Hate-Crimes News Stories: An Examination of Seven Years of Newspaper Reports

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Abstract

In this paper, we analyze seven-years of hate crime newspaper articles from seven newspapers. We explore the extent to which newspapers chose to report hate crimes and how they frame crimes of hates. The analysis is informed by social construction of claims-making and utilizes a content analysis approach. The central argument is that the portrayal of hate crimes may have an impact on public perceptions, values, attitudes, and behaviors in the short and long-term regarding crimes of hate. Findings suggest that newspaper reporting of hate crimes is sporadic with certain types of hate crimes receiving more newspaper coverage than others when compared to the number of hate crimes reported to the police.

Keywords: hate crimes, print media, social construction, content analysis

Introduction

There has been a rise in intolerance shaped by hate crimes recognized as a social problem (Williams, Burnap, Javed, & Ozalp, 2020). In fact, since 1978, when California passed the first statute that criminalized hate- or bias-motivated violence, the 2017 UCR (Uniform Crime Report) announced a more than 16% increase in hate crimes ("Hate Crime Statistics, 2017," 2018). Even with the increase, the question became how was the prevalence portrayed within society? Media coverage became part of the discourse concerning hate crimes (Bittle, 2002). The prevalence and social construction of hate crimes can be explored within the media. A hate crime is defined as a criminal incident in which a person commits an unlawful behavior against another based on their race, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or other protected category (Levin, 2015).

Past research has indicated a competing agenda between the media and legislation for limited resources of dissemination of crime (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McComb & Shaw, 1993). Hilgartner and Bosk (1988) revealed the competition for the space to articulate an issue, but they also pointed out that there is competition to socially construct (define) the social problem. The media landscape however, includes various outlets (ex: print, broadcast). Over the past years, the media landscape has included a shift in dissemination from print and broadcast to other forms such as hypertextuality, interactivity and multimediality (Brossard, 2013; Deuze, 2003). This created a platform in which the participants "engaged with the media content" and "interacted (ex: post and repost) with each other in various ways" (Brossard, 2013, p. 14096). Feilzer (2011) stated that "the media plays an important role in the social construction of crime as well as the social construction of public opinion on crime and criminal justice" (p. 285). Nevertheless, news stories inform the reader of the existence of a topic. The print media is one vehicle of disseminating knowledge, and "the newspaper has long been recognized as an important channel to disseminate information to the public" (Ishak, Hussin, Taibi, Daud, & Tuah, 2016).

The next issue is whether the information is correct or not and how the outlet particularly defined the issue. The knowledge concerning crime within the media is often incorrect (Cavender & Muleahy, 1998; Oliver & Armstrong, 1998; Radar & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010), but this knowledge has an impact on the perception of crime within the community (Goidel, Freemand, & Procopio, 2006; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). The issue becomes further confounded when the interpreter has limited knowledge of a crime and the media information becomes the scale of analysis of the offender and victim (Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn, 2010).

Within the enactment of the official collection of data, the competition for limited space, and the print new media portrayal , there is a need to research the topic. In this paper, we utilize social construction and news-making criminology as the foundations for examining seven years of newspaper reports of hate crimes. Utilizing social construction will allow us to examine the types of hates crimes and the number of crimes reported in newspapers as compared to the number of hate crimes reported in the Uniform Crime Report (UCR). Specifically, this research will expand our understanding of what types of hate crimes newspapers choose to report and a critical examination interpreting why the stories presented are deemed "newsworthy" hate-crime stories.

Hate Crimes and Print Media

There are various forms of media dissemination of the depiction of crime, ranging from Twitter to fictional drama. Research on hate crimes in the print media is limited and lacks consistency. The few studies that have been conducted focus on particular hate crimes that received an overabundance of media attention. The media focus on sensational aspects of stories creates a narrow view of social problems, which can result in shallow reporting (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Husselbee & Elliot, 2002). The emphasized aspects of any situation (attributional aspects) versus the presentation of the entire social problem can create an

incomplete picture (McComb & Ghanem, 2001). The current leadership, policy, or even one of the definitions that exist within each state regarding hate crimes may frame the narrative. Thus, leading the media outlet to disseminate certain attributional knowledge (aspects) concerning hate crimes to its readership. It is important, however, to understand the distinction between the specific attributes that are presented within the medium, and in this case, newspapers.

