

**Crime in the News:
How Crimes, Offenders and Victims Are Portrayed in the Media***

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This study examines the representation of crime stories in the news. Using 71 matched pairs, we examine the constructed elements in the reporting of crime stories between newspapers and local television to document similarities and differences across the mediums. Although considerable work has been devoted to discerning differences in reporting across types of media, little research has investigated how the same crime story “gets told” in one medium compared to another. With matched-pairs of stories, we are able to do this. In this study, we also use content analysis to examine a subset of cases that focus on juveniles to ascertain how atypical victims and offenders are portrayed in the media. Although youth are much less likely to commit crime and to be victimized compared to adults, their stories are disproportionately “the stuff of news.” Collectively, the findings indicate that news reporting follows the law of opposites—the characteristics of crime, criminals, and victims represented in the media are in most respects the polar opposite of the pattern suggested by official crime statistics. This was especially the case in news reports involving juvenile victims and offenders.

Keywords: media, victims’ studies

INTRODUCTION

Everyday people consume the news from a variety of sources including television, radio, newspaper, and the Internet but few are aware of potential biases in the construction and reporting of news stories. All news, no matter the source, has a constructed newsworthy quality. There are important reasons why one story is selected for coverage when another is not. “Events that appear to disrupt expectations [or are] deviant occurrences are the stuff of news” (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003:13). These “disrupted expectations” and “deviant occurrences” are particularly characteristic of crime news stories.

Critical attention to how crime is reported in the news is necessary given the way in which the media represent these events heavily influences our understanding of crime in society. “Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values; what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (Kellner 1995:24). The extent of influence depends,

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to some degree, on characteristics of the different types of mediums (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). Jeffres (1986) defines a medium as “any device that carries messages between people...but what makes a medium a mass medium is its ability to carry messages not just from one person to another but from one person to thousands or millions of others” (pg. 1). This study examines the representation of crime stories in the mass media, in newspapers and television in particular, to reveal how crime is characterized in the news. Using 71 matched pairs, we examine the constructed elements in the reporting of crime stories between newspapers and local television to document similarities and differences across mediums. Although considerable work has been devoted to discerning differences in reporting across types of media (Barak 1994; Burton 2005; Doyle 2003; Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1991; Jensen 1997; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994), little research has investigated how the same crime story “gets told” in one medium compared to another. With matched-pairs of stories, we are able to do this. In this study we also use content analysis to examine, in detail, a subset of cases that focus on juveniles to ascertain how atypical offenders and victims are portrayed in the media. Although youth are much less likely to commit crimes and to be victimized compared to adults, their stories are disproportionately “the stuff of news.”

The Social Construction of Crime in the Media

Reality is socially constructed, in large part, through the media, which provide a way for dominant values in society to be articulated to the public. In particular, the news media constitutes an arena for the powerful institutions of society to disseminate information to a large audience. Gramsci (1971) argues that ‘media hegemony’ refers to the dominance of a certain way of life and how it is diffused through the public (see also Barak 1994:238-243). In other words, “media systems tend to privilege the ideological perspective of the powerful—in particular those of the holders of state power, exponents of establishment politics, and representatives of major capitalist economic interests” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994:7). The news, therefore, favors some groups over others (e.g., affluent whites vs. poor inner-city blacks) so media bias is not random (Barak 1994:4; Jensen 1997:27).

Lipschultz and Hilt (2002) suggest there are two levels to the social construction of reality with regards to news media. At the first level, producers construct reality through the bureaucratic decisions they make about which events to report and how they will report them (Chermak 1997:711). In this process, biases are inevitable. “The process of gathering information and deciding what’s news are the primary concerns of critics, who argue that there is no way news can be ‘value-free’ because a series of value judgments have been imposed on the event along the way” (Jeffres 1986:110). The second level suggests that viewers construct their own reality based on how they understand and interpret the news. Not everyone receives and processes news in the same way; audience characteristics and experiences can be influential. As Weitzer and Kubrin (2004:499) claim, “The field of communication studies has increasingly regarded the reception of media messages as a dynamic process in which viewers actively interpret and perhaps reconstruct those messages in light of their personal backgrounds and experiences.” The social construction of reality thus begins when the producer decides what story to cover and continues all the way to the consumer’s living room, where social reality is (re)constructed.

If the media construct a general sense of reality, they also construct a reality of crime. In fact, the media are “among the most important agents in the diffusion of criminal conceptions. Crime coverage in the newspapers [and] television affects a person’s estimate of the frequency of crime as well as the interpretations that he attaches to crime” (Quinney 1970:281; see also Miller Potter 2005). In fact, over 75 percent of the public claim they form their opinions about crime from what they see or read in the news, which is more than three times the number who say they get their primary information on crime from personal experience (22 percent) (ABC News 1996).

The language used in a news report is critical in constructing the consumer’s reality and perception of crime. Relating the framing of language to the social construction of reality, Loge (2005) uses the metaphor of a camera stating that “the same photograph of the same scene looks different depending on the filter used on the camera. And, of course, just as the camera lens and filter include information, they also exclude information; one cannot see what is outside the camera frame or see the photograph in a different light. Language, therefore, is both a *reflection* and a *deflection* of reality” (pg. 695). The language used in a newscast or in the newspaper, the information that is included and the facts that are omitted, greatly influence how the public perceives crime.

Jewkes (2004:40) describes how crime stories become newsworthy by focusing on several news values specific to crime including the level of predictability of the crime (or how common or uncommon the crime is), risk (or the sense that consumers may be at risk of similar victimization), whether the crime has a sexual aspect to it, whether the offender or victim is a celebrity or high-status person, whether the crime occurred locally, the level of violence, the presence of spectacle or graphic imagery, and whether youth are involved, among others. The extent to which a story contains these elements influences the likelihood that it will be reported. Of course “a story does not have to conform to all the criteria in order to make the news – although events that score highly on the newsworthiness scale (that is, conform to several of the news values) are more likely to be reported” (Jewkes 2004:40). Crime news values can change over time.

Ultimately, the discussion of news values for both general and crime news focuses on the idea that dominant values are placed on the audience and that these ideals inform the selection and construction of specific stories into news (Burton 2005). This study is not concerned with where these values stem from, but rather how they shape the stories produced by the media.

Crime Reporting in the Media

No matter the country, the day, or the time, “crime is an important news topic” (Chermak 1994:95). According to one content analysis of six print and three broadcast media organizations, “print media present nine crime stories a day, on average, and electronic media four crime stories per day” (Chermak 1997:711). Despite potential differences across mediums, there are general ways the media portray crime. Ultimately, decisions the media make typically create a distorted view of reality held by the public, one that differs in many ways from reality (Sacco 1995:143). According to Reiner, Livingston and Allen (2003), the portrayal of crime in the media compared to official crime statistics is referred to as the “law of opposites,” meaning that “the characteristics of crime, criminals, and victims represented in the media are in most respects the polar opposite of the pattern suggested by official crime statistics or by crime and victim

surveys” (pg. 15). There are several dimensions of crime stories to which the law of opposites applies.

