudes. In their book regarding September 11 and terror management theory, Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg (2003) noted that the public appears willing to give up civil liberties because of safety concerns. They argue that the fear of terrorism lingers in Americans' minds, triggering mortality salience effects and causing increased focus on cultural worldviews, particularly that of the nation, as illustrated by increased flag sales, a flourish of patriotism, and support for leaders. Several studies have shown that reminders of death and reminders of September 11 cause increased support for President George W. Bush as people look to leaders for support and boosts to self-esteem (Cohen et al., 2004; Cohen et al., 2005; Landau et al., 2004).

This is relevant to an issue such as freedom of information, which by its very nature engenders conflicting values. On the one hand, mortality salience should bolster support for cultural worldviews, such as democratic principles, government transparency, and press rights, arguably all important parts of the American experience and psyche. Therefore, under this perspective, the thought of death should increase support for freedom of information. On the other hand, mortality salience should also increase support for societal leaders and institutions, such as the government, as Landau et al. (2004) found. So what happens when freedom of information and government security are in conflict? Which side will the public take? According to terror management theory, it depends on the individual's worldview and social value orientation.

If people in a given population hold divergent views, then it is reasonable to conclude that mortality salience may amplify those views, creating further polarization. The value enhancement hypothesis suggests that mortality salience amplifies preexisting differences in social value orientation (Greenberg et al., 1992). For example, people who value self enhancement become greedier under a mortality salience condition, but those who value social good become more collectivist and charitable.

Psychologists examining moderating variables in mortality salience experiments rely on established personality constructs and measurement scales. Schwartz (1992, 1994), for example, outlined different values inherent in humans throughout the world, acknowledging that some cultures and individuals hold some values more dearly than others. For the purposes of this study, one value measured in the Schwartz value inventory

seems most relevant to support for access to government information: values toward national security.

We see evidence in previous research of the connection between security values and support for government transparency. For example, need for security has been found to be positively correlated to political conservatism and trust in government. Piotrowski and Van Ryzin (2007) found that those who are least supportive of transparency tend to be conservative and trusting of their local leaders. The assumption of this study is that people who value national security are likely to support the stability and protection of government, and therefore value freedom of information less. Such a person may see the press' access to government records as a threat to the nation, and under a mortality salience condition those views should be amplified. In contrast, those who value national security the least should feel less threatened by journalists acquiring government records, and may demonstrate more support for freedom of information in a mortality salience condition.

Hypotheses

H1: Values toward national security will be negatively related to support for press access to government records.

H2: The effect of mortality salience on support for press access to government records will be moderated by national security values such that those who most value national security will exhibit less support for press access to government records under a mortality salience condition, and those who least value national security will exhibit more support for freedom of information.

Method

The authors conducted a 2 (mortality salience vs. control group) x 2 (high in valuing national security vs. low in valuing national security) between-subjects experiment in spring 2005 at a public university in the western United States.

Participants. The researchers recruited 171 undergraduates from a variety of majors (101 female, 70 male; median age = 20; 79% Caucasian) in groups ranging from 15 to 20 in partial fulfillment of a course requirement in psychology. Participants filled out all of the materials in a single paper packet and were debriefed upon completing the study. Of those 171 participants, 13 had not filled out key parts of the survey, including the

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experimental manipulation part of the survey, and so they were eliminated, leaving a sample of 158 for analysis (96 female, 62 male; median age = 20; 81 percent Caucasian).

Social value assessment. First, participants were instructed to complete Schwartz's 56-item social value survey (Schwartz, 1992). The students were asked to complete the following sentence for each of the 56 listed values (e.g., "freedom – freedom of action and thought," "social order – stability of society," and "social power – control over others, dominance"): "As a guiding principle in my life _____ is:" and then write a number next to each value, from -1 for "opposed to my values," 0 for "not important" to 7 for "of supreme importance." The one item relevant to this study focused on national security: "National security – protection of my nation from enemies." Of the 158 participants, the mean for the group on this item was 4.53 ($SD = 1.91$), centrally located on the nine-point scale. In order to create the moderating variable for this study, the sample was split in half; the higher-scores group labeled as valuing security the most and the lower-scores group valuing security the least.