This becomes the "problem definition" as delineated by Stone (1998, p.106). For example, Ott and Aoki (2002) focused on how print media framed the Matthew Shepard murder. During this time period, the authors examined print-media coverage from three national newspapers, and found that print media framed Shepard's murder in a manner that allowed for readers to remain free of any social culpability regarding anti-gay hate crimes, the ability to reaffirm stigmatization of gay individuals and impede implementation of the police to prevent violence in the future (Ott & Aoki, 2002).

To understand the genesis of hate crimes, it is imperative to step back and explore the specific knowledge disseminated within the newspaper. Husselbee and Elliott (2002) compared local and national newspaper coverage of the James Byrd and Matthew Shepard hate-crime murders. The authors hypothesized that, in both national and regional papers, stories focusing on the two murders would sensationalize aspects of the crime that could lead to inaccuracies within the stories. Stories that focus on the two communities where the homicides took place would inaccurately categorize the communities. However, examining stories from eight national newspapers and six regional papers, the authors found that both national and regional newspapers covered the Shepard and Byrd murders with accuracy and that the stories that focused on members of the communities where both murders took place were written in a favorable manner.

Colomb and Damphousse (2004) examined newspaper coverage of hate crimes to examine whether the social construction of hate crimes in newspaper reporting leads to moral panic in communities. In their study, they compared various print media stories that focus on hate crimes to the rate of hate crime occurrences from the UCR. They found that although official data did not represent a rise in hate crime occurrence during the time period of the study, newspapers created a moral panic by mentioning previous hate crimes, primarily Matthew Shepard's murder. The authors also noted that there was a change in tone regarding Shepard's murder in the three-year period from the initial stories that focused on his murder to the media's coverage of increased community support of anti-hate-crime legislation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of social construction provides the foundation for understanding the portrayals of hate crimes in newspapers. Social construction suggests that news is developed from an interpretive process used to create reality (Herda-Rapp, 2003). This created reality is then used by consumers to construct a view of the world. The heart of social construction of crime in the news is how newspapers process crime events into crime news (e.g., Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Rhineberger-Dunn (2013) found that social construction is central to claims-makers discerning what the public views as true regarding social problems. Rhineberger-Dunn (2013) also found that small-town newspapers construct inaccurate images of juveniles who commit crimes in comparison to the UCR. Thus, creating an image of the offender not supported statistically by the national data. Herda-Rapp (2003) found that the media's social construction of school violence affects not only citizens' perceptions of schools but also how schools define violence and how school officials and law enforcement respond to it within society, In contrast, Birkland and Lawrence (2009) explored the impact of the Columbine shooting on various issues beyong school violence. Interestingly enough, the researchers found that the incident had an impact on society, but the "public opinion and the nature and substance of public policy was limited" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p. 1405). Therefore, it became paramount to determine how the social problem is framed within the newspaper in comparison to the reality of the problem

Official Data

President George H. W. Bush signed the Hate Crime Statistics Act in 1990, which requires all states to collect data on hate crimes through the UCR (Anderson, Dyson, & Brooks, Jr., 2002). The UCR is a clearinghouse of information collected by state and local law enforcement (Scheitle & Hansmann, 2016). According to the UCR, hate crimes had been on a decline since 2008, but, in 2017, the FBI announced an overall 16% increase in hate crimes ("Hate Crime Statistics, 2017," 2018). Researchers often use data from the UCR as they attempt to understand the extent of hate crimes and the impact that these crimes have on individuals and communities (McDevitt, Balboni, Bennett, Weiss, Orchowsky, & Walbolt, 2003). Like the UCR, the various forms of media serve as platforms for conveying specific information about crimes. The concern is whether a difference exists between the attributional aspects presented in the media and the official data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Methods