Prevalence and Content of Crime Stories

Since the Second World War, an increasing proportion of news stories have focused on crime. And the last two decades, in particular, have witnessed a redefinition of what is considered an appropriate subject for crime news reporting. “Changes in mores relating to public discussion of sex and violence have allowed respectable media outlets to report crimes that would have previously been seen as taboo and to do so at a level of detail that would once have been considered lurid” (Sacco 1995:145). Nowhere is the law of opposites more applicable than with respect to the types of crimes reported in the media. Official crime statistics indicate that most crime is nonviolent yet the news media suggests just the opposite (Chermak 1997:696; Garofalo 1981; Schlesinger, Tumber and Murdock 1991), often creating the perception of an “epidemic of random violence” (Sacco 1995:142). “About two-thirds of crime news stories are primarily about violent or sex offenses, but these account for less than ten percent of crimes recorded by the police” (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003:18-9). A study by Sheley and Ashkins (1981) found that a St. Louis newspaper gave “crimes against the person” thirty five times more attention than property crimes, and murder ninety times more coverage than other major offenses. At the same time, attention to property crimes in the news has declined “unless they involve celebrities or some highly quirky features” (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003:19), yet property offenses constitute over 90 percent of crimes recorded by the police.

Offenders and Victims

Many news sources give little information about criminal offenders but when they do, they are typically older than in actual crime reports (Lotz 1991; Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003; Sacco 1995). In the media, the majority of reported offenders are between the ages of 20 and 40, yet according to official statistics “more than 40 percent of convicted or cautioned offenders are under 21” (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003:20). An increasing trend, however, has been the reporting of crimes, particularly violent crimes, by juveniles (Dorfman et al. 1997; Perrone and Chesney-Lind 1997). A meta-analysis of 77 studies that examined crime news reports found that when youth appear in the news, it is often connected to violence. “Relatively few youth are arrested each year for violent crimes, yet the message from the news is that this is a common occurrence” (Dorfman and Schiraldi 2001:17). One analysis examining 840 newspaper reports and 109 news segments documented that 40 percent of all newspaper articles on children were about violence, as were 48 percent of television news stories (Kunkel 1994). On the other hand, evidence indicates that youth victims receive much less attention than youth offenders (Dorfman and Schiraldi 2001:22).

As might be expected, the media depict a large proportion of offenders as racial and ethnic minorities, even though a much smaller percentage are involved in the criminal justice system (Reiner, Livingstone, and Allen 2003). Minorities, therefore, are overrepresented as offenders in the news (Barlow 1998; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). Research by Entman (1990, 1992, 1994) finds that in television news stories, black (compared to white) suspects are less likely to be identified by name, are not as well dressed, and are more likely to be shown physically restrained. Yet while blacks are overrepresented as offenders, they are typically underrepresented as victims in the news (Weiss and Chermak 1998; Pritchard and Hughes 1997).

One study found that newsworthiness increases when the victim of a crime is white and another found that homicides with white victims resulted in more and longer articles than homicides with black victims. The media and official statistics are in agreement on one aspect of criminal offenders: they are more often males (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003; Sacco 1995:143).

Regardless of race, a general problem with the portrayal of victims in crime news stories has to do with what Sacco (1995:149) refers to as “the random character of victimization,” or the media’s tendency to imply that anyone at anytime may fall victim to crime. He notes, “While the best social science literature indicates that the risks of crime...are not equally shared, media images often convey a different message” (pg. 149). The random character of victimization is underscored to increase the dramatic value of a story.

As the preceding discussion indicates, the news media does not reflect actual crime statistics on several dimensions. The previously mentioned meta-analysis concluded, “Overall, the studies taken together indicate that depictions of crime in the news are not reflective of either the rate of crime generally, the proportion of crime which is violent, the proportion of crime committed by people of color, or the proportion of crime committed by youth” (Dorfman and Schiraldi 2001:7). While much of this discussion applies to the reporting of crime in all types of media, it is also the case that mediums differ in various ways regarding the construction of crime news. Comparing newspapers and local television news, we highlight these differences below and argue that such differences have potential implications for the construction of the social reality of crime.

Crime Reporting Differences in Newspaper and Television

The news media allow for private events, or individual crimes, to become public concerns. “The news media, in particular, provide an important forum in which private troubles are selectively gathered up, invested with broader meaning, and made available for public consumption” (Sacco 1995:142). This study determines whether these “private turned public” events are in fact represented differently depending on the medium in which they are reported. There are numerous reasons to believe that differences in representation exist depending on whether the crime story is written-up in a newspaper or broadcast on local television news.

Doyle (2003) describes television as a “shared arena.” Unlike newspapers, television allows for a wider and more diverse audience. Since it requires a less specialized skill from viewers in decoding and understanding, the audience has a more passive role when it comes to television news; viewers sit and watch, without a choice as to what is covered, taking in information they are given as truth (Doyle 2003:14-15). As for newspapers, readers make more choices regarding which stories they will focus on, thereby playing a more active role in their news consumption.

Newspapers are completely visual. Headlines and pictures attract the reader and both are designed to catch the eye. Television, on the other hand, is based on sound as well as sight, thus appealing to numerous senses (Jeffres 1986:5). The notion of graphic imagery, a crime news value previously mentioned, is of higher importance for television news. While newspapers can include black and white pictures, a streaming color video from the news station adds more sensation to one’s consumption. In particular, “seeing something on television may have a much

stronger emotive impact than...reading about it in the newspaper” (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004:501).

With regards to emotion, newspapers focus on ideas whereas television emphasizes “feeling, appearance, mood...there is a retreat from distant analysis and a dive into emotional and sensory involvement” (Doyle 2003:15). Television takes already formed cultural stereotypes and uses them to its advantage, tapping into human emotions. For example, the belief that juvenile offenders are becoming increasingly violent is often used. Because of this stereotype, a story that involves a youth offender will receive greater attention in the news.

Another major difference between newspapers and television is that newspapers use space to get their message across whereas television uses time. Television values timeliness more than newspapers because of the short amount of time available for a given program or news segment. In essence, “broadcasters emphasize events that occur within a given day and highly value those occurring within the most recent few hours while daily newspaper journalists deal with material that appears as ‘yesterday’s news’” (Jeffres 1986:109).

