

**Crime Stories as Television News: A Content Analysis
of National, Big City, and Small Town Newscasts**

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Abstract

The present paper is a five-week content analysis of crime stories reported on television news. The sample consists of three nightly newscasts available on a rural, midwestern cable system. Included are nightly newscasts from a national network, a big city television station, and a small town channel. Findings from this exploratory study show that these three sources of television news differ substantially in their coverage of crime stories.

Introduction

In 1945 George Gallup asked survey respondents if they had ever seen a television in operation. Only 19 percent said that they had (Gallup, 1972:551). Things have changed dramatically. Today, about 250,000 televisions are built each day worldwide and in the United States there are two television sets per household (Macionis, 1997:135; Steinberg, 1985:85). In the average household, the television set is on nearly eight hours a day and, except for sleeping or working, watching television is the most time-consuming behavior of Americans (Perkinson, 1996; Steinberg, 1985:85). The point is that television has become a primary agent of socialization in American society, rivaling, if not superseding, the importance of the family, religion, and schools.

One reason television has become so influential is that it is the main source of information about the world. In a 1995 poll, for example, Americans were asked to indicate all the sources from which they got their news and information. Seventy-eight percent answered "nightly national news" (the most frequent source) and seventy-five percent reported "local television news" (Gallup Jr., 1996:117-118). A good share of this information deals with crime and criminals. As we shall presently see, however, there are noteworthy differences in crime reporting between national, big city, and small town television newscasts.

Television News and Crime Reporting

Media coverage of crime and justice is as old as printing (Surette, 1998:53). Historically, newspapers commonly carried stories about crime and criminals. The same was true of the radio when it became a dominant information medium. And today, millions of Americans watch television news on a daily basis and these broadcasts regularly feature crime stories (Bailey and Hale, 1998; Barak, 1994; Graber, 1980; Katz, 1986; Surette, 1998; Warr, 1995). Crime news is one of the most frequent subject areas of television news, claiming 10 to 20 percent of total news air time (Dominick, 1978; Graber, 1980). A recent examination of the local news at Chicago's three major network stations found that local news devoted 15 to 17 percent of non-commercial time to crime stories (Johnson, 1998). Crime was the number one content area of these Chicago television newscasts, followed by health and medicine at 11 to 13 percent. Moreover, the present research has found that local news programs most often begin with a crime story.

Why is crime such a popular subject in television newscasts? There are several reasons (Katz, 1986). First, crime news is relatively cheap and readily accessible. Crime stories are routine and reporters rely on regular sources such as police officials (Chermak, 1995b). Second, providing information about crime can be seen as serving a useful purpose. Viewers are alerted to dangers that they may face and are generally kept apprised of the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Third, and perhaps most pivotal, crime stories are able to capture viewer attention. Surveys repeatedly show that Americans judge crime to be a serious problem in society and are usually interested in this topic. As recently as May, 1997, poll respondents identified crime as the number one problem facing the United States (Maguire and Pastore, 1997:114). However, because most people do not personally know criminals, they rely on media portrayals for intimate details.

It is clear that television newscasts are a major source of information concerning crime in the United States. There is reason to believe that ordinary citizens tend to accept crime news uncritically. For example, 64 percent of American adults think that the press "accurately reflects how much crime there is" (Maguire and Pastore, 1996:222). Social scientists are more skeptical of the accuracy of crime reporting. Some have even argued that the media creates the social reality of crime (Barak, 1993), or at the very least, exercises significant power over the interpretation of that reality (Gans, 1980). Unfortunately, researchers have consistently found that crime reporting on television is distorted in key respects (Barrile, 1986; Chermak, 1995a, 1994; Dominick, 1978; Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter, 1996; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981; Tunnell, 1998). One of the greatest distortions is that television news coverage of crime exaggerates the prevalence of violent interpersonal crime, while it underplays the extent of white-collar crime. Researchers agree that this pattern exists in the media in general, and in television programming (news and entertainment) in

particular. What is missing, however, is a targeted investigation of levels of television newscasts. Do all newscasts follow the pattern of accentuating violent crime? The present project, an exploratory study, provides a preliminary answer to this question by presenting findings from a five-week content analysis of television news crime reporting at the national, big city, and small town levels.