Content Analysis

Content analysis is the most commonly used method for analyzing various aspects of data regarding communication patterns and interpretations of these patterns (Lacy, Watson, Riffe, & Lovejoy, 2015). Content analysis allows for a systemic replicable analytical study that provides explicit written protocols and allows for replication of the study (Stemler, 2001). This form of analysis also offers insight into trends and patterns of documents. In the case of our study, examining trends of newspaper reports of hate crimes allows for insight into the types of hate crimes. According to Stemler (2001), content analysis also provides an "empirical basis for monitoring shifts in public opinion" (p. 138). In the case of studying hate crimes within newspaper reporting, we used a mixed method analysis (quantitative and geographic) to examine how often newspapers report hate crimes compared to the number of hate crimes reported to the police via UCR reports. This comparison allows for us to examine how print media chooses the stories they report in proportion to the number of hate crimes reported to the police in various states.

Sample

Data was gathered using LexisNexis and World Access News databases to access newspaper articles from January 2010 to December 2017, utilizing the key term "hate crime." LexisNexis and World Access News were the two databases used due to their accessibility by the authors. Seven newspapers were selected for examination: *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Tampa Bay Times*, *Seattle Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Denver Post.* These papers were selected because they all have circulations of over one-million newspapers daily (Agility PR, 2018). The six-year timeframe was chosen in hopes that it would provide a robust amount of data that could be coded and analyzed in an efficient manner. This time period also considers fluctuation in crimes reported to the police and newspaper coverage. Articles from the Associated Press and Reuters were eliminated for fear of the likelihood of duplication. The 729 articles were selected from the following: *The New York Times* = 367; *Chicago Tribune* = 104; *Tampa Bay Times* = 25; *Seattle Times* = 89; *Houston Chronicle* = 58; *The Denver Post* = 44; and the *Los Angeles Times* = 42.

Hate crime types were identified by using the UCR hate crime definitions as the reference point. The UCR identifies 11 crimes that can be motivated by hate: murder, non-negligent manslaughter, rape/sodomy/sexual assault with an object, aggravated assault, simple assault, burglary, larceny-theft, motor-vehicle theft, arson, simple assault, intimidation, and destruction/damage/vandalism of property. For this study,

not all of the UCR crimes are utilized, as they were not all identified in newspaper reports. For consistency within this study, the following terms are used to identify crimes: homicide (murder and non-negligent manslaughter), sexual assault (rape/sodomy/sexual assault with an object), assault (aggravated assault, simple assault), harassment (intimidation), vandalism (destruction/damage/vandalism of property/arson). The category "other" represents newspaper reports that focus on other issues, such as the creation of new laws, changes in laws, etc.

Data Analysis

A code sheet was created to gather information on hate crimes reported in the seven newspapers. There were two coders who initially coded each article. In the event of no consensus, a third coder was utilized. Lastly, each coder provided a two-to-three-sentence summary of each article. The coders presented their work to each other to ensure 100% intercoder reliability. The unceasingly reflective coding process included both an integrated individual examination and a team integrated analysis approach. The following quantitative data was collected: 1) types of hates crimes reported in newspapers, 2) main subject of the story, 3) geographic focus, and 4) the hate crime statistics were collected from the UCR for each state comparison. Examining the UCR trends in the type of hate crimes reported to the police, and comparing with the types of crimes, number of stories, and tone of newspaper articles will allow for an understanding of how newspapers frame hate-crime stories from a social-construction context. In this study, we examined each of the newspaper articles according to the code scheme individually. We then came together to compare our various code schemes with the goal of consensus around the codes.