Mortality salience manipulation. In the next stage of the experiment, participants were randomly assigned to a mortality salience (MS) condition or dental pain (DP) control condition. In terror management theory research, the most common form of manipulation is a simple written paper survey titled "Projective Life Attitudes Assessment" that includes two instructions on one sheet of paper: "Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouse in you:" and "Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to *you* physically when you die and once you are physically dead." For each question, participants are provided a half page to write their answers. The control condition replaces the word "death" with "dental pain" in order to provide an equally unpleasant thought-inducing task, but one that is not specifically about death. This ensures that the results from the mortality salience manipulation are not caused by feeling unpleasant or depressed, because those in the dental pain control condition also should feel unpleasant or depressed by thinking of a dentist's drill on their teeth.

Mood check. For the third step, participants completed the 60-item Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which measures mood to make sure that any detected results are not a factor of feeling angry, sad, or upset. The questions ask participants how

they feel that moment (e.g., hostile, down, jittery, joyful), rated on a scale of 1-5.

Dependent variable: Support for press access. Participants then completed a 44-item survey that included questions regarding demographics and 8 questions measuring support for press access to public records, assessed on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 7 with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 7 representing "strongly agree." The access questions were gleaned from previous studies and pretests (e.g., Cuillier, 2004). The means of the eight items were calculated to create a "support for press access" scale. The Cronbach's alpha for the eight-item scale was a satisfactory .76. (See Table 1 for questions and means.). Information from the paper questionnaires was entered into SPSS v. 15.0 for analysis.

Table 1

Support for Press Access item wording and means²

| | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD³</i> | <i>Participants</i> |
|--|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Public records explaining after the fact what went wrong in a war or U.S. military battle should NOT be made available to the press. (recoded) | 4.82 | 1.71 | 158 |
| The spending decisions of high-level public officials should be made available to the press. | 4.65 | 1.83 | 158 |
| Court documents regarding lawsuits against companies should be made available to the press. | 4.52 | 1.57 | 158 |

² Measured on a scale from 1 to 7 with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 7 indicating strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha for all eight items = .76. In general people express greatest support for records that have a public safety or government operations facet, and less support for records that involve personal privacy.

³ Standard Deviation.

| | | | |
|---|------|------|-----|
| Records detailing someone's criminal past should be made available to the press. | 3.97 | 1.67 | 158 |
| Public utility records, including the value of a person's home and how much was paid in property taxes, should be available to the press. | 3.92 | 1.71 | 157 |
| The press should have access to the annual Salaries of public employees | 3.17 | 2.01 | 158 |
| Property tax records, including the value of a person's home and how much was paid in property taxes, should be available to the press. | 2.58 | 1.62 | 158 |
| Divorce court files, which may include family assets and allegations between spouses, should be available to the press. | 2.23 | 1.44 | 158 |

Results

Out of a scale of 1 to 7 with a higher number indicating greater support for press access, the mean score for all 158 participants was 3.73 ($SD = 1.04$), so overall this sample did not highly support or oppose support for press access. The means for individual items ranged from a low of 2.23 ($SD = 1.44$) for access to divorce court files to a high of 4.82 ($SD = 1.71$) for access to documents that explain what went wrong in a war (see Table 1 for item wording and means).

As expected, no main effect was found. Those in the mortality salience condition had a mean score of 3.73 ($SD = 1.13$) and those in the control (dental pain) condition had an identical mean score of 3.73 ($SD = .96$).

Mortality salience did not have an overall effect on attitudes toward freedom of information for the sample as a whole.

