

The Newsworthiness of Executions

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Network television, national newspaper, and in-state newspaper reports of executions imposed between 1977 and 2007 were analyzed. As the frequency of executions increased, coverage became less consistent, extensive, and prominent. Within states where most executions occur, newspapers consistently reported them, but the reports became shorter and less prominent. Executions that are reported by national news media typically involve: crimes with multiple victims, unusual offender characteristics, precedent-setting circumstances, unusual legal claims, or execution protocol violations. Predicting news coverage is difficult because contemporaneous events compete for coverage. The declining news coverage of executions has implications for both their deterrent and brutalization potential, and for the ability of citizens to participate knowledgeably in discussions about capital punishment.

Keywords: television, news, media, death penalty, executions

INTRODUCTION

Between 1976, when the U.S. Supreme Court's ten-year moratorium on executions was lifted, and at the end of 2007 a total of 1,099 people were executed in the U.S. Over the last three decades, the number of executions increased, reaching a maximum of 98 in 1999, and then decreased to 42 in 2007. The present study analyzes changes in news coverage of executions over this period.

News media coverage of crime has received extensive scholarly analysis (e.g., book-length treatments are offered by Barak, 1994; Howitt, 1998; and Surette, 1998). We know, for example: crime news comprises an average of seven percent of all the news reported in

newspapers and 20 percent of local television news, crime-and-justice news consistently constitutes one of the five top newspaper subject categories, and crime news is read and remembered by a larger proportion (one-quarter) of newspaper subscribers than any other category of news (Surrette, 1998, p. 67). The operations of the criminal justice system are, however, seldom reported in the news, except as the background setting for a story. The court system then becomes the main focus of a particular story about the response to crime, causing the actual imposition of punishment to be largely ignored by the news media (Surrette, 1998, p. 70). This paper considers the news coverage of just one aspect of the criminal justice process, the execution of offenders.

This paper seeks to determine: (1) the change in news coverage of executions as they changed in frequency between 1976 and 2007, and (2) the characteristics of specific executions that rendered them newsworthy, while other executions received little or no news coverage. We hypothesize that the increase of execution frequency caused a decline in news coverage, and that executions in which characteristics of the crime, offender, or victim were unique received more news coverage.

NEWSWORTHINESS

Determining the news value of a particular story – its “newsworthiness” – is a subjective task with no universally agreed upon criteria (Lundman, 2003). Surrette (1998, p. 61) argued that two factors contribute to the newsworthiness of a particular story. The first is “periodicity”—the relationship of the time cycle of the event to the publication cycle of the medium. If the event's occurrence or cycle matches the scheduling needs of the organization, the event is more likely to be reported. Similarly, the timing and predictability of the story (i.e., whether the media can plan their coverage around the event) also effects its status as a newsworthy event (Fox & Van Sickel, 2001; Jewkes, 2004).

Another factor influencing an event’s newsworthiness is “consonance”—how closely the event is connected to previously developed news themes, as well as established public images of, and explanations for, events. Determining the consonance of a given event often includes a reliance on specific themes that have a history of generating public interest. The ability of the media to focus on the dramatic or unusual aspects of an event generally tends to increase the news value of the event. While no consensus exists about which characteristics render an event consonant with the goals of the media, a basic pattern has been established (Fox & Van Sickel, 2001; Jewkes, 2004; Greer, 2006). Stories that incorporate violent conflict, involve well-known persons, include graphic imagery, and allow for the reinforcement of traditional cultural values are preferred over more complex stories that may challenge the reader to reconsider widely held beliefs. In combination these factors relate not only to the consonance of an event with the goals of the media, as suggested by Surrette (1998), but also to the overall entertainment value of the story (Fox & Van Sickel, 2001).

Crime as News

The vast majority of crime news stories “focus disproportionately on the most serious and violent crimes” (Greer, 2006, p. 85). This generalization applies to network television newscasts, as well as those in big cities and small towns (Maguire, Sandage & Weatherby, 1999). Jewkes (2004) also asserts that violence increases the newsworthiness of crimes.

Furthermore, events involving characters that are easily polarized into ideal types—e.g., the cold-blooded, evil offender versus the innocent victim—where the deviant behavior is easily highlighted and the offender easily identified, are more likely to be considered newsworthy (Greer, 2006).

Crime that is easily explained is also likely to be covered. For instance, Jewkes (2004) argues that the simplicity of an event can affect its status as a newsworthy event. A criminal event that is easily explainable (e.g., a murder) and will not confuse the audience is more likely to become news than a more complex event where the guilty party is not easily identifiable (e.g., stock market manipulation). Simple events appeal not only to the audience, but also to news media personnel. Events that offer news outlets easy access to information and do not require them to do much work are likely to receive coverage. Media outlets have become increasingly reliant upon information from official sources—typically the police—so oftentimes only those events the police want to be covered will receive coverage (Doyle, 2003; Sacco, 2005).

A consonant event—one that fits into a noticeable trend (i.e., can be characterized as one of a series of incidents in a previously identified “crime wave”)—is more likely to be covered than an event that does not fit into such a pattern. If a given “crime wave” has been receiving a great deal of coverage, however, an event that fits the pattern may not be covered if it does not offer a new twist on the story (Sacco, 2005). The impact of consonance on newsworthiness is one quality that illustrates the importance of context in determining which events are newsworthy. Other aspects of context will also be seen to affect newsworthiness.