In addition to these differences, newspapers and television are distinct in terms of the organization and production of content. There are differences between the mediums “where most of the ‘media work’ is accomplished” (Jeffres 1986:86). Actual news makes up a large percentage of the content in newspapers whereas for a television station, news constitutes only a small portion of the coverage. Moreover, pressure for ratings and internal competition is much greater for television than newspapers (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004). Internal competition reflects the reality that there are several local television stations compared to typically one major newspaper in a city. Thus, a heavy reliance on ratings and competition among local news channels can “lead to a greater stress on marketable, shocking news in television” (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004:501).

In sum, television and newspapers are not identical media sources, in large part because they have different “structuring agents” (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991), or ways in which information is presented. Before news even becomes available for public consumption, the mediums start on different playing fields. All in all, newspapers have a relatively limited arena or readership, have space as their “structuring agent,” produce only news, do not rely heavily on technology for production, and have a distance barrier to overcome. On the other hand, television has a much larger and more diverse audience, produces more than just news broadcasts, relies heavily on technology for production, uses time as its “structuring agent,” and has the feel of being much closer to the audience. We argue that these differences are likely to influence the content and nature of crime news reporting, resulting in the finding that the same crime story will be presented somewhat differently in newspapers and television.

The Current Study

The current study focuses on the representation of crime stories in newspapers and television to compare similarities and differences in the reporting of events across mediums. In this study we also examine a subset of cases that focus specifically on juveniles to ascertain how atypical offenders and victims are represented in the news. In our analysis, we adopt the framework advanced by Singletary and Lipsky (1977) that focuses on the nature of errors present

in a news story. Singletary and Lipsky (1977) classify reporting errors as “objective” or “subjective,” where objective reflects the factual characteristics of a story and subjective reflects the interpretive aspects of the report. Here we use a modified version of this framework that accounts for the inclusion and/or omission of objective versus subjective story characteristics or facts. Specifically, objective facts are the indisputable facts of the crime, some of which are essential for understanding what happened and some of which are not essential but tend to be reported to provide greater detail about the course of events. Subjective facts, on the other hand, include the unnecessary aspects of the story that more often than not add a layer of bias. Further discussion of objective and subjective facts is provided in the methods section.

Using this framework, we address three research questions: First, what type of information about crime is provided to consumers in both newspapers and television? Are objective or subjective facts most common? And to what extent do crime news stories reflect the “law of opposites,” where the focus of attention is on uncharacteristic crimes/offenders/victims? Second, do differences in reporting exist across newspapers and television? Given differences between these mediums, will newspapers and television report in different frequencies objective and subjective facts for the same given story? And third, how do portrayals of juvenile offenders and victims—unusual candidates for news stories according to official statistics—vary in newspaper and television news? Are differences in reporting and the types of “facts” presented diminished in such cases?

Methods

From October 19th through December 2nd 2005 we collected crime stories from the *Washington Post* and the 11 o’clock local television news on the Washington, D.C. ABC affiliate. We define a crime story as “a program segment which features one or more acts of breaking the law as central to the narrative” (Grabe 1999:38). Each day during this period we read the *Post* and clipped crime stories from the first section (coverage of national, international, and a small number of local stories) and Metro section (complete coverage of the local news). At 11:00 pm each night, we recorded the local television news. The following day, all crime reports were transcribed.

In order to be in the sample, a crime story had to be included in both mediums. If the television news covered a murder in Northeast D.C. but it was not covered in the *Washington Post* either the next or the following day, then the story was not included in the sample. Over the study period, we collected and coded 71 crime stories resulting in our sample of matched pairs. In this study, a “matched pair” consists of two news reports of the same crime, one from television and the other from the newspaper. With matched pairs, we are able to determine whether, and to what extent, crime stories are reported differently across mediums. It is important to note that the unit of analysis for this study is the report of a crime story, not the crime itself. In other words, our sample consists of 71 matched crime reports, some of which include reports of the same crime over a period of time. In this sense, some crime stories are presented multiple times in both mediums given repeated reports on these events.

We selected the *Washington Post* because it is the most highly circulated newspaper in the D.C. metropolitan area. The local ABC station was randomly chosen between ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX stations. The 11 o’clock news was coded because there is little, if any, coverage

of traffic, which constitutes a large portion of the morning and evening news. Without traffic included, there was the likelihood that more crime stories could be reported. Also, by 11:00 pm most crimes for the day have occurred and could be reported on.

All television recordings were transcribed word for word to determine the precise word count. After crime reports from both mediums were matched and the television news was transcribed, we read the stories line by line and, using SPSS, coded them “on what was portrayed, reported, suggested or implied in the context” (Grabe 1999:38). We coded a variety of variables: *Date case reported*, *List of crimes that occurred* (e.g. murder, sexual assault, robbery), *Most serious crime type* (1 = violent, 2 = property, 3 = drug, 4 = other), *multiple crimes* (0 = no, 1 = yes, 99 = missing), *multiple offenders* (0 = no, 1 = yes, 99 = missing), *multiple victims* (0 = no, 1 = yes, 99 = missing), *Is crime story part of a string of crimes* (0 = no, 1 = yes, 99 = missing), *Did the crime occur in DC* (0 = no, 1 = yes, 99 = missing), *DC quadrant of crime* (1 = NW, 2 = NE, 3 = SW, 4 = SE, 5 = Did not occur in DC, 99 = missing), *State crime occurred in* (0 = Washington DC, 1 = Virginia, 2 = Maryland, 3 = Florida, 4 = California, 5 = Washington State, 6 = Massachusetts, 7 = Tennessee, 8 = Pennsylvania, 99 = missing), *aggravating circumstances* (0 = no, 1 = yes, 99 = missing), *List of aggravating circumstances* (e.g., police involved shooting, offender is female, victim is a child), *Number of offenders*, *Number of victims*, *Race of offender reported* (1 = White, 2 = Black, 3 = Hispanic, 4 = Asian, 5 = Other, 6 = No Race Reported, 99 = missing), *Race of offender implied* (1 = White, 2 = Black, 3 = Hispanic, 4 = Asian, 5 = Other, 6 = No Race Implied, 99 = missing), *Age of offender*, *Sex of offender* (0 = male, 1 = female, 99 = missing), *Race of victim reported* (same coding as offender), *Race of victim implied* (same coding as offender), *Age of victim*, *Sex of victim* (same coding as offender), *Victim/offender relationship* (1 = Family Intimate, 2 = Family Nonintimate, 3 = Friend/Acquaintance Intimate, 4 = Friend/Acquaintance Nonintimate, 5 = Strangers, 99 = missing), *Word count*, *Was the story a lead story* (0 = no, 1 = yes).