To test hypothesis 1, that national security values were found to be negatively related to support for press access; a Pearson correlation indicated a moderate negative correlation of $-.30$ ($p < .001$). When evaluating the means between the two groups – those high and low in valuing national security – participants who valued national security the most demonstrated less support for press access to public records ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.00$) than those low in national security ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.00$). The difference was statistically significant, $t(156) = 3.81$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, ordinary least squares regression indicated that a negative relationship remains ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .001$), even when controlling for age, gender, religiosity, and political conservatism (see Table 2). Hypothesis 1 is supported. People who value national security the most support FOI the least.

In testing the second hypothesis, a 2 (mortality salience vs. dental pain) by 2 (high in valuing national security vs. low in valuing national security) ANOVA found a statistically significant interaction, $F(1,154) = 6.53$, $p = .01$ (see Figure 1). Analyzing each group separately, for those who were high in valuing national security, support for press access was higher in the control group (3.62 , $SD = .94$) than for the mortality salience group (3.19 , $SD = 1.03$), and the difference was nearly statistically significant, $t(77) = -1.90$, $p = .06$. For those who were low in valuing national security, support for press access was lower in the control group (3.85 , $SD = .98$) than for the mortality salience group (4.23 , $SD = 1.00$). The difference also was close to being statistically significant, $t(77) = 1.71$, $p = .09$ (see Table 3). Based on the statistically significant interaction, Hypothesis 2 was supported. In a death-thought condition, those who valued security the most became even less supportive of FOI and those who valued security the least became more supportive of FOI.

Analysis also showed that the detected effects were not caused by mood change. No statistically significant mean differences were found between the mortality salience group or control group for the 60 items in the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS-X), including “angry,” “frightened,” “irritable,” “scared,” “loathing,” “sad,” “upset,” jittery,” and “alone.” Therefore, any detected effects cannot reasonably be attributed to people feeling angry, sad, or fearful.

Table 2

Regression analysis of support for press access with valuing national security, controlling for demographics and other values⁴

| | <i>Unstandardized</i> | <i>Standard</i> | <i>Beta</i> |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Coefficients</i> | <i>Coefficients</i> | <i>Error</i> | |
| | (<i>B</i>) | (<i>SE B</i>) | (<i>β</i>) |
| Block 1: Demographics | | | |
| Age | .09 | .05 | .01 |
| Sex (male 1; female 2) | -.18 | .16 | -.09 |
| Incremental R^2 change | | 1% | |
| Block 2: Values | | | |
| Religiosity | -.04 | .04 | -.08 |
| Political conservatism | -.08 | .05 | -.13 |
| Incremental R^2 change | | 4.8% | |

⁴ This table indicates a moderate relationship (-.27, $p < .001$) between valuing national security and support for press access, even when controlling for demographic and political variables (which were found not to be related to support for access). The total model, including demographics, accounts for 9.4 percent of variance. *** = $p < .001$.

Block 3: National security

| | | | |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| Valuing national security | -.15 | .04 | -.27*** |
| Incremental R^2 change | 6.5% | | |
| Total R^2 | 12.3% | | |
| Total Adjusted R^2 | 9.4% | | |