Findings

Table 1 provides information concerning the types of hate crimes reported in the seven newspapers. *The New York Times* reported the most hate-crime stories overall, with a total of 384. Assault (n=184; 50.15%) was the largest number of hate-crime stories, followed by vandalism (n=86; 23.4%) and harassment (n=59; 16.1%). Further others (n=43; 11.7%) and homicides (n=12; 3.3%) had the fewest amount of coverage, and there were no newspaper reports of sexual-assault hate crimes in *The New York Times*. The *Chicago Tribune* (n=104) had the second-highest number of hate-crime newspaper articles. Following the same trend as *The New York Times* regarding assaults, the *Chicago Tribune* reported more assault hate-crime news stories (n=41; 39.4%) than any other crime type. Harassment and vandalism both consisted of (n=23; 22.1%) respectively of hate-crime stories, followed by other (n=18; 17.3%). 5.8 percent (n=6) of hate-crime stories focused on homicide, and lastly hate-crime sexual-assault newspaper reports accounted for one (1%) of all the newspaper stories.

The Seattle Times (n=89) had the third-greatest number of hate-crime newspaper stories. In keeping with the trend of *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune,* 24 (27%) instances of hate-crime newspaper coverage focused on assaults. Harassment was the second-highest amount of newspaper hate-crime stories (n=21; 23.6%), followed by homicides (n=18; 20.2%). Twenty (22.5%) newspaper stories focus on hate-crime stories categorized as "other." Vandalism made up six (6.7%) newspaper reports, and no hate-crime sexual assaults were reported in this newspaper, unlike the *Chicago Tribune*. The *Houston Chronicle* had a total of 58 newspaper stories that focus on various hate crimes. Homicide and other both had the largest number (n=17; 29.3%) of hate-crime newspaper reports, followed by assault (n=15; 25.9%), vandalism (n=5; 8.6%), and harassment (n=4; 6.9%). *The Denver Post* had the third-fewest number of hate-crime news stories (n=44); 34.1 percent (n=15) of the stories focused on "other" aspects of hate crimes, followed by homicide newspaper reports representing 25 percent (n=11) of stories, and then assault (n=10; 22.7%), vandalism (n=7; 15.9%), and harassment (n=1; 2.3%). The *Los Angeles Times* (n=42) had the second-fewest number of cumulative hate-

crime newspaper reports. 40.5 percent of those hate-crime newspaper stories (n=17) focused on "other" types of stories not directly related to a hate crime, while 31 percent (n=13) of hate-crime newspaper reports focused on vandalism. Then, 14.3 percent (n= 6) focused on harassment, followed by assault, which accounted for 9.5 percent (n=4) of newspaper reports, followed by homicide, accounting for 7.1 percent (n=3) of newspaper reports. The *Tampa Bay Times* (n=25) had the fewest number of hate-crime newspaper reports during the reporting time period. That newspaper's highest number of hate-crime stories focused on assaults (n=11; 44%), followed by harassment (n=8; 32%), vandalism (n=4; 16%), and other *(*n=2; 8%); no hate-crime stories were reported that focused on sexual assault.

Table 1

Newspaper by Crime Type						
Newspaper	Assault	Harassment	Sexual Assault	Homicide	Vandalism	Other
New York Times	184(50.1)	59(16.1)	0(0)	12(3.3)	86(23.4)	43(11.7)
Chicago Sun Time	41(39.4)	23(22.1)	1(1.0)	6(5.8)	23(22.1)	18(17.3)
Tampa Bay Times	11(44.0)	8(32.0)	0(0)	1(4.0)	4(16)	2(8.0)
Seattle Times	24(27.0)	21(23.6)	0(0)	18(20.2)	6(6.7)	20(22.5)
Houston Chronicle	15(25.9)	4(6.9)	0(0)	17(29.3)	5(8.6)	17(29.3)
Denver Post	10(22.7)	1(2.3)	0(0)	11(25.0)	7(15.9)	15(34.1)
Los Angeles Times	4(9.5)	6(14.3)	0(0)	3(7.1)	13(31.0)	17(40.5)