These variables were coded twice for each crime story—once for the television report and once for the newspaper report. For all race variables, no race reported or implied means that the offender or victim was mentioned in the article, yet no race was explicitly mentioned (reported) or shown through pictures (implied). A variable coded as “missing” indicates that the article made no mention of that factor. For example, if the police had no suspects, therefore having no offender to assign characteristics to, then the reported race, implied race, sex, and victim/offender relationship, among other factors, all would be reported as “missing.”

As noted above, in line with Singletary and Lipsky (1977), this study adopts the terms “objective” and “subjective” with slightly modified definitions. Again, an objective fact is an indisputable and unbiased aspect of a news story. Some objective facts are essential for understanding the story while others are not equally essential. In the latter case, without these facts the audience can still comprehend what happened however they provide another layer of coverage, supplementing the essential facts. Regardless, the media cannot skew this information, unlike with subjective facts; the offender can either be male or female, there can only be one time the crime occurred, and the victim can only be one age. Most important, however, is that objective facts minimize personal bias or judgment in the report. For example, reporting the offender’s race, which provides additional meaning to the story in a manner similar to the reporting of offender age or sex, is often an unnecessary element of the story that mostly serves

to reinforce existing stereotypes of race and crime. Thus, offender race is considered subjective rather than objective. The variables that fit under the objective heading are: *most serious crime type, state crime occurred in, time crime occurred, sex of offender, sex of victim, age of offender and age of victim.*

Subjective facts refer to aspects of a news report that are unnecessary for a complete understanding of what happened and that can often introduce bias into the report. While some are also indisputable like objective facts, they are all of little consequence to the audience's general understanding of the events that occurred. In other words, as the term suggests, these facts are typically included to enhance the subjectivity or newsworthiness of a particular story. These are the facts that can perpetuate stereotypes and myths regarding crime in our society. Of the variables in this study, *are there aggravating circumstances, race of offender reported, race of offender implied, race of victim reported, race of victim implied, and victim/offender relationship* are considered subjective facts. We categorized these as subjective facts because not only are they less central to the story, they allow for the possibility of bias.

Our analysis of the matched pairs examines the content of crime stories in the news generally but also attempts to distinguish differences across mediums. Stories could differ either in the specific information that is reported in both mediums or in what is excluded in the accounts. The crime stories where the mediums differed on information are referred to as *Unmatched Cases*. For example, if there is a case where the television news reported the race of the offender as White whereas the newspaper either did not report a race or reported a different race, then there is an *Unmatched Case* for that variable. We supplement the statistical analysis with a content analysis of the stories to more thoroughly explore the nature of crime news reporting, as well as any differences that may exist across the mediums. In particular, we focus on the representation of juveniles as offenders and victims.

Results

During the course of coding, 71 matched pairs were collected. Some of the crimes included the assault of a well-known rapper, the accidental shooting of a young woman at a high school football game, the abuse of an infant by his foster mother, the sentencing of a man who knowingly spread HIV to his sexual partners, the notorious "cell-phone bandit," a local mall stabbing, the murder of a newborn baby, and a car chase that spanned from Northern Virginia to Maryland, among others.

It is important to note there were several instances when crimes were reported in one medium but not the other (and thus were excluded from our sample). Although we did not systematically collect information on these cases, we note several observations about such stories. First, there were more examples of crime stories reported in the local television news that were not reported in the newspaper. Most of these involved updates about crimes previously reported on but many of them were about new crimes that were almost always violent in nature, such as bank robberies or shootings in the District and metro area. In other words, these were common violent crimes without particularly dramatic elements that the television news briefly reported on but the newspaper did not consider newsworthy enough to devote attention to. Second, although there were fewer stories presented in the newspaper that were not reported on local television news, the unmatched newspaper reports were typically not about violent crimes

but often were reports about white-collar or political crimes in the area. This is not surprising given the location in which this study took place and because the *Washington Post* is considered one of the nation's top political newspapers. Finally, regardless of which medium reported a story and which didn't, on the whole, the excluded cases were much less sensationalistic than the cases included in the study.

In this section we present results that follow the objective and subjective framework. Each category of facts consists of two elements: (1) a reporting of the facts (yes or no), and (2) a comparison of the crime stories in which the fact was reported by both mediums. The first will determine whether or not the mediums differ in the reporting of specific facts, thereby addressing the question: will the television and newspaper report the same crime differently? The second will determine how the mediums differ when they both present the same fact, thereby addressing the question: will there be differences in the story between the mediums based on objective and subjective facts? The additional research question on the representation of youthful offenders and victims will be addressed in the qualitative analysis of cases where youth were involved.

Objective Facts

Table 1 displays the frequencies of objective facts for both newspaper and television reports. Of the 71 matched stories, both mediums identically reported the most serious crime type and the state the crime occurred in. Both mediums nearly identically reported two other objective facts: offender and victim sex. On the other hand, offender and victim age were less likely to be equally reported across the mediums, although there is still general consistency. This suggests that objective facts are reported similarly in newspaper and local television news.

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Objective Facts for Newspaper and Local Television News Reports (N = 71)

		Frequency for Newspaper	Percentage for Newspaper	Frequency for Television	Percentage for Television
<i>Most Serious Crime Type Reported?</i>	Yes	71	100.00	71	100.00
<i>State Reported?</i>	Yes	70	98.6	70	98.6
<i>Offender Sex Reported?</i>	Yes	51	71.8	52	73.2
<i>Victim Sex Reported?</i>	Yes	55	77.5	51	71.8
<i>Offender Age Reported?</i>	Yes	42	59.2	34	47.9
<i>Victim Age Reported?</i>	Yes	40	56.3	27	38.0

This finding is further supported in Table 2, which displays crosstabs for the most serious crime type reported—violent, property, drug or other. Table 2 shows that the newspaper reported a violent crime in 61 cases, a property crime in 7 cases, and an “other” crime in 3 cases. The

same was true for television news. Cross-tabs on the state in which the crime occurred (not shown here) also matched identically in terms of both mediums reporting the same states.

Table 2: Cross-tabulation for *Most Serious Crime Type* Newspaper by *Most Serious Crime Type* Television (N = 71)

		<i>Most Serious Crime Type</i>				Total
		<i>Television</i>	Violent	Property	Drug	
<i>Most Serious Crime Type Newspaper</i>	Violent		61			61
	Property			7		7
	Drug					0
	Other					3
	Total		61	7	0	3

While cross-tabs for offender age and victim age (not shown here) do indicate minor discrepancies across mediums, the unmatched cases are only slightly different. Of the 32 cases where offender age was reported in both mediums, only 2 matched pairs differed with regards to the age given. In one case, which involved a Tennessee school shooting, the television reported the offender's age as 15 whereas the newspaper stated the offender was 14 (ABC News Nov. 9, 2005; *Washington Post* Nov. 9, 2005). In another case, which focused on the attack of a high school teacher by a student, the television reported the offender as 16 whereas the newspaper reported him as 15 (ABC News Oct. 19, 2005; *Washington Post* Oct. 21, 2005). Similar minor discrepancies were found with respect to victim age. Thus, as expected, television and newspaper reports do not differ when presenting objective facts.