Table 3

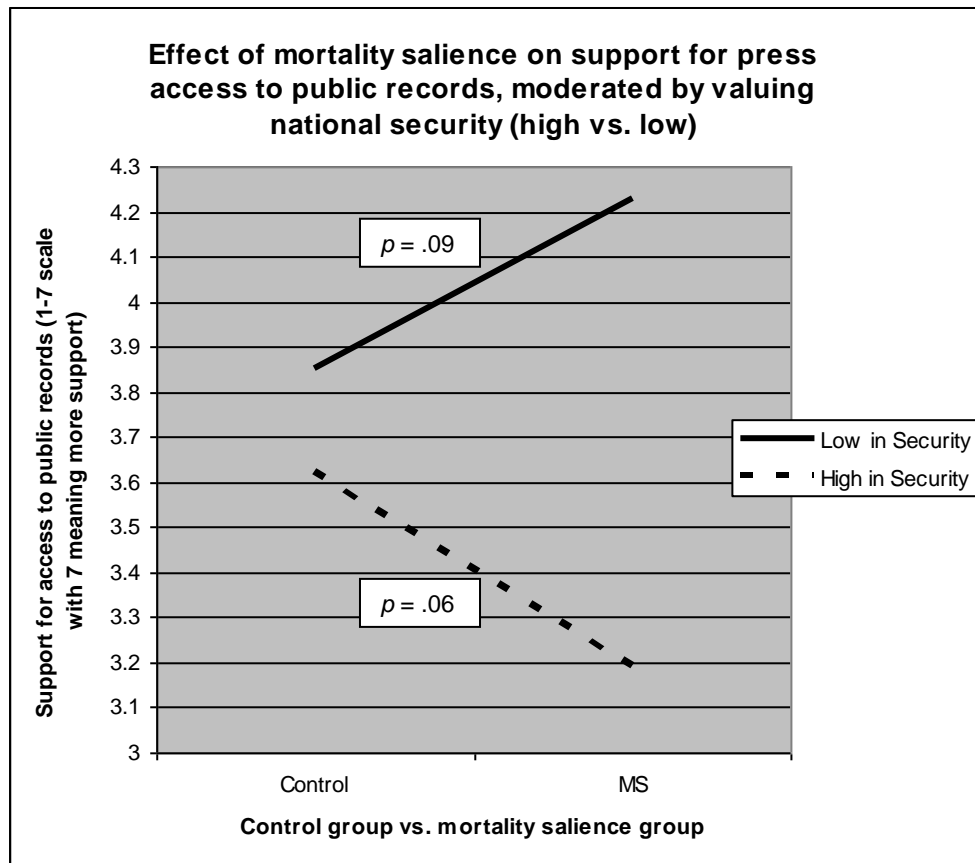
Support for press access to public records as a function of mortality salience condition and valuing national security

| | High in Security | | Low in Security | |
|---------------------------|------------------|------|-----------------|------|
| | DP | MS | DP | MS |
| <i>Mean</i> | 3.62 | 3.19 | 3.85 | 4.23 |
| <i>Standard Deviation</i> | .94 | 1.03 | .98 | 1.00 |
| <i>Participants</i> | 44 | 35 | 41 | 38 |

Note: DP = dental pain control condition, MS = mortality salience condition. See Figure 1, next page.

Figure 1

Support for press access to public records as a function of mortality salience condition and valuing national security (high vs. low)



Note: Control group = dental pain control group; MS = mortality salience group

The interaction is statistically significant, $F(1,154) = 6.53, p = .01$.

Discussion

This study indicates that people who most value national security are less supportive of freedom of information than those who least value national security. More important, this study suggests that when primed to think of their own deaths, people who most value national security demonstrate

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even less support for access, and people who least value national security demonstrate even more support for access. Even though the mean differences were not statistically significant on their own, when combined a statistically significant interaction emerged.

This is consistent with the value-enhancement hypothesis of terror management theory that posits when people think of their own mortality they are more likely to cling more dearly to their worldviews. The results are strengthened by checking mood to ensure that the differences between the mortality salience and control groups are not a function of participants in the death group being sad, angry, or depressed.

Who are these two different types of people, the security-oriented vs. the low-security-oriented, who do not agree on the importance of FOI? Research (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005) indicates that people who most value national security tend to be older, less educated, politically conservative, and female. Post-hoc analysis provided some support for those correlations (Pearson correlations between national security values and demographics: age, $r = .17, p < .05$; political conservatism, $r = .27, p < .01$).

However, the regression analysis for support for access controlled for those demographics, so there is something more about people who value national security. The security-minded people could be more cognizant and fearful of national threats while the other group more confident or apathetic. All we can infer from this study is that the degree to which one values national security is negatively related to support for press access to government records, and those views are amplified by thoughts of death.