Data and Methods

Data for this study were obtained between September 23, 1997 and November 24, 1997. Between these dates, five weeks of selected television newscasts were sampled. An every-other-week schedule was adopted in order to minimize the chances of repeat crime stories dominating the reports examined.

The television newscasts that were analyzed were selected from options offered on a Tele-Communications Incorporation (TCI) cable system operating in west-central Illinois. The sample includes national, big city, and small town newscasts. The NBC nightly news was chosen because it was (and is) the highest rated evening news broadcast. Chicago's WGN (9:00 P.M.) news was examined as representative of big city news (Chicago is the third largest city in the United States with a city population of about three million). It might be argued that because WGN is a "superstation," it is not like most big city stations. However, with regard to television news, WGN is on record as stating that the goal of its coverage "is to serve local audiences" (Kirk, 1998:2). In any event, WGN was the only big city newscast shown on the cable system used in the study. The (6:00 P.M.) newscast of WGEM of Quincy, Illinois, was chosen as representative of small town television news (Quincy's population is just under 40,000). WGEM was selected because it is the highest-rated small town news program offered on the aforementioned cable system. Plainly, it would have been preferable had the cable system included at least two representatives of each level of newscast, yet the selection of NBC, WGN, and WGEM was adequate for this exploratory work.

One newscast per day/per channel was videotaped. This means that, in theory, five weeks of taping should have yielded a total of 105 programs, 35 each for NBC, WGN, and WGEM. However, in seven instances major league baseball or professional football pre-empted the NBC and WGEM newscasts (WGEM is an NBC affiliate that presents local news immediately after conclusion of the national news). Hence, the sample contains 28 NBC programs and 28 WGEM programs. Thirty-four WGN newscasts were taped. The one missing WGN newscast resulted because a Chicago Bulls game went well beyond the scheduled time and the videocassette recorder was programmed for the regular time (the researchers were out of town and unable to respond to this development).

Content analysis is a research method for "analyzing the symbolic content of any communication" (Singleton, Straits, Straits, & McAllister, 1988:347). The main enterprise of content analysis is coding. In the present project over 1,200 news stories (90

newscasts) were coded. The first step in the coding operation was to identify crime stories as contrasted from all other news stories. Each crime story was then transferred to a special videotape so that these stories could more conveniently be the subject of detailed content analysis. The crime stories were then coded for type of crime: "interpersonal violence," "white-collar crime," "drug offense," or "other." Each of these content categories was defined in reference to the description or depiction of specific recording units. The interpersonal violence category included stories on bodily harm or threat of bodily harm. Mainly, this consisted of homicide, rape, assault (and/or battery), and robbery. The white-collar crime category included crimes committed by a person in the course of his or her high status occupation or crimes committed in the interest of corporations or government agencies. The third content area, drug offense, consisted of stories that treated the growing, selling, purchasing, or using of drugs. Finally, the "other" category included all the crime stories that did not fit in any of the three previous categories.

The coding was divided among two principle coders. Approximately 10 percent of the overall sample of news stories and about 20 percent of the 246 crime stories were double-coded for "reproducibility reliability" (Krippendorff, 1980:130-154; Weber, 1990:17). Intercoder reliability scores ranged from .98 for identification of a crime story to .91 for type of crime story. Problematic cases were reviewed and judged by three coders.

Results

Perhaps the most important finding from this study is that newscasts do not follow a uniform pattern in their coverage of crime stories. Significant differences were found between national (NBC), big city (WGN of Chicago), and small town (WGEM of Quincy, IL.) television news programs. To begin with, in our sample we found that crime was not given an equal amount of coverage. On average, WGN newscasts broadcast about three times as many crime stories as NBC, and about five times as many as WGEM. The average frequency of crime stories per newscast was as follows: 1.67 for NBC; 4.88 for WGN; and 0.97 for WGEM. It is worth noting that the WGN 9:00 P.M. News is a 60 minutes program, while the NBC and WGEM newscasts are 30 minutes in length. Even taking this into account, WGN had the highest rate of crime story coverage. In drawing out further distinctions between level of newscast, it will now be useful to detail the types of crime most often reported.