Apart from this, it is interesting to note that 61 of the 71 reports were for violent crimes, despite their statistical rarity (relative to property and drug offenses) in official statistics. In other words, the "law of opposites" clearly operates with respect to the type of crimes reported in the media. This was true for both newspaper and local television news. The finding that violent crime is over-represented in the news is in line with existing research (Chermak 1997:696; Dorfman and Schiraldi 2001; Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2003).

Subjective Facts

Table 3 shows the frequencies for subjective facts in newspaper and television reports. As shown, subjective facts are presented at a much lower frequency than objective facts. For example, offender and victim race are reported less than 10 percent of the time regardless of medium and both mediums imply victim and offender race less than 27 percent of the time. Two other subjective facts—victim/offender relationship and aggravating circumstances—are reported at higher frequencies. Given that subjective facts are less critical for understanding what happened, it is not surprising they receive less attention in the news. Still, newspapers and local television news do provide this additional information, some of which is unnecessary and can perpetuate stereotypes.

Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages of Subjective Facts for Newspaper and Local Television News Reports (N = 71)

		Frequency for Newspaper	Percentage for Newspaper	Frequency for Television	Percentage for Television
<i>Offender Race Reported?</i>	Yes	7	9.9	3	4.2
<i>Offender Race Implied?</i>	Yes	14	19.7	19	26.8
<i>Victim Race Reported?</i>	Yes	1	1.4	2	2.8
<i>Victim Race Implied?</i>	Yes	7	9.9	8	11.3
<i>Victim/Offender Relationship Reported?</i>	Yes	60	84.5	60	84.5
<i>Aggravating Circumstances?</i>	Yes	29	40.8	29	40.8

Table 3 also indicates that the frequency of reporting of at least some subjective facts does vary by medium. For instance, offender race is more frequently reported in the newspaper yet it is more frequently implied in the television news (typically through pictures shown during the segment). While these differences are not large, it is important to remember that the mediums are reporting on the exact same crime story.

Tables 4a and 4b display the cross-tabulations for *offender race reported* and *offender race implied*. These tables indicate the unmatched cases with respect to these variables. As shown, in those cases where subjective facts are reported in both newspapers and local television news, there is a large difference across mediums, specifically in terms of offender's implied race.

Table 4a: Cross-tabulation for Race of Offender Reported Newspaper by Race of Offender Reported Television (N = 71; N.R.R. = No Race Reported)

		<i>Race Of Offender Reported Television</i>						
		White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	N.R.R.	Total
<i>Race Of Offender Reported Newspaper</i>	White						1	1
	Black		1				1	2
	Hispanic			1			3	4
	Asian							
	Other							
	N.R.R.		1				43	44
	Total		2	1			48	51

Table 4b: Cross-tabulation for *Race of Offender Implied Newspaper* by *Race of Offender Implied Television* (N = 71; N.R.I. = No Race Implied)

		<i>Race of Offender Implied Television</i>					Total	
		White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other		N.R.I.
<i>Race of Offender Implied Newspaper</i>	White	1					1	
	Black		2				3	5
	Hispanic			6				6
	Asian							
	Other					1	1	2
	N.R.I.	4	3	2			28	37
	Total	5	5	8		1	32	51

According to Table 4a, of the 51 paired cases in which an offender was known by the police or made reference to in the report that enabled a race category to be determined, only 45 reports were the same across mediums; a Black offender in one matched pair, an Hispanic offender in one matched pair, and no race reported in 43 matched pairs. However, of greater interest are the six *unmatched cases*; one White, one Black, and three Hispanic offenders were reported in the newspaper whereas no race was reported on the television news. On the other hand, one Black offender was reported on the television news while the newspaper reported no race in this case.

Table 4b indicates that the mediums also differ on implied offender race for the same crime story. There were three cases in which the newspaper implied the offender was Black and one case in which an “other” race was implied, while the television news did not imply a race for either. On the other hand, there were four cases in which the television news implied the offender’s race as White, three cases as Black, and two as Hispanic yet in each of these cases, offender race was not implied in the newspaper.

Of the four cases in which the television reports implied the race of the offender as White, all were crimes that occurred outside of Washington, D.C. Three of these cases involved a crime in Pennsylvania and one was a sexual assault in Florida. Thus, instead of focusing on local crimes, the television news chose to concentrate on national stories with white offenders. It is also important to note that the cases where the television implied the offender race and the newspaper did not were either extremely violent in nature or involved a minor. These cases include three kidnappings of a minor, two sexual assaults, three murders, and leaving a 4-year

old on the side of a busy interstate. Conversely, the cases in which the offender's race was implied in the newspaper involved property crimes and in one case, a murder suspect being released due to lack of evidence. This suggests that television reports tend to imply offender race when a crime is particularly heinous whereas newspaper reports are more likely to imply offender race in victimless crimes or in cases where the offender is portrayed in a favorable light. Regardless, there is a discrepancy between the mediums as to which crimes warrant the race of the offender being implied.

Analysis of Juvenile Offenders and Victims

Given our major finding that crime news reporting follows the "law of opposites," to further investigate this phenomenon, in additional analysis we elected to focus specifically on the reporting of crimes by and against juveniles—atypical offenders and victims. By focusing on youth in particular, we are able to more closely examine how the media construct and perpetuate the "law of opposites" in both television and newspaper reporting, and we can determine whether differences emerge based on the medium. Despite how infrequently they are involved in crime as either offenders or victims, juveniles constitute a central focus of crime news reporting. This section describes how these offenders and victims are portrayed in the media. We move beyond the objective/subjective framework to a more detailed content analysis of reports with juvenile offenders or victims. We selected out those matched pairs where a juvenile was identified as either a victim or perpetrator in the story (n=27). As these crimes are newsworthy, we were not surprised to find that 38 percent of our sample involved youth. Despite this, one must keep in mind, once again, that juveniles are much less likely to be either victims or offenders. Concerning the latter, almost 90 percent of crimes cleared by arrest are committed by adults (Snyder and Sickmund 1999). Thus, juveniles were overrepresented in our sample. Moreover, every case in our sample with a juvenile offender involved a violent crime, supporting Dorfman and Schiraldi's (2001) conclusion that "news involving youth is violent" (pg. 17).