Implications. Ramifications of the mortality salience effect on public policy, FOI, and the press are significant. First, the results suggest that during times of mortal strife, those who value security are likely to express even more support for secrecy, which could provide the impetus for leaders to reduce transparency, even if another portion of the population expresses more support for FOI. Calls for action to protect security by a vocal segment of the population, particularly security-minded political conservatives on talk radio or Fox News, may provide enough justification for increased secrecy, which reduces the ability of the press and public to hold government accountable and understand the rationale behind important decisions, such as going to war. Further, the nature of crises can exacerbate the problem. Research indicates that negative emotional response to events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, increases media use, perhaps to reduce uncertainty about what happened (Boyle et al., 2004). If, during

crises, people seek out media coverage of the death-focused incidents, then effects from mortality salience may be amplified.

Second, based on these findings, it is possible that mortality salience might cause national opinion polls to underestimate public support for access. This study did not find a main effect decrease in support for access caused by mortality salience, but this sample of college students is likely to be different from the general public surveyed in national opinion polls. Research indicates that those who respond to national telephone polls are more likely to be older (Link & Oldendick, 1999), less educated (Keeter et al., 2000; Oldendick & Link, 1994), stable homeowners (Bose, Russell, & Giesbrecht, 2004; Kuusela & Vikki, 1999), politically conservative (Durand, Blais, & Vachon, 1999), and female (Groves & Lyberg, 2001; Teitler et al., 2003). These attributes are associated with those who value security, and therefore telephone surveys might indicate an overall lower support for access during times of strife because the samples include a disproportionate number of people who value security.

Third, an element of this line of research is the potential for *preventing* attitudinal shifts in the future. Psychologists have found ways to inoculate people to the mortality salience effect, such as through reminders of tolerance or boosts to self-esteem (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997). Therefore, future research could develop ways to prevent polarization during times of strife through public service campaigns reminding citizens of tolerance, rationale thinking, and democratic principles. Perhaps the most effective method for preventing death-thought-based attitudinal shifts is to provide boosts to self-esteem, reminding citizens of their ability to overcome adversity and stay strong and hopeful for a better day. If, or when, a major catastrophe strikes again, civil libertarians and others could take action to potentially prevent mortality salience effects from causing polarization or potential decreases in support for access.

Limitations and future research. The fact the sample for this study was comprised of college students limits its generalizability to the general public. Future research should attempt to replicate these questions with a cross-section of adults throughout the United States and in other countries. It is possible a random sample of adults would value security more than college students, potentially resulting in a significant main effect between the control group and mortality salience condition, much more robust than from a college-student sample.

Furthermore, more studies should examine other factors that affect support for government transparency, and explicate the relationship between support for access and national security values. Perhaps other psychographic factors are at play, such as trust in government, need for cognition, or political apathy. Experiments testing inoculation messages to prevent attitude shifts could be informative for FOI advocates.

Finally, the FOI academic community should continue to develop a parsimonious model that can explain and predict public attitudes toward freedom of information. The excellent legal research, case studies, and policy analyses need to continue, but the access community should foster more quantitative research, which has the added benefit of "hard numbers" that can be informative in policy discussions.

Conclusion. Public support for the right of journalists and others to access government records is essential for encouraging government leaders to adopt strong freedom of information laws and foster agency cultures based on transparency and accountability. It is disconcerting, though not unexpected, that the more concern a person has for national security the less supportive that person is of access. Even more important, when confronted with the thought of death, people who highly value national security become even less supportive of access to public records. In the event of war or a terrorist attack, polarization over freedom of information could likely result in adoption of secrecy-oriented policies. Access advocates should be prepared for such shifts in public opinion and remind citizens that tolerance and government transparency are not threats to national security, rather, essential systemic protections that make a democratic nation healthy, rationale, and enlightened, even during times of death.

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