As displayed in Table 2 (the types of stories in the various newspapers), the majority of newspaper stories were basic newspaper stories (n=710; 97.4%), stories that documented some aspect of a hate crime, the judicial processing of a person charged with a hate crime, and victim or community response to a hate crime. For example, a story printed in the *Chicago Tribune* on January 11, 2010, focuses on a gay man who was beaten as he waited for public transportation. The story quotes the victim as he detailed the attack and the verbal threats made against him during the attack (Janssen, 2010, p. 8). Another example, a story in the *Denver Post* on September 11, 2013, focuses on the arrest of a suspect in the beating of a man in a parking lot. Although the story discussed the man turning himself in for arrest, it focuses on the crime and the harm to the victim (and the victim posting pictures of his injuries on his social-media page) ("Denver Suspect," 2013, p. 2A).

Examples of stories that focused on criminal prosecution primarily deal with the sentencing of a person charged with a hate crime. For example, a story published in the *Los Angeles Times* on July 12, 2014, focused on a man being sentenced to three years in jail for vandalism (Abram, 2014, p. 3). Another example is a story from the September 4, 2011, edition of the *Seattle Times*, reported on a man being sentenced to 51 months in prison for an attack against a black man, unlike most of the stories that documented just the court proceeding. This article detailed the background of the perpetrator (Branton, 2011, p. B7). A small percentage of reports (n=19; 2.6%) consisted of press-releases, letters, and editorials. Press releases consisted of giving information

regarding the date and time of a press conference or a community event. Letters-to-the-editor consisted of writings from citizens that focused on a concern regarding a hate crime that had taken place in the community.

Table 2

Types of Stories

	Number	Percent
Press-release/Letter/Editorial	19	2.6
Basic news story	710	97.4

The third analysis focused on the geographic location of the hate crime. Geographical focus in the reporting of hate crimes is important because stories that are focused on local crime prove more significant in fostering fear of crime and perceptions of crime in local communities. 93.9 percent of articles focused on hates crimes locally or within the state. Given that the seven newspapers evaluated in this study have over one-million circulation of readers each, a broad geographic focus on state crimes is feasible.

Table 3

Geographical Location of the Story

	Total Number	Percent
None/International	18	2.5
Local	633	86.8
State/Regional	52	7.1
National	26	3.6

Table 4 depicts the accuracy of newspaper reports as compared to UCR reports. The table results suggest that the proportion of hate crimes reported to the police differs significantly from UCR data. Results show that only 2.1 percent of vandalism hate crimes were reported in newspapers even though there were over 6,000 vandalism cases reported throughout the seven states to the police, according to the UCR. Assault hate crimes (n=289; 6.5%) reported to the police received more newspaper coverage than any other type of crime. Regarding homicides, only 2.42 percent of crimes reported to the UCR were covered in newspapers. Harassment hate crimes accounting for 3.26 percent were reported in newspaper.

Table 4

Comparing Newspaper Reports to UCR Hate Crimes from 2010-2016.

Crime Type	Newspaper Reports	UCR	%
Vandalism	144	6838	2.10
Assault	289	4441	6.50
Homicide	68	28	2.42
Harassment (Intimidation)	122	3736	3.26
Sexual Assault	1	529	.18

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that newspaper reporting of hate crimes is sporadic and not the least bit exhaustive. *The New York Times* reported the most hate crimes of various types—in both local and national stories. The fact that *The New York Times* has well over a 1.1-million daily circulation and tends to have a more national readership than the other newspapers in the study may explain the higher rate of reporting of hate crimes (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). The majority of stories across all seven newspapers focused on the hate crime of assault. For the purpose of this study, aggravated and simple assault reported in the UCR were combined but were underreported in newspapers in comparison to the UCR. Newspaper reports did not distinguish between the two forms of assault unless they were discussing a particular charge. For example, an article in *The New York Times* on July 28, 2010, records an individual being charged with first-degree assault as a hate crime (Cruz, 2010, p. 15). In the vast majority of stories in which the newspapers used the term "assault," it was employed generally to describe various acts of physical aggression or the attempt of physical aggression. The large number of newspaper reports of assault hate crimes can be attributed to this generalized of the use of the term. The vast majority of newspaper stories were in the category of a basic news story. All the states in this study have hate-crime laws and, as a result, the focus on crimes that violate those laws is reflected. We suspect that in states that do not have hate-crime laws there would be more press releases/letters/editorial stories, as they would focus on the need for such laws.