Executions as News

Considering the factors that determine the newsworthiness of events in general and crimes in particular, executions would seem to be events that should always be newsworthy. While the dominant, contemporary method of execution (i.e., lethal injection) minimizes visible manifestations of suffering, executions result in rapidly induced death—they may, therefore, be considered inherently violent. They are scheduled events that are also part of a pattern of similar events. Finally, they feature the affirmation of positive social values through the punishment of an offender that often is depicted as the embodiment of everything that is wrong with society (Greer, 2006). Despite all of the characteristics of executions that enhance their newsworthiness, many executions receive little or no news coverage.

Greer (2006) suggests that the characteristics of the crime that is being punished may influence the coverage that an execution receives; crimes that received more coverage during the investigation and trial phases because of the violent nature of the act or the characteristics of the offender may also receive more coverage during the punishment phase. This hypothesis implies that executions are not in themselves newsworthy events, but become newsworthy as the final episodes of continuing news stories about particular crimes.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data Sources

The independent variables in this study are characteristics of executions and the people executed in the U.S. between 1977 and 2007. All data on the independent variables—names of offenders executed, dates of executions, number of victims, and race of victims and offenders—

were obtained from the Death Penalty Information Center website (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/>).

The dependent variable is news coverage of executions. The two sources of data for news coverage were network television news programs and newspapers. TV news is an essential data source for this study because it has such a large audience. In 2002, the NBC evening news broadcast averaged 6.3 million viewers, ABC 6.7 million, and CBS 6.2 million--a total of 19.2 million viewers (MediaMark, 2002).

The Vanderbilt *Television News Archive* (retrieved February 20, 2008, from <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>) provided the data on national TV news coverage of executions. This *Archive*, "the world's most available, extensive and complete archive of television news" contains an index of all news stories broadcast on the evening news programs of three major TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC), beginning in 1968. Archival coverage of CNN began October 2, 1995; therefore the present analysis includes reports of executions on CNN beginning on that date. Coverage of FOX began only in 2004, too recently for inclusion in this analysis.

Six newspapers with large readerships constituted the second set of data sources for this study. *USA Today*, was selected based on its national coverage and readership. With an average weekday readership of 6.3 million (retrieved on February 24, 2008, from <http://www.newspapermedia.com/docs/Top100.pdf>), *USA Today* is currently the most widely read newspaper in the United States. Publication of *USA Today* began in 1984; data collection for the present study from *USA Today* began in that year.

The *New York Times* is included because it provides extensive coverage of national news and has the third largest readership in the U.S.: 4.8 million readers on an average weekday (retrieved on February 24, 2008, from <http://www.newspapermedia.com/docs/Top100.pdf>). The *Wall Street Journal* has a larger readership than the *New York Times*, but the *Journal's* primary focus on business news renders it unsuitable for inclusion in the present study.

Most events—including executions—are typically more salient to the residents of the geographic areas where they occur, and more newsworthy to the news media serving that area, than to people and media in other parts of the country. The small number of executions in most states obviated the study of a pattern of *change* in coverage within those states. Three states--Texas, Florida, and Georgia—executed a total of 507 people (or 46 percent of all people executed in the U.S.) during the period of the study. These three states were selected for separate analyses because they executed enough people to permit analysis of change in state-based news coverage.

A fourth state, Michigan, which does not have the death penalty, was also included in this study so that news coverage a state that does not have the death penalty could be compared with news coverage of executions in states that execute people with some regularity. The *Detroit Free Press* news archive (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/Archives?s_site=freep&p) was searched for all reports executions in the U.S. during the study period, to reflect news coverage in Michigan. The *Detroit Free Press* has an average

daily readership of 1.1 million (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from <http://www.newspapermedia.com/docs/Top100.pdf>).

In each of the four states, one newspaper was selected based on having both a large circulation and a searchable, on-line World Wide Web archive. The *Houston Chronicle* has an estimated average weekday readership of 1.2 million (retrieved on February 24, 2008, from <http://www.newspapermedia.com/docs/Top100.pdf>). The *Houston Chronicle's* archive (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from <http://search.chron.com/chronicle/archiveSearch.do>) was searched for reports of executions in Texas.

The *Miami Herald* archive (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from <http://www.miamiherald.com/>) was searched for reports of executions in Florida. The *Herald* has an estimated weekday readership of 806,000 (retrieved on February 24, 2008, from <http://www.newspapermedia.com/docs/Top100.pdf>).

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* archive (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from <http://stacks.ajc.com/>) was searched for reports of executions in Georgia. This newspaper has a weekday readership of 994,000 (retrieved on February 20, 2008, from <http://www.newspapermedia.com/docs/Top100.pdf>).

Variables

The dependent variable *news reports of executions* was operationalized as follows: A news report was included only if it both (1) was published/broadcast during the week following an execution, and (2) included a report of a completed execution. News stories about crimes, trials, appeals, and similar issues were excluded unless they also included reports of completed executions.