Commonalities between Mediums

Newspaper and television reports depict crimes with juvenile offenders and victims in some similar ways. We identified four common themes in the reports: (1) juvenile offenders and their offenses are portrayed as irrational, (2) crimes committed by juveniles are linked to other crimes in the past, creating the appearance of a "youth crime wave," (3) juvenile victims are presented as innocent and blameless, and (4) there is an obsession with safety and security following incidents involving juveniles. We discuss each of these in turn.

More often than not crimes committed by juveniles are portrayed in the news as irrational, unexplainable and senseless. This characterization of crime as random and inexplicable is common in most crime reporting (Surette 1994;1998) but we found it especially characteristic of crimes committed by youth. For example, in one murder case, both mediums describe the offender's motive as due to his anger because marijuana supplies he had ordered were mistakenly delivered to the victim's home (ABC News Oct. 20, 2005; *Washington Post* Oct. 21, 2005). In another case, the report mentions "there is no clear motive for the attack but some kids here at the school say the student may have been upset over a failing grade he received from that teacher" (ABC News Oct. 19, 2005). In a third case involving a youth offender who killed his girlfriend's parents, the newspaper reports, "Ludwig confessed to the killings saying he shot Borden's parents after her father told Ludwig to stop seeing her...Ludwig said he shot

Michael Borden in the back as he was going down the hall to the front door and then headed toward Cathryn Borden. ‘I shot Mom as she was sitting in the chair...It was an intentional murder. I intended to shoot them, and I did’” (*Washington Post* Nov. 22, 2005). These examples, which represent typical juvenile offenses in our sample, underscore the irrational nature of violence committed by youth. For most, a wrong delivery, a failing grade, and a parent’s disapproval do not warrant a violent response. Such examples create the perception that youth today act senselessly and without remorse. In reality, however, crimes of this nature are extremely rare—especially among juveniles—highlighting, once again, how the “law of opposites” is central to news reporting. This is true regardless of medium.

Another common theme in the reporting of youth offender cases involves the linking of the crime under question to related crimes in the recent past. In other words, in many cases the story’s focus extends beyond the current crime to incorporate broader crime trends either in the area or over time. The result is the media construction of a “youth crime wave” (see Fishman 1978). For example, one case entailed a large number of juvenile offenders arrested on carjacking and robbery charges. After briefly describing what happened, the television newscast turned its attention to related incidents involving these and other youth. The newscaster reports, “Some of the alleged carjackers are also charged with the rash of street robberies in Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights” (ABC News Nov. 15, 2005). The focus of the story then shifts yet again to linking all these offenses to even broader crime trends in the area. The newspaper notes, “Robberies, especially carjackings, are a vexing public safety problem in the county. There were more carjackings in Prince George’s last year than in the rest of Maryland’s communities combined...Prince George’s police created a carjacking unit at the beginning of this year to tackle the problem. Last year, 563 carjackings occurred in Prince George’s; there were 492 in the rest of the state” (*Washington Post* Nov. 16, 2005).

In one rape case, the entire focus of the story involves the possible linking of the offender to other sexual assaults in the area. The newspaper headline reads “Fairfax Teen Charged with Rape” with a subheading of “Police Seek to Link Him to 3 Other Attacks” (*Washington Post* Nov. 5, 2005). After the short opening paragraphs that describe what happened, the remainder of the article essentially deals with three other sexual assault cases in which the offender is implicated (but not charged). The 3rd paragraph of the story leads off with, “Although Acosta is charged in only one of the Dunn Loring attacks, ‘we think he is responsible for all four,’ said officer Bud Walker, a police spokesman. ‘We fully expect him to be charged in the others,’ Walker added.” This story reported in the television news also underscores the offender’s possible linkage to other crimes. The newscast opens with, “A teenager is under arrest tonight on sexual assault charges and police say 18-year-old Michael Acosta could be the person responsible for a series of attacks near the Dunn Loring metro stop” (ABC News Nov. 4, 2005).

In a third case involving a student who violently attacked his teacher, it is clear that the story is reported, in large part, to raise broader concerns about rising trends in youth violence, especially in schools. Highlighted in the beginning of the article is the fact that this incident followed two school attacks from the previous week. Also underscored is the greater need to “protect schools from intruders with deadly weapons,” following these incidents (*Washington Post* Oct. 21, 2005). By the 4th paragraph, the story cites national trends in student violence noting, “Nationwide, about 4 percent of schoolteachers reported that they were physically

attacked by a student during the 1999-2000 school year..." Several other national figures are provided.

In each of these cases, the stories serve a larger function. While the facts are reported, of greater interest are the connections that can be made between the offender and other crimes, the offender and other offenders, and the crime and other crimes. In essence, these stories represent "case studies" of larger crime problems in the area. By explicitly making these connections, the media construct a reality that violence among youth is pervasive and that something must be done.

Not surprisingly, we found that in the majority of youth victim cases that the victims were presented as innocent and blameless individuals. Both mediums used several tactics to heighten victim innocence including focusing on the extent of the victim's injuries and highlighting the victim's positive attributes. Concerning the former, news reports of juvenile victims typically give extensive listings of the injuries sustained by the victim as well as provide detail about the nature of the injury. This characterization is more evident the younger in age the victim. For example, in one case where a mother is accused of killing her newborn, the newspaper states that the medical examiner ruled the death a homicide and then continues to list the extent of injuries sustained by the infant: "The cause of death was determined to be asphyxia, blunt force, head injury, and environmental exposure" (*Washington Post* Dec. 1, 2005). Even more detail is provided in another infant abuse case where it is reported that the mother admitted "striking the infant with an open hand and dropped him six to seven times while changing him or giving him a bath" (ABC News Oct. 27, 2005). The television newscaster lists the extensive injuries: "consistent with shaken baby syndrome, brain hemorrhages, skull fracture, bleeding from the eye, and bruises." The newspaper report of this same story also notes that the "skull was fractured" and there was "swelling to the brain" (*Washington Post* Oct. 29, 2005).

Another case in which a mother left her young son on the side of a busy highway provides an example of how injury is emphasized when the victim is a juvenile. In this case, almost the entire television news report focuses on the extent of injury: "Channoah Green faces child endangerment charges for kicking her 4-year old son out of the car on busy 495 near route 50 in July" (ABC News Nov. 18, 2005). The story continues, "She's also accused of hitting him with her car as she drove away." And also reported, "The trooper got emotional on the stand today while recalling the blood he saw on the boy's face when he arrived on the scene." For this same story, the newspaper report contained similar statements regarding injury: "Brown testified that he pulled over and ran to the boy, who had a cut on his face. 'I scooped him up...He was pretty much hysterical, frantic'" (*Washington Post* Nov. 19, 2005).