Many stories focused on local hate crimes. Stories from the Associated Press and Reuters were eliminated from this study, which allowed us to focus more narrowly on stories that are not duplicated and are less likely to have a national focus. For readers, stories that are focused locally are more likely to draw interest and readership. Local stories are also more likely to resonate with readers (Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000). Reporters who construct the news stories do so in ways that sensationalize various aspects of hate crimes that attract readers, and, as a result, these individuals have the power and ability to frame the reader's thoughts regarding hate crimes.

Claims-making is a major component of social construction theory, and this suggests that claims-makers bring attention to social conditions (Best, 1987; Rader & Rhineberger-Dunn 2013). Newspapers act as claims-makers by bringing attention to hate crimes that they view as newsworthy. The extent to which the media chooses to represent hate crimes has a direct impact on society's perception of the extent and nature of hate crimes. Television news viewership is down, while newspaper readership has stabilized, although the vast majority of readers are shifting to online versions of newspapers (Ahlers, 2006). Newspaper reporting has been and continues to be a vehicle by which culture and values are shared. As a result, examining how newspapers frame stories is important in understanding how individuals perceive crime. This has become even more important since the U.S. has been introduced to the concept of "fake news," especially as asserted by President Donald Trump. President Trump's suggestion that news organizations who have had a history of reputable news are now presenting "fake news" requires more social scientists to examine how news is presented.

Limitations

A limitation to this study was using the UCR as the comparison to the number of hate crimes reported in newspapers. The UCR has been utilized previously as a comparison to hate-crime newspaper reports ("Hate Crime Statistics, 2017," 2018). Although the UCR is considered official data, it is important to recognize that this data source is not an exhaustive resource of data related to hate crimes. The UCR is a report of crimes reported to the police (McDevitt, Balboni, Bennett, Weiss, Orchowsky, & Walbolt, 2003). However, many crimes are not reported to the police for various reasons. Victims of hate crimes are often the most vulnerable and are often least likely to report crimes to the police. Zaykowski (2010) found that minority victims of hate

crimes are less likely to report being the victim of a hate crime. The lack of reporting has serious consequences for the victim, community, and criminal justice system. Many victims will not report crimes to the police due to their distrust of the police and/or criminal justice system.

Another notable limitation to this study is the limited number of newspapers used in the study. Although all seven newspapers have over a million papers in daily circulation and cover vast geographic locations, the examination of only seven papers is not enough to develop a generalized understanding of what types of hate crimes are more likely to be deemed newsworthy.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study explored what types of hate crimes are more likely to be newsworthy than others. Newspapers construct hate-crime stories that frame the way community members think of hate crimes. Colomb and Damphousse (2004) found that during 1998 and 1999 the vast amount of newspaper reporting of hate crimes resulted in a moral panic regarding hate crimes. Jacobs and Henry (1996) found that there was a social construction of a hate-crime epidemic due to the attention of politicians, journalists, and interest groups. Both of these studies suggest that the media's misrepresentation of hate crime leads to irrational fears of hate crime by community members. The results of this study suggest the need for researchers to contextualize newspaper reports of hate crimes. Future research should broaden the search terms to avoid excluding crimes that are committed due to bias but may not be labeled as hate crimes. The current study used the term "hate crime" but excluded bias crimes and other crime motivated by hate.

Future research should broaden the number of newspapers used in the analysis. Focusing on differences in local and national newspapers will offer a more in-depth understanding into the complexities of the newsworthiness of hate crimes. There is also a need for researchers to measure the impact of reading newspaper reports of hate crimes on citizens' perceptions of hate crimes in their community. Although this study could not address this concern, understanding how readers interpret stories will provide insight on both readerships' perception of newspaper reports of hate crimes.

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