The *quantity of coverage* was operationalized in three ways. It was first defined dichotomously—whether or not an execution was reported. The second indicator was the number of broadcasts or published reports about each execution. The third indicator of quantity was length, measured either as the duration (in minutes) of a TV news story, or the number of words published in a newspaper article. If several reports about a single execution were televised/published, the lengths of all the stories were added together to yield a summary measure of quantity for each execution.

The *prominence of coverage* was operationalized dichotomously for both newspapers and TV broadcasts. Newspaper prominence was determined by whether an article appeared on the front page of the paper, while the prominence of televised stories was measured by whether the execution story was the lead story of a broadcast. The logic of this definition is simply that articles printed on the front page are more likely to be seen and read than articles printed elsewhere in a paper, while the first news story of a broadcast has a higher probability of being watched. If several stories were published or televised about a single execution, coverage of that execution was considered “prominent” if any of the articles appeared on page one (or the TV report was broadcast first in a news broadcast).

RESULTS

Proportion of Executions Reported

The three national television networks reported fewer than seven percent of the executions that took place between 1977 and 2007. The national newspapers *USA Today* and *New York Times* reported 20 percent and 48 percent, respectively, of the executions during that period. The lowest level of coverage was found in Michigan (the state without a death penalty); the *Detroit Free Press* reported only 11 percent of executions in the U.S. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Miami Herald*, on the other hand, reported 100 percent, 94 percent, and 95 percent, respectively, of the executions occurring in the states where those papers are published.

Number of News Reports

TV news averaged 15 reports per 100 executions. *USA Today* averaged 28 articles per 100 executions. The *Detroit Free Press* averaged only 11 articles per 100 executions. The three newspapers whose reports of in-state executions were recorded for this study printed more articles about executions occurring in those states. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* averaged the most articles (2.5 per execution) followed by the *Houston Chronicle* (1.6 articles per execution) and the *Miami Herald* (1.3 articles per execution).

Length of Reports

Because the standard deviations of report lengths were very large, medians are reported here. The length of articles about executions followed a similar pattern across the TV networks and five newspapers. Typical television news reports of executions were brief. Excluding those executions that were not reported by any of the networks, the median length of *all* network TV news reports combined was 140 seconds per execution. Published reports were shorter in newspapers with national coverage than in newspapers where only coverage of in-state executions was analyzed. In *USA Today* reports of executions averaged 37 words, compared to 366 words in the *New York Times* and 605 words in the *Detroit Free Press*. Longer articles appeared in the *Miami Herald* (median = 1,278 words), the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (1,258 words), and *Houston Chronicle* (536 words) about executions that occurred in Florida, Georgia, and Texas, respectively.

Prominence of Reports

“Prominence” was recorded dichotomously—whether or not a published article appeared on the front page of the newspaper. When *USA Today* reported executions at all, only two percent were reported on Page One. The *New York Times* reported three percent of all executions on Page One; among executions that were reported in the *Times*, five percent of all reports were on Page One. Newspapers published reports of in-state executions far more prominently: Forty-four percent of executions in Texas were reported on Page One in the *Houston Chronicle*, 55 percent of executions in Georgia were reported on Page One in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and 57 percent of executions in Florida were reported on Page One of the *Miami Herald*.

Change in Reporting over Time

The number of executions carried out each year since 1977 has ranged from one execution in 1977 to 98 in 1999. Executions have also increased in frequency in Texas, but occurred at fairly stable rates in Florida and Georgia. These patterns of change and stability serve as a backdrop for the analyses that follow.

Change in Proportion of Executions Reported

Since nearly all executions occurring in their respective states were reported in the Texas, Florida, and Georgia newspapers, no analysis of change in proportions of executions reported will be presented. Variation did occur, however, in coverage by the TV networks and national newspapers.

Between 1977 and 1983, when only a few executions occurred each year, every execution was reported on at least one of the TV networks. In 1984, when the number of executions began to increase rapidly, the proportion of executions reported dropped off just as rapidly. Network TV news coverage continued to drop off, so that no more than seven percent of executions were reported by TV network news in any year of the last decade.

For this and subsequent analyses of change in coverage over time, each execution was assigned a sequence number, from 1 to 1,099, starting with the first execution in 1977 and ending with the last one in 2007. The moderate, negative bivariate correlation ($r = -.208$) between the sequence number of the execution and reportage by the TV networks confirms the decline in proportion of executions reported.

A similar decline occurred in coverage of executions by the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. The *New York Times* reported most executions until 1996, but has covered only about one-fourth of executions since then. The strong correlation between the sequence number and the proportion reported ($r = -.613$) in the *New York Times* reflects this drop-off. *USA Today's* coverage of executions, which was consistently less exhaustive than the *Times's*, declined in recent years all the way to zero in 2003. The bivariate correlation ($r = -.373$) reflects this decline over three decades. Change in reporting by the *Detroit Free Press* was similar, with a significant, negative correlation between sequence number and proportion reported ($r = -.285$).