National Newscasts (NBC)

As noted earlier, existing research shows that the reporting of crime on television news, like other media outlets, focuses especially on interpersonal violence. With regard to NBC, the present data support this finding. Table 1 shows that crime stories covered in our sample of national newscasts most frequently featured violent offenses. Fifty-five percent of NBC crime stories highlighted violent

crimes. The two crime stories most frequently reported on NBC were the Louise Woodward "nanny" case and the Marv Albert sexual assault case. Both of these cases were exceptional and sensational, and they were frequently "framed" (and reframed) in the sense meant by Peter Manning (1998). Manning argues that the media commonly show an image, for example, an image of a particular crime, and then show the image again (reframe it) in another context (e.g., a crime story might be shown at the various stages of arrest, trial, and sentencing). This was certainly the case with regard to the Woodward and Albert stories.

The nanny case centered on a 19-year-old woman from England charged with shaking to death the baby of two medical doctors. Marv Albert, a famous sports broadcaster, was charged with biting a woman with whom he was sexually involved. One of the many allegations to emerge in this case was that Albert enjoyed wearing women's underwear. The point is that attention focused on the Woodward and Albert stories not just because the acts involved interpersonal violence, but because there were sensational aspects to the cases.

TABLE 1. TYPE OF CRIME REPORTED BY NBC (N=47)

VIOLENCE (26=55%): Nanny case (5); Marv Albert sexual assault case (4); Oklahoma City bombing (3); Pearl, Miss. killings (2); robbery; bicyclist kills motorist; convicted rapist pardoned; terrorist plot foiled but could have killed hundreds; assault weapons & street killings; man with AIDS has sex with numerous women; Rabin assassination; Atlanta bombings; terrorism in Egypt; 11-year-old boy shoots motorists; skinhead kills a black for being black; terrorism in Germany.

DRUG OFFENSES (4=9%): Mexican drug cartel; heroin use in U.S.; Olympians use of illegal drugs; heroin use in Plano, Texas.

WHITE-COLLAR CRIMES (11=23%): IRS illegal tactics (2); federal government cover-up; federal government corruption; Chrysler loses lawsuit regarding defective vans; FBI unit head convicted of obstruction of justice; nursing home neglect; Whitewater crimes; mortgage scams; real estate scams; fraudulent telemarketers.

OTHER (6=13%): Nuclear theft; programs for deterring juvenile crime; Iraq's germ warfare research; home repair swindles; Internet information on poison bombs; credit card fraud from stealing discarded junk mail.

Other violent and sensational crimes reported by NBC included stories on the Oklahoma City bombing; a multiple killing case in Pearl, Mississippi, in which a male adolescent murdered his mother and two school mates; and a hate crime in Denver in which a white male skinhead killed a black man for being black. The Oklahoma City, Pearl, and Denver stories were three of the most serious, and most violent, crimes covered by NBC during the five-week sample.

As noted earlier, the research literature suggests that the media tend to give little attention to white-collar crime. Importantly, this was not found to be the case with regard to NBC newscasts. In fact, 23 percent of all NBC crime reports focused on white-collar offenses. These stories included such diverse topics as Whitewater offenses; illegal tactics of the Internal Revenue Service; government "cover-ups" and "pay-outs;" unsafe consumer products; and various corporate scams.

Big City Newscasts (WGN)

The crime stories reported on WGN were even more likely to describe violent offenses than was the case with the national news. As seen in Table 2, 65 percent of all WGN crime reports described interpersonal violence. Many of these reports highlighted national stories. The nanny trial, Marv Albert's case, and the Oklahoma City bombing are three examples of this. However, a majority of WGN violent crime stories referred to behavior that occurred in the greater Chicago area. Illustrations of local violent offenses included the stabbing death of an elderly woman by a man intent on stealing the victim's car; sexual assault involving one female victim and four male offenders at a local college; seven killings at a suburban fast food restaurant; the beating death of an elderly woman by her daughter; the severe beating of a two-year-old for bed-wetting; and perhaps the most sensational story of all involved the torture, beating, and raping of a woman. In this case, a 24-year-old man assaulted his wife for several days. He whipped her, cutting her skin open, and then forced her to soak in a tub of salt water. She was eventually rescued when someone at the apartment door became suspicious.