Another useful tactic for portraying victim innocence is to focus on the victim's positive attributes. The best example can be seen in the case of a teenager who was shot and killed. Friends and relatives were quoted in several instances, each time for the purpose of portraying the victim in a positive light. For example, the victim's relatives called him "an upbeat 11th grader who had lots of friends and a sharp sense of humor" (*Washington Post* Dec. 1, 2005). They are also quoted as saying "He dreamed of joining the military." The victim's sister states, "He was fun-loving...He was just silly and goofy." In other cases, victims are described as hardworking focused youth with plans for the future: "an honor student who was in an

enrichment program to help her get into college” (*Washington Post* Nov. 17, 2005) and “she excelled in a cosmetology class at school and hoped to work in a salon after graduation” (*Washington Post* Nov. 8, 2005).

As these and other cases show, crimes involving youth victims are portrayed in a way that creates sympathy for the victim. Unlike with adult victims, reports on youth victims are disproportionately devoted to documenting and describing the various injuries sustained, as well as creating the image that the victim is an innocent player. Of course crimes involving innocent victims are newsworthy to begin with (see Chermak 1997:706) but the level of newsworthiness increases even more when the victims are young.

As a final common theme, both mediums frequently discuss safety and security issues in crimes involving juvenile victims or offenders. Attention to safety and security is heightened when any aspect of the crime occurred at school or during a school-related event (e.g., football games), or when the victim/offender is a student. Statements such as “The safe learning environment has to be the first priority of any school system” (ABC News Nov. 3, 2005), “Anne Arundel County officials said yesterday that they will reevaluate security measures at school sports events” (*Washington Post* Oct. 30, 2005), “Authorities also stepped up patrols near Roosevelt High School and in the neighborhood where the shooting occurred” (*Washington Post* Dec. 1, 2005), and “‘People are angered and saddened by this,’ said schools spokesman Phil Kavits, noting that officials are taking steps to ensure the safety and well-being of students” (*Washington Post* Nov. 10, 2005) all show the media’s pervasive focus on school safety.

While most reports stressed improving safety and security measures following a crime, some centered on the lack of safety and security, which led to the events in the first place. One newspaper report notes, “The three attacks underscored a reality of campus security as police and education officials seek to protect schools from intruders with deadly weapons: Sometimes, students without knives or guns pose a significant threat to teachers and administrators” (*Washington Post* Oct. 21, 2005). And in another case where a teacher is accused of raping a student, the newscaster highlights how the school failed to investigate the teacher’s background when he quotes a police officer who says, “When you’re somebody’s teacher, you’re placed in a position of trust and educating kids and something like this happens, it’s very, very concerning” (ABC News Nov. 3, 2005). The argument made here is that lax safety precautions by school officials led to this unnecessary crime. This, in turn, results in a greater focus on the need for tighter security. The “law and order” responses in these cases justify the need for additional resources to crack down on crimes where juveniles are involved, a phenomenon that has been documented previously with respect to drug crimes (Chermak 1997:706).

Differences across Mediums

As discussed above, both mediums are sensationalistic in portraying youth offenders and victims. Yet, when one compares the same juvenile crime story in the local television news and in newspapers, it becomes apparent that the mediums differ in how each sensationalizes the story. Differences occur in (1) the use of quotes from witnesses or authority figures, (2) pictures and live reporting, and (3) headlines and opening statements.

More so than newspapers, television reports use statements from witnesses or authority

figures (e.g., police or school officials) to provide a sense of realness to the event. This tactic allows a seemingly rare occurrence to hit home with the audience. These statements instill a sense of fear, a lack of security, or simply add a captivating element to the story. On the other hand, newspapers use quotes from authority figures more to update facts or add additional information to the case.

Examples of how television reports sensationalize crimes involving youth are prevalent: “some parents are wondering, is their child safe?” (ABC News Oct. 19, 2005), “that brings back the, you know, the look of horror on the child’s face that should never be on a 4-year-old’s face” (ABC News Nov. 18, 2005), “I’m devastated to know that someone walked in to this school, supposed to be protected by a police officer or several security officers in this building and walk in and just go into a school and beat someone like that” (ABC News Oct. 19, 2005), “kinda makes you wonder if this is really somewhere you want to raise a child” (ABC News Nov. 13, 2005). Statements from concerned parents such as “These people are with your children 8 hours a day and you teach your children to respect authority figures and when this happens you have to rethink what you’re teaching at home” (ABC News Nov. 3, 2005) take an otherwise uncommon event and make it real. The result is the appearance that this crime could happen to anyone, could take place anywhere, and more generally that “the world is a scary place” (Weitzer and Kubrin 2004:499).

Newspaper articles do not use witness and law enforcement statements in the same manner as the television broadcasts. When quoting, the newspaper reports tend to include statements that either update or add information to the case. For example, statements such as, “This was not a stranger picking up a stranger on the side of the street. This was a preexisting relationship that stemmed back to their ties in the District of Columbia” (*Washington Post* Nov. 23, 2005) and “After a careful analysis of the facts, we have concluded that there is insufficient evidence at this time to go forward against the suspect” (*Washington Post* Nov. 8, 2005) report facts and update the reader about specific elements of the case.

Another difference between newspaper and television reports on crimes involving juveniles is the “theoretical” distance between the reporter and the crime scene, which in turn affects the distance between the audience and the event. Television reporters are often on the scene of the crime as “the story is unfolding” (ABC News Nov. 27, 2005) whereas newspaper reporters disclose the information they receive via the Internet, phone calls, or interviews. Thus, newspapers are more distant in their reporting compared to television.

Newspaper reporters, however, still have the ability to incorporate pictures related to the event. Despite this, only three of the 27 articles included pictures, and one was a map showing where the crime occurred. Moreover, only one of the three pictures was connected to a story involving a juvenile victim. On the other hand, eight of the television reports were broadcast “live and on the scene” and these stories almost always (7 of 8 times) involve a juvenile victim. In these cases, the crimes consisted of the sexual assault of a young girl by her teacher, a young child’s abduction, the severe abuse of an infant, the murder of a young girl, a high school football shooting, a double stabbing of two teens, and a kidnapping of a 14-year old girl by her older boyfriend. In each case, the television producers deem these crimes newsworthy enough to send a reporter live to the scene. Television news thus sends the message to viewers that crimes

with juvenile victims deserve greater attention, that they are the most heinous and shocking, and that there is universal sympathy for young victims.