One peculiar characteristic of *USA Today's* coverage is the importance of the day of the week an execution occurs for determining whether the execution is reported. *USA Today* is published only on weekdays. Whereas 22-39 percent of executions occurring on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays were reported, only 7 percent of executions occurring on Fridays were reported in *USA Today*. This relationship between day of the week and proportion reported is statistically significant ($df=6$, $F=7.249$). Executions that occur at the end of each week evidently become "old news," no longer worthy of reporting in Monday's edition of *USA Today*. This finding is consistent with Surrette's (1998) assertion that the relationship between the timing of an event to the publication cycle of the news medium is an important factor in determining the newsworthiness of the event.

Change in Number of Reports

The decline in proportion of executions reported is paralleled by a decline in the mean number of reports per execution published in *USA Today*, as indicated by the correlation

between sequence number of executions and number of news reports ($r = -1.60$). The mean number of reports was not significantly related to the sequence number for TV news, the *New York Times*, or the *Detroit Free Press*. Considering the newspaper reports of in-state executions, the mean number of articles in the *Houston Chronicle* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* did not change significantly over time. The number of articles per execution increased significantly with sequence number ($r = .493$) in the *Miami Herald*.

Change in Length of Reports

The third measure of coverage quantity is story length. The mean length of news reports varied over time and by source. The length of articles in *USA Today* and TV news increased with sequence number of executions ($r = .395$ and $.342$, respectively). Change in article length in the *New York Times* and *Detroit Free Press* was not significant. The *Houston Chronicle's* articles became significantly shorter ($r = -.145$) with sequence number, while article length in both the *Miami Herald* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* did not change significantly.

Change in Prominence

In only four years (1989, 1992, 1998, 2001) was any execution reported on Page 1 of *USA Today*. Between 1979 and 1982 the *New York Times* reported all executions on the front page; after that few reports received such prominent coverage. The correlation between execution sequence number and publication on the front page was, however, not significant over the 30-year study period for either *USA Today* or the *New York Times*. Neither was the correlation between execution sequence number and reportage of executions as the lead story on TV network news.

The prominence of coverage of in-state executions by the Texas and Georgia newspapers was strongly, negatively correlated with sequence number ($r = -.730$ and $-.654$). From 1977 through 1998 the *Houston Chronicle* reported nearly all executions in Texas on the front page; since then, however, only 10 percent were reported on the front page. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, published all reports of executions in Georgia on the front page in the period 1983-1991, but subsequently placed 78 percent further back in the paper. The *Miami Herald* showed no significant change in prominence of coverage of Florida executions.

Newsworthy Executions

In recent years most executions received little attention in the press, but some were reported and a few received extensive coverage. As Halmari and Östman (2001) argue, the “discourse pattern” in coverage tends to change when something about the offender, crime, or execution itself is extraordinary. In this section we explore the characteristics that rendered particular executions newsworthy.

Table 1: Logistic Regression of Any Execution Coverage on Case Characteristics

	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>USA Today</i>		<i>Detroit Free Press</i>		TV Networks	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Case Characteristics</i>								
Case Number	-.005*** (.995)	-.005*** (.995)	-.004*** (.996)	-.004*** (.996)	-.004*** (.996)	-.003*** (.996)	-.003*** (.997)	-.003*** (.997)
White Victim	.221 (1.247)	-.191 (.826)	.018 (1.018)	-.241 (.786)	.171 (1.186)	.376 (1.456)	.512 (1.669)	.964 (2.623)
Black Offender	-.066 (.936)	-1.206*** (.299)	-.177 (.838)	-.506 (.603)	-.029 (.972)	.176 (1.193)	-.406 (.666)	.516 (1.676)
Offender's Age	.018* (1.018)	.019* (1.019)	.015 (1.015)	.015 (1.015)	-.003 (.997)	-.003 (.997)	.008 (1.008)	.007 (1.007)
Number of Victims	.223* (1.250)	-.006 (.994)	-.060 (.942)	-.084 (.920)	.049 (1.050)	.022 (1.022)	.266* (1.304)	.355 (1.427)
<i>Interaction Terms</i>								
Black Offender * Number of Victims		.575* (1.777)		.011 (1.011)		.058 (1.059)		-.218 (.804)
White Victim * Number of Victims		.144 (1.155)		.038 (1.038)		.005 (1.005)		-.069 (.933)
Black Offender * White Victim		.543 (1.720)		.418 (1.519)		-.358 (.699)		-.736 (.479)
r^2_{GSC}	.485	.490	.226	.228	.178	.178	.144	.146
Model chi-square	488.914***	494.937***	166.430***	167.379***	98.293***	98.750***	64.278***	65.386***

N=1,099 for all models

Cell entries are regression coefficients (β) with odds ratios in parentheses.

+: $p < .10$

*: $p < .05$

**: $p < .01$

***: $p < .001$

Multivariate Analysis of Offender and Victim Characteristics

The race/ethnicity of the offender(s) was significantly related to the proportion of executions reported in the *New York Times*, but not the *Detroit Free Press*, *USA Today*, or TV network news, but race had no effect on the length of the report. [The *Miami Herald*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and *Houston Chronicle* were excluded from this analysis because nearly all executions occurring in the states where these papers were published were reported.] The racial/ethnic category with the highest proportion of reported executions in the *New York Times* involved neither White, Black, nor Latino offenders, but offenders from foreign countries and “other” racial/ethnic groups. The number of murder victims was also significantly related to the likelihood that an execution would be reported by the *New York Times*, *Detroit Free Press*, and TV network news, but not by *USA Today*.