TABLE 2. TYPE OF CRIME REPORTED BY WGN (N=166)

VIOLENCE (108=65%): Marv Albert sexual assault case (7); nanny case (6); hit & run case (6); reckless homicide (6); kidnapping (4); beating death of elderly woman by daughter (3); triple shooting/double murder (3); baby abandoned in garbage can (3); mob hit man on trial (3); bank robbery (3); Unabomber (3); husband hires man to murder wife (2); felony drunk driving by school bus driver (2); stabbing death of elderly woman (2); Oklahoma City bombing (2); Jon Benet Ramsey killing (2); armed robbery (2); sexual assault (2); gang warfare leads to shooting of a cop (2); football homecoming murder (2); attempted murder (2); serial rapist (2); convicted murderers ask not to be executed (2); child abuse & neglect (2); robbery and seven killings at fast food restaurant (2); car jacking with victim shot; woman killed in her own home; armored car robbery; convicted criminals released on basis of new DNA evidence; terrorism in Egypt; Ennis Cosby killing; robbery led to killing;

TABLE 2 (continued)

hate crime in which Hispanic student beaten by black students; two-year-old severely beaten for bed wetting; family assaulted in their own home; man stabbed then kills perpetrator; young girl shot and killed; murder of millionaire; reward offered for killer; sudden infant deaths may be killings; suspect shot by cop after car chase; felony stalking; arrest of man wanted for murder; man suspected of killing wife; retrospective on Tylenol killings; women motorists hit train while fleeing from men; D.C. gunman fires shots at random; woman assaulted by football players; Pearl, Miss. killings; aggravated assault; shooting near a school; two older boys drop younger boy from window of building; charges of terrorism dropped; wife tortured, beaten, & raped by husband; murder mystery; retrospective on Susan Smith case; stabbing; man with AIDS has sex with numerous women.

DRUG OFFENSES (8=5%): Mexican drug lord case; drunk driving; residents shut down crackhouse; drug bust of 31 individuals; news conference on DUI; drug dealer involved in car crash; routine traffic stop leads to drug bust; hostage & robbery case involving drug dealers.

WHITE-COLLAR CRIMES (16=10%): Illegal campaign fund raising (2); money missing from funds raised for Girl X (2); six companies involved in counterfeit clothes; company fraud regarding furs; IRS illegal tactics; alderman on trial for racketeering; possible consumer fraud by cable television companies; state legislators implicated in cash for grants; obstruction of justice charges; ADM price fixing case; city council member resigns amidst charges of shady financial dealings; Microsoft versus U.S. Department of Justice; elections fraud; former state representative & tollway chief indicted for illegal financial gain.

OTHER (34=20%): Elaborate burglary ring (5); reckless driving in loop (4); bootleg tapes & videos (3); reckless boat driving (2); school vandalism (2); counterfeiting ring; arson; illegal immigrant story; man flashes teenage girl; baby food scam; cell phone cloning; half-brother of Jesse Jackson sent to prison; truck smashes into building; crime investigation of bus driver; electrical blackout intentionally caused; theft of ATM cards; school burglary; pedophiles on the Internet; reckless driving; White House intruder; program to foil car theft; gambling raid; stolen car.

WGN featured a considerably smaller percentage of white-collar crimes than was the case with NBC. Only 10 percent of WGN crime stories highlighted white-collar offenses. Furthermore, the WGN sample contained only eight drug crime stories (five percent), a lower percentage of such stories than what was found for NBC (nine percent) or WGEM (33 percent).

Small Town Newscasts (WGEM)

The pattern found with WGEM newscasts differed substantially from the sample of national and big city newscasts. Only 30 percent of all crime stories reported on WGEM dealt with violence. Table 3 identifies 10 violent offenses. The killing of a four-year-old boy, the robbery of a convenience store, and an altercation leading to a non-deadly shooting were perhaps the three most serious and violent crimes reported (actually, the first story pertained to a Peoria, Illinois, case and was one of only two crime stories set outside the WGEM viewing audience).