Both mediums sensationalize juvenile crimes, whether the juvenile is an offender or victim. However, television broadcasts dramatize opening statements more frequently and overtly than do newspaper headlines, leading to a third difference between the mediums. Newspaper headlines are typically more to the point and use few sensational words and adjectives. On the other hand, television opening statements are longer, vivid, and embellished, often with the intention of inducing fear. For instance, in one case, the newspaper headline read, "Pr. George's Teacher Charged With Rape" (*Washington Post* Nov. 4 2005) while for the same story, the television newscaster started off his report by saying, "Pascal Brazey faces a long list of charges after one of his former students accused the teacher of rape" (ABC News Nov. 3, 2005). This statement provides the same information as the newspaper headline, but also gives the teacher's full name, adds that he faces other charges in addition to rape, and most importantly, adds that the victim is a student, tapping into a key news value. And in another case that involved an accidental shooting at a football game, the newspaper headline read, "Teen Spectator Wounded in Shooting at Arundel Football Game" (*Washington Post* Oct. 29, 2005). The television report for this story opened with, "Tonight a high school football game ends with gunfire and a teenage girl is shot" (ABC News Oct. 28, 2005). While this statement does not provide more information than the newspaper headline, it does leave the audience wondering whether the victim is alive or dead. The words "gunfire" and "teenage girl shot" do not specifically describe the severity of injuries which, incidentally, were minor as noted by the newspaper (e.g., wounded). In another case involving carjackings and robberies committed by teens, the newspaper headline read "Teens Charged in D.C., Pr. George's Carjackings, Robberies" (*Washington Post* Nov. 16, 2005) whereas the opening statement from the television news reporter was, "30 teenagers are under arrest tonight accused of robbing and carjacking at least 90 people" (ABC News Nov. 15, 2005). Clearly the scope of the crimes is portrayed differently in the two mediums. In one final story about a foster mother abusing her 6-week old son, the newspaper headline simply stated: "Baby Injured" (*Washington Post* Oct. 29, 2005). This is much less sensationalistic than the television reporter's opening statement: "New and only on 7 tonight, a newborn placed in a D.C. foster home is now fighting for his life after being badly beaten and shaken" (ABC News Oct. 27, 2005).

Despite these differences, both mediums use headlines and opening statements to captivate and intrigue their audience. Newspapers want their readers to continue reading so by being vague in the title, the consumer must continue to read to get the "full" picture. Television stations also want their viewers to continue watching but they encourage this by delivering a shocking opening line: "A teen is murdered and his killers are on the loose tonight" (ABC News Nov. 30, 2005); "A bike path in Reston is a crime scene tonight" (ABC News Nov. 13, 2005), and "Tonight a high school football game ends with gunfire and a teenage girl is shot...Our cameras were there and happened to be rolling during these frightening moments at Annapolis High School where a teenage girl was struck by a bullet tonight" (ABC News Oct. 28, 2005). These opening statements capture the viewer's attention and increase the likelihood that they will continue watching to find out what happened.

Discussion

This study has examined how crime is presented in newspapers and local television news, and specifically, how crimes involving juveniles are portrayed. Concerning the former, we found that objective facts, for the most part, are similarly reported across mediums. So basic facts about any crime story do not differ depending upon which medium one consumes. On the other hand, the presentation of subjective facts did differ between mediums, with six unmatched cases for the reporting of offender race, 13 for offender race implied, and four for victim race implied. In addition, offender and victim race were reported in some television broadcasts but not in the newspaper articles and vice versa. Therefore, depending on which medium an individual consults, one might receive a different impression regarding the race of the victim and offender. Given preexisting stereotypes about race and crime, these differences might be significant and have implications for beliefs, attitudes and opinions about crime (see Weitzer and Kubrin 2003:512-514).

Regardless, similar to previous research, we found that the ever-popular phrase, “If it bleeds, it leads” applied in our study as well. According to our findings, for a crime to be covered in the news, it typically had to be violent in nature; nearly 85 percent of the crimes included in our sample were violent.

A content analysis of the crime reports involving juvenile victims and offenders yielded several interesting findings. First, there were some common themes that emerged in both mediums including the portrayal of juvenile offenses as senseless and irrational, the linking of discrete crimes by youth for the purpose of creating a “juvenile crime wave,” the characterization of juvenile victims as innocent, and a strong emphasis on safety and security following crimes involving youth. These themes were pervasive in our sample of crime reports and did not vary based on the medium in which the story was presented.

Although both newspaper and local television news emphasized dramatic crimes where youth were involved, there were some differences in their reporting. By playing on the viewer’s emotions, television reports attempt to instill a sense of fear in consumers and underscore the lack of safety and security. They accomplished this through carefully crafted words and phrases used by the news anchors, statements from witnesses and public officials, and live footage direct from the scene. Whether the crime was a murder, a sexual assault, or a kidnapping, the television news almost always managed to present the story with an additional layer of alarm. This same level of fear was not created in the newspaper reports. Without visuals, witness statements, etc., newspapers are not likely to instill the same sense of fear in readers.

Although several studies have documented how crime is portrayed in the news and a few specifically focus on juvenile offenders and victims, ours is unique in its approach. By using a matched-pair study, we were able to directly compare the same crime event in two mediums. In this way, the crime event is “controlled” and we are able to focus on differences in the presentation of information. As indicated from our findings, there are in fact differences in how the same crime story gets told.

Despite the study’s strengths, there are some limitations that warrant attention. Most importantly, the findings are not necessarily generalizable, as they were collected from news sources in one city over a short period of time. To get a more thorough understanding of the

construction of crime news across mediums, more news sources need to be incorporated, including radio stations or Internet websites. Moreover, sampling more than one of each medium will likely reveal that there are, in fact, differences *within* mediums in terms of reporting. For instance, two newspapers may not present the same story in a similar manner, especially if one is characterized as having a liberal slant while the other a more conservative approach. Along these lines, the two news sources included in this study were of a slightly liberal nature, which affects our ability to generalize to other news mediums not just nation-wide but in Washington D.C. as well. At the same time, we are not concerned that the findings of this study are anomalous, in large part because the conclusions reached are consistent with other studies on the topic.

As always, there is room for additional work in this area. Future studies might examine how females and males are treated in the news media, as both victims and offenders. There were some cases in our sample that had female offenders, but just a few. This suggests that only certain types of crimes by females are included, which raises questions about identifying newsworthy qualities that may be gender-specific. In addition, future research should investigate similarities and differences in the reporting of national versus local crime stories within the context of local news. Given that “news space is not a luxury” (Chermak 1997:705), important decisions must be made about which national stories are so newsworthy that they may take the place of an otherwise newsworthy local crime.

Whatever the focus, we encourage researchers to continue studying “crime in the news.” This line of research is necessary to gain an understanding of how private crimes become public concerns, in other words, to determine how the media construct “the social reality of crime” (Quinney 1970) through these “private turned public” events. As Burton (2005) suggests, “it is difficult to argue that news may be defined as anything other than ideological work. It brings us versions of the world; it brings certain kinds of understandings of the world, and indeed of what we refer to as truth and as reality.”

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