Table 1 presents the findings of a series of logistic regression analyses testing whether age of offender, race/ethnicity of victim and offender, and number of victims influence whether an execution is reported at all. The first model examines the association between these characteristics and whether an execution was reported in the *New York Times*. Here, case sequence number, the age of the offender, the presence of a black offender, and the interaction between black offenders and the number of victims are significantly related to coverage.

The odds of an execution receiving coverage are 1.02 times higher for each year increase in the age of the offender. The odds of an execution receiving coverage in cases involving a black offender decrease by a factor of .299. However, this negative effect is reduced, depending on the number of victims involved: a case where the offender is black and a large number of victims were killed is significantly more likely to be reported. Finally, a unit increase in the case sequence number reduces the odds of an execution receiving coverage in the *New York Times* by a factor of .995

The association between case characteristics and whether an execution received coverage in *USA Today*, *The Detroit Free Press*, and televised news are virtually identical, with the exception of number of victims for TV news. In each case, the only significant factor is the case sequence number; neither the race of the actors involved nor the number of victims contributed significantly to whether an execution was reported.

Table 2 displays the results of OLS regression analyses testing whether the race of the offender or victim as well as the number of victims influenced the amount of news coverage an execution received. Coverage is measured here by the length of all newspaper articles about the execution, or the duration of television reports. In addition to these case characteristics, three interaction terms are included. These terms are black offender by number of victims, white victim by number of victims, and black offender by white victim.

The first set of models; the case sequence number is negatively related to the amount of coverage in the *New York Times*, while the number of victims is positively related. None of the interaction terms is significantly correlated with the dependent variable. Executions receive more coverage when there are more victims, but more recent executions receive less coverage. Together, these variables account for only 5.2 percent of the variance in the amount of coverage in the *New York Times*.

Table 2: OLS Regression of Amount of Coverage on Case Characteristics

	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>USA Today</i>		<i>Detroit Free Press</i>		TV Networks	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Case Characteristics</i>								
Case sequence number	-.123**	-.122**	.399***	.383***	-.01	-.012	.016	.017
White Victim	.037	.063	.041	.292*	.022	.075	-.032	.127+
Black Offender	.019	.106	-.016	.167	-.015	.098	.039	.003
Offender's Age	.0003	-.004	-.022	-.024	-.039	-.041	.034	.031
Number of Victims	.180***	.306*	.219***	.418*	.090	.234	.101**	.192*
<i>Interaction Terms</i>								
Black Offender * Number of Victims		-.153		.017		-.148		.116
White Victim * Number of Victims		-.100		-.274		-.124		-.187*
Black Offender * White Victim		.025		-.231+		-.022		-.074
F	5.24***	3.55***	11.06***	7.71***	0.22	0.16	3.20**	4.22***
r ²	.048	.052	.206	.227	.01	.012	.015	.031

N=1,099 for all models

+: p < .10

*: p < .05

** : p < .01

***: p < .001

The second set of models repeats these analyses for coverage in *USA Today*. Both the sequence number and the number of victims are significantly correlated with the dependent variable; however, in contrast with coverage in the *New York Times*, the case sequence number is positively associated with the amount of coverage and remains positively associated when the interaction terms are included in the model. This counter-intuitive finding is explained by the pattern of coverage in *USA Today*, which reported executions less consistently as time progressed, but the more recent executions that were reported received substantial coverage. The interaction terms are not significant, indicating that the race of neither the victim nor the offender significantly impacts the amount of coverage an execution received. Altogether, these variables account for 22.7 percent of the variance in coverage.

The third set of models repeats these analyses using the amount of coverage in the *Detroit Free Press*. Here, none of the variables in either model, including the interaction effects, is significantly associated with the amount of coverage, and the total explanatory power of the model is substantially weaker than in the previous analyses, accounting for only 1.2 percent of the variance in coverage.

The final set of models repeats these analyses using the duration of execution reports in TV network news. The number of victims is associated with more coverage. Of the interaction terms, white victim by number of victims is significant, indicating that cases involving multiple white victims receive less coverage than cases with multiple, non-white victims. The main effect of number of victims is also significant and remains positively associated with amount of coverage. Altogether, these measures account for only 3.1 percent of the variance in coverage. The next section of these analyses assesses the relationship between the case characteristics and the prominence of coverage. For the newspapers in this analysis, the dependent variable is whether or not the execution was covered on the front page. For television news coverage, the dependent variable is whether or not the execution was the first story covered during any broadcast.

The final quantitative analysis, summarized in Table 3, focuses on the prominence of news coverage. Beginning with the *New York Times*, none of the variables was significantly related to the likelihood that an execution would be reported on Page 1. Furthermore, since no cases with a black offender and white victim were reported on Page 1, this interaction term was removed from the model.

This analysis is repeated using prominence of coverage in *USA Today* as the dependent variable. Here, because no executions featuring white victims or black offenders were covered on the front page of the paper, none of the interaction terms could be included in the analysis. Only the number of victims is significantly associated with prominence of coverage; each additional victim in a case increases the odds that it will receive coverage on the front page by a factor of 2.44.