Previous research indicates that eight percent of crime stories reported on big city news telecasts featured drug offenses (Chermak, 1997:696). Comparable results were found in the present study for national and big city newscasts, but not for the small town WGEM news. While violent crime was a far more frequent topic on NBC and WGN than on WGEM, the reverse pattern was found for drug offenses. As shown in Table 3, 33 percent of WGEM crime stories pertained to drugs, whereas the percentages for NBC and WGN were nine percent and five percent, respectively. Though WGEM showed a high rate of drug stories, the offenses reported were typically less serious than the drug crimes covered by NBC or WGN. For example, several of the WGEM drug cases dealt with marijuana or drinking and driving. On the other hand, NBC profiled a Mexican drug cartel and WGN described a drug bust in which 31 people were arrested. The point is, the drug stories on WGEM generally focused on relatively minor offenses.

TABLE 3. TYPE OF CRIME REPORTED BY WGEM (N=33)

VIOLENCE (10=30%): Possible suicide (2); motorist shot; girl assists boy in occult-related suicide attempt; four-year-old boy killed by man; aggravated assault charges; possible suicide; robbery; altercation leads to non-fatal shooting of a college football player; man arrested for stalking of ex-girlfriend; sheriff's deputy charged with battery.

DRUG OFFENSES (11=33%): community efforts to combat underage drinking (2); arrest for possession of controlled substances (2); arrest for marijuana possession (2); two women sentenced for drug charges; drunk driving laws; pharmacist charged with illegal dispensing of narcotics; drug dealing; smuggling drugs into prison.

WHITE-COLLAR CRIMES (0):

OTHER (12=36%): Theft of explosives (2); check cashing fraud (2); delinquent child support payments; child pornography on the Internet; arson investigation; illegal tree cutting; property damage done by inmates; illegal disposal of leaves; program to fight auto theft; program to fight scams against the elderly.

Finally, an examination of the content category "Other" suggests that NBC and WGN might share a news selection strategy quite different from the strategy used at WGEM. NBC covered stories involving nuclear theft, germ warfare, and the manufacture of poison bombs, and WGN broadcast stories on an elaborate burglary ring, a man flashing a teenage girl, and a White House intruder. These were spectacular stories. WGEM, on the contrary, highlighted stories on delinquent child support payments and the illegal disposal of leaves. These reports were fairly mundane, at least in comparison to the NBC and WGN stories just cited. This raises an interesting question: Does the size of the news organization and its audience influence not just the type of crime story reported, but the affective nature or function of the reports? That is, are crime stories picked not just in terms of the seriousness of the offense, but for what the story has to offer to the audience?

Discussion and Conclusion

This study advances several noteworthy findings. Some of these points support previous research findings, while others challenge or add to the existing literature. First, while all newscasts featured crime as a staple topic, news programs varied in their attention to crime. Our sample of big city newscasts had the highest rate of crime reports, while national and small town newscasts paid less attention to crime stories. Second, in support of previous research, this project found that a high percentage of crime stories focused on interpersonal violence. This pattern was clearly less pronounced for small town news, however. Third, except for WGEM, the small town station, there was little coverage of drug offenses. This is perhaps odd because drug offenders make up an increasingly high percentage of new arrestees. In Illinois, for example, drug arrests have tripled between 1983 and 1996 (Smith, 1998). Fourth, although researchers have typically found that "news in general pays little attention to white-collar crime" (Tunnell, 1998:114), there was considerable emphasis on white-collar crime in the national news sample. However, noting yet another difference in level of newscast, white-collar crime stories were not a frequent topic in big city newscasts, and there was no coverage of white-collar crime in the sample of small town newscasts. Fifth, contrary to some popular thoughts and selected published research (e.g., Cooper, 1996), we found no evidence that television news exaggerated African-American involvement in crime. Most of the sample news reports did not offer any information about the race of the offender, but for those stories that did identify the race of offender, the results were as follows: NBC (three of 16 offenders were African-American); WGN (23 of 56 were African-American); and WGEM (zero of three were African-American).

The final finding, which is overarching in scope, is that level of newscast appeared to manifest a distinctive news strategy with regard to crime reports. Research has shown that there are important strategic differences between newspaper and television

news coverage of crime (Chermak, 1995b; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981), but here we were concerned with differences related to the level of television news. NBC and WGN show a marked preference for violent types of crime, while WGEM was much less likely to report on violent crimes and much more likely to highlight drug offenses. In the remainder of this paper, we offer a speculative but informed explanation for these findings.

As was noted earlier, all forms of media news, including TV newscasts, take an interest in crime. Kenneth Tunnell (1992) refers to this phenomenon as the "commodification of crime." Crime is such a recurring story line on television newscasts because viewers are interested in crime, and crime stories are inexpensive to deliver. One reason explaining the low expense is that police authorities are more than willing to supply up-to-date information on crimes. Crime control is widely seen, by both the police and the public, as the main job function of the police. From the perspective of the police, media crime reports dramatize why communities need police protection (although there is a danger in that some viewers might conclude that there is too much crime and that the police are to be blamed for this). It is worth noting that the police do not provide television news personnel with information on all types of crime. Typically, the most serious crimes (e.g., interpersonal violence) receive the most attention. Perhaps this meets the needs of newscasters who may believe that these stories are most likely to grab the interest of viewers. Taking these general observations as an overview, perhaps some light can be shed on the differential strategies of the three newscasts sampled in this study.

Each of the news programs has a mandate to cover a specified area. For NBC the area of coverage is the world, although most attention is focused on the United States. The main area of coverage for WGN is the city of Chicago and its surrounding suburbs, and WGEM is primarily concerned with events happening in Quincy, Illinois, and the general rural viewing area of the WGEM station. An important consideration here is the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) "localism doctrine" which has traditionally required stations (as part of the licensing process) to meet the needs and interests of the communities in which they broadcast. Even though the localism doctrine has been relaxed in recent decades, it remains a concern of broadcasters. In fact, one study showed that between 1976 and 1992 newscasts increased their attention to local news (Slattery, Hakenen, and Doremus, 1996). This may help explain, in part, why NBC and WGN are far more likely than WGEM to air crime stories that are violent and sensational. If crime reporting focuses on the most serious crimes taking place in the coverage area, NBC and WGN probably have a daily surplus of violent offenses to choose from. WGEM has a more limited selection. This could be one reason why drug offenses (e.g., marijuana possession) received so much more coverage on WGEM than on either NBC or WGN. In a small town, a charge of marijuana possession might be the most serious offense on which to report. At the same time, this is not a complete

explanation for the differences noted above. After all, it is always possible for a television newscast to broaden its scope. This is something that WGN frequently did. Similarly, WGEM could have easily reported crimes taking place in St. Louis or Chicago (interestingly, this station routinely presented sports stories concerning teams from St. Louis and Chicago). With regard to crime, however, WGEM seldom reported stories about crimes that occurred elsewhere.

It seems likely that area focus is not a total explanation for differential crime reporting. There may be strategic differences between the newscasts. While it is probably the case that hard news, high ratings, and community service (defined broadly) would be a concern for each of the newscasts, the priorities may vary. Arguably, NBC, WGN, and WGEM may define their fundamental missions differently. Although an over-simplification, perhaps NBC and WGN newscasts were interested mainly in hard (serious) news stories and segments that promoted high ratings. Indeed, recent research shows that viewers are particularly attentive to television news messages that provoke anger and fear (Newhagen, 1998). Clearly, anger and fear are common emotional reactions to violent crime stories. But research also suggests that when fear messages are too pronounced, viewers are likely to "tune out" (Strong and Dubas, 1993). This presents a problem for small town stations. While big city viewers can temper their personal fear by disassociating themselves from what is reported to happen in "bad" areas, small town viewers are likely to identify themselves closely with the news of the community. Accordingly, small town newscasts might be more interested in promoting positive, community-oriented news.

In sum, despite sample limitations (future research should extend the analysis to other national, big city, and small town newscasts), the present study offers preliminary evidence that television crime news varies significantly by level of newscast. This general conclusion is a point not found in the present literature, which tends to lump all levels of television news together. Researchers have been critical of the media for misrepresenting the actual facts of crime; researchers too need to be careful about their representation of media reports. One size does not fit all.

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