These analyses were repeated again with prominence of coverage on TV news broadcasts as the dependent variable. Again, separation effects limited the analysis, because no cases involving a black offender and white victim were reported first in a news broadcast. That said, none of the independent variables in this analysis was significantly correlated with prominence

Table 3: Logistic Regression of Prominence of Coverage on Case Characteristics

	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>USA Today</i>		TV Networks	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Case Characteristics</i>						
Case Number	-.001 (.999)	-.001 (.999)	-.0002 (1.000)	---	.002 (1.002)	.002 (1.002)
White Victim	1.087 (2.966)	1.555 (4.734)	---	---	.614 (1.849)	1.397 (4.004)
Black Offender	-.195 (.823)	.976 (2.653)	---	---	1.454+ (4.278)	2.078 (7.990)
Offender's Age	.018 (1.018)	.015 (1.015)	-.072 (.930)	---	-.036 (.965)	-.035 (.966)
Number of Victims	.438** (1.550)	.880 (2.411)	.891** (2.437)	---	.266 (1.305)	.761 (2.140)
<i>Interaction Terms</i>						
Black Offender * Number of Victims		-.775 (.461)	---	---		-.432 (.649)
White Victim * Number of Victims		-.379 (.684)	---	---		-.481 (.618)
Black Offender * White Victim		---	---	---		---
r ² _{GSC}	.076	.089	.150	---	.166	.171
Model chi-square	13.5*	12.746*	8.968*	---	7.36	7.605

N=1,099 for all models

Cell entries are regression coefficients (β) with odds ratios in parentheses.

+: $p < .10$

*: $p < .05$

** : $p < .01$

***: $p < .001$

of coverage. Therefore, across all of these analyses, the only factor that significantly influenced whether or not an execution received prominent coverage was the number of victims.

Qualitative Analysis of Offenders, Victims, and Executions

Most reports of executions in *USA Today* were included in brief notices in a section entitled “News from the States”, where news from each U.S. state is reported in a single paragraph. Only 45 (or 4 percent) of all executions received 100+ words of coverage. Furthermore, only 11 (or 1 percent) were reported extensively, in at least 1,000 words. A close reading of all articles in *USA Today*, covering 220 (or 20 percent) of all executions carried out in the U.S. between 1984 and 2007 revealed some common characteristics of the most extensively covered executions. These characteristics were found to be distributed among five categories that describe personal, social, and historical contexts. Many cases had more than one of these characteristics, so these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Offenders’ Personal Characteristics: In some cases, offenders’ personal characteristics—sex, mental capacities, or age—render them different from most people that are executed, thereby making their executions newsworthy. Both Margie Barfield (executed in North Carolina on November 2, 1984) and Karla Faye Tucker (executed in Texas on February 3, 1998) were female, born-again Christians. These two characteristics, in combination, attracted a great deal of debate and media attention. Being female, by itself, was insufficient for the execution to become newsworthy, however—the eight other executions of women did not receive extensive coverage. The execution of Delaware’s Willie G. Sullivan (Delaware, September 24, 1999) attracted much debate, because he may have suffered from both mental retardation (with an IQ of 70), and fetal alcohol syndrome. Kelsey Patterson (Texas, May 18, 2004) and James Hubbard (Alabama, August 5, 2004), both mentally ill, were executed despite the 1986 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Ford v. Wainwright* (477 US 399, 1986), which banned the execution of mentally ill people.

Attention was sometimes roused by an execution of a non-citizen or a person born outside the United States, prompting international involvement and much international press coverage on behalf of the condemned. For example, the government of Paraguay appealed unsuccessfully to the World Court at The Hague to prevent the execution of Paraguayan citizen Angel Breard (Virginia, April 14, 1998). Similarly, the execution of Mir Aimal Kasi (Virginia, November 14, 2002), a Pakistani citizen who killed two CIA agents, attracted much coverage because it elicited fears of Middle Eastern retaliation against Americans.

The Mexican government has attempted several times, without success, to avert executions of Mexican citizens in the U.S. The executions of Irineo Montoya (Texas, June 18, 1997), Mario B. Murphy (Virginia, September 17, 1997), and Miguel Flores (Texas, November 9, 2000) were rendered newsworthy by the fact that they were either born in or citizens of Mexico.

Stanley “Tookie” Williams (California, December 13, 2005), founder of the Crips street gang, was sentenced to death in 1979 for the slaying of four people in Los Angeles. While in prison he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize and other awards for his attempt to end the gang violence that he helped start. The Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger, denied

Williams' clemency request because Williams failed to express remorse and inform on other members of the Crips. William's notoriety, his transformation while awaiting execution, and Schwarzenegger's denial of clemency combined to make this execution one of the most extensively reported in decades.

Legal Claims: Claims of inadequate representation and questions of factual guilt occasionally result in increased media attention. The foreign-born men, Breard, Montoya, Flores, and Murphy, claimed that they were denied access to their consulates immediately after their arrests, as guaranteed by international treaty. Additionally, Willie Darden (Florida, March 15, 1988), Gary Graham (a.k.a. Shaka Sankofa, Texas, June 22, 2000), and Juan Raul Garza (Federal, June 19, 2001) claimed that they had been the victims of racial prejudice in their legal representation and/or jury selection. The conviction of Virginia's Roger K. Coleman was so vigorously contested that his picture was on the cover of *Time Magazine* prior to his execution (May 20, 1992). According to Coleman's attorneys, he had an alibi that did not give him enough time to commit the crime, and another man had bragged about killing the victim.

Circumstances of the Crime: In news reports of executions, coverage is typically given not to the execution itself, but rather to the circumstances of the crime and the reactions of victims' families (Haney and Greene, 2004). Some capital cases are so gruesome, the death tolls so high, and the ways in which victims were killed so horrific that extensive news coverage is assured. The executions of mass/serial murderers, Ted Bundy (Florida, January 24, 1989), John Wayne Gacy (Illinois, May 10, 1994), and Timothy McVeigh (Federal, June 11, 2001), were each covered in articles longer than 1,000 words that included vivid details of their crimes and witnesses' responses to their deaths.

The characteristics of victims also influence the extent of reporting of executions. The executions of murderers of children are noteworthy: Westley Dodd was executed (Washington, January 5, 1993) after committing atrocities against three children. Margie Barfield (North Carolina, November 2, 1984), Judy Buenoano (Florida, March 30, 1998), and Betty Lou Beets (Texas, February 24, 2000) were all convicted of killing their romantic partners or children.

Protocol Violations: Executions have rules of etiquette for observers, prison personnel, and prisoners. An execution may be rendered newsworthy when those rules are violated. Protocol requires that condemned prisoners are to accept their impending deaths with quiet resignation. In a few instances, however, they refused to comply, and instead fought the guards escorting them to the death chamber. Gary Graham (Texas, June 22, 2000) showed evidence of a recent struggle as he was secured with several more restraints than usual on the day of his execution. Daniel Thomas (Florida, April 15, 1986) brawled with guards as he was led "kicking and screaming" to the electric chair, in view of execution witnesses.

Protocol violations may also include technical errors and equipment malfunctions, resulting in visible harm to the body and evidence of intense suffering. Phenomena falling into this subcategory of protocol violations are typically called "botched executions." This term is commonly used in anti-death penalty rhetoric, because it conjures up emotionally charged images of mutilation and pain that are diametrically opposed to the emotionally neutral language of laws and procedures prescribing executions.

Greer (2006) argues that botched executions are more likely to receive coverage. Although no rigorous effort has been made to specify the characteristics of “botched” executions, a list of 40 such events, carried out between 1982 and 2007, has been compiled by Radelet (2007) and is posted on the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) website. This list “...is not intended to be a comprehensive catalogue of botched executions, but simply a listing of well-known examples” (Radelet, 2007). This list includes a broad range of incidents where execution protocol was violated, ranging from delays caused by technicians’ difficulty in finding a usable vein for a lethal injection (e.g., Morin—Texas, March 13, 1985; Rector—Arkansas, January 24, 1992) to more horrific events, such as offenders’ catching fire during electrocution (e.g., Tafero—Florida, May 4, 1990; Medina—Florida, March 25, 1997).

Of the 40 the executions on Radelet’s list, 37 occurred during the period covered by the *USA Today* dataset. In order to test the hypothesis that botched executions are more newsworthy than others, *USA Today*’s coverage of the botched executions obtained from the DPIC was compared with coverage of other executions. Eleven of the 37 executions (30 percent) labeled as botched were reported in *USA Today*, which is not significantly more than the percentage of other executions reported. The reports of these eleven executions all included some details of the violations in protocol listed in the DPIC report, but none of these executions was reported on Page One of *USA Today*.

Historical Precedent: The most common category of newsworthiness was a “first” for a state or the nation. Similarly, executions that constitute a “record” of some sort fall into this category. More than one-third (38 percent) of newsworthy executions earned this designation because of their historical context.

Examples of precedent-setting executions that received greater than average coverage include the following: Margie Barfield (North Carolina, 1984), was the first woman executed in the United States since the death penalty was reinstated in 1976. The execution in Arkansas of Hoyt Clines, Darryl Richley, and James Holmes (August 3, 1994) was the first triple execution since 1962. The execution of Wilford Berry (February 19, 1999) was Ohio’s first since 1963. Timothy McVeigh and Juan Raul Garza (June 11 and June 19, 2001) were the first Federal prisoners to be executed in thirty-eight years. Larry Wayne White’s execution (May 22, 1997) was Texas’ fourth execution in one week. Paul Nuncio (June 15, 2000) was the 134th Texan—the largest number ever to be executed during the administration of a single governor. Texas’ governor at that time was George W. Bush.

Contemporaneous Events: While some executions possess one or more characteristics that make them exceptional, the presence of these characteristics does not guarantee extensive news coverage. The reporting of executions does not occur in a vacuum; other, contemporaneous events compete with executions for news coverage. News editors decide which of many reportable events are newsworthy. The coverage of executions depends on the number and importance of “competing” regional, national, and international events. The newsworthiness of executions is determined, at least in part, in relation to the newsworthiness of other, contemporaneous events.

Timothy Spencer killed four people, and was the first person in the nation to be convicted using DNA evidence. Since it was a historical “first,” Spencer’s (Virginia, April 27, 1994) execution would have been considered newsworthy, yet it received a meager 20 words in *USA Today*, possibly because it occurred two weeks before the scheduled execution of serial killer John Wayne Gacy (Illinois, May 10, 1994). Due to the far more horrific details of Gacy’s killings, Spencer’s execution was overshadowed by Gacy’s impending execution.

A similar phenomenon occurred in 2001. For many months after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the news was dominated by reports of those attacks and other terrorist activities. None of the 63 executions in 2001 carried out after September 11 was reported in *USA Today*. The editors assigned a higher priority to other matters, stripping all executions of their newsworthiness, although if they had occurred under other circumstances, at least some would likely have been newsworthy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

When, after a ten-year hiatus, executions resumed in 1977 all executions received extensive, prominent coverage by the broadcast and print media. As the pace of executions increased, coverage declined. Executions have disappeared almost entirely from network TV news—between 2001 and 2007 only 14 (3.3 percent) of the 416 executions carried out in the U.S. was reported by *any* of the major TV networks. During the same period *USA Today* reported only 2.6 percent of executions. The low salience of executions in Michigan, a state that does not have the death penalty, is reflected in the infrequent and brief coverage of executions (that occurred in other states) in *The Detroit Free Press*.

The *Houston Chronicle* consistently reports executions in Texas, the state that executes the most people. Over time, however, the *Chronicle's* articles have become shorter and less prominent. More recently only a few “unusual” executions received extensive, prominent coverage. In Florida the *Miami Herald* has continued to publish about one long article per execution, but these articles are not consistently printed on Page One. Even in Georgia, which has executed the fewest people among this small sample of states, the prominence and quantity of news coverage has declined. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* has consistently published about two, long articles per Georgia execution, but in recent years, those articles have no longer appeared on the front page. As the number of executions has increased, both across the U.S. and within states, executions have become less newsworthy.

The low level of network TV coverage of executions should be viewed in light of the small number of news stories in a typical newscast. A review of the archive of all the regularly scheduled news broadcasts on CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN in a recent month (retrieved February 29, 2008, from <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>) revealed that a single broadcast contains only 8-10 stories. A huge number of national and international events occur each day from which TV news editors must choose no more than ten. Among these occurrences on a typical day would probably be bombings, accidents, or severe weather somewhere in the world resulting in many deaths, as well as political and economic events with important national and international consequences. In competition with news reports of such a large number of large-scale events, a news story about

the death of a single criminal offender by lethal injection may, understandably, fail to survive an editor's cut.

We hypothesize that the local TV coverage of in-state executions would be comparable to local newspaper reporting of in-state executions. Whereas most executions that occur in distant states would not be especially interesting to a local TV audience, executions that occur closer to home would be of interest, and would receive more coverage on local TV stations. Unfortunately, the archives of local TV stations are not generally accessible to researchers, so this hypothesis would be difficult to test.

The differentials between national and in-state news reports of executions help to explain the pattern found in a previously reported (Jacoby & Bronson, 2004) national survey of public awareness of completed executions. Jacoby & Bronson found that the public sharply underestimated the number of executions actually carried out in the U.S. (during the year prior to the survey), but more accurately estimated the number of executions carried out in respondents' home states.

Based on these findings, given the recent pattern of executions, news coverage of executions appears to depend partly on the rate of executions in a geographic area. Within each state the extent of newspaper coverage is inversely related to the rate of executions within that state. Over time, even in states with low annual execution rates, the newsworthiness of executions declines.

On a national level the amount and prominence of newspaper and TV reporting of executions is quite low. The race of victims and offenders seems to be a much less important factor in the reporting of executions than in the legal processes that result in executions. Characteristics of particular executions—unusual qualities of the offense, offender, victim, or context—render some executions more likely to receive national news coverage. Predicting with precision which executions will receive extensive (or any) national news coverage is difficult, however, because editorial decisions to publish or broadcast particular news stories depend heavily on the relative newsworthiness of competing, contemporaneous events.

On the national scene crime *is* news, but punishment, including capital punishment, is not. Even when a crime resulting in execution is unusually heinous, and has therefore received extensive news coverage, the execution carried out as punishment typically occurs more than a decade later. The crime story, for which the execution constitutes a conclusion, may not be followed over such a long period by the news media, which is continually confronted with the challenge of determining which more immediate events to cover.

The significance of the failure of the national news media to report executions remains unexplored, but some consequences can at least be suggested. The only way the vast majority of citizens can become aware of executions is through the mass media. In the absence of mass media reporting of executions, the public remains unaware that they occur. Public ignorance of most executions, therefore, renders moot the long-simmering debate about the deterrent and/or brutalization effect of capital punishment. The behavior of prospective murderers cannot be influenced by executions about which they do not know.

Perhaps even more important, citizens cannot participate knowledgeably in policy discussions about capital punishment if they remain ignorant about current punishment practices. Ironically, the evidence presented in this study reveals that over the last 30 years, as executions became more frequent, reports to the public about them declined.

ENDNOTE

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and may not represent those views of the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the Department of Justice

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