

# Southern Newspaper Coverage of Exonerations from Death Row

by

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## ABSTRACT

How do newspapers in the south react when a death row inmate is exonerated? Examining newspaper coverage since 1990 of the 16 inmates released from the death rows of Florida, Georgia, and Texas reveals that (a) exonerated inmates receive less coverage than those who are executed, (b) coverage is apt to portray the exoneration as the result of an isolated mistake and not indicative of systematic failure, and (c) coverage emphasizes the experiences of former inmates after being released, not during their incarceration. Cumulatively, this pattern serves to minimize the seriousness of the innocent on death row situation, and is consistent with media theories suggesting political coverage is generally supportive of moderatism/mainstream elite political thinking.

Normally, it is not front page news when someone visits a mall. "I don't even know what I'm looking for," the shopper admitted as he read the list of stores on the directory. But the Associated Press and other newspaper reporters were on the scene when Rudolph Holton went shopping for the first time in sixteen years (Hallifax, 2003a).

Holton had spent the interim on Florida's death row. Then, on January 24, 2003, he was released, the 25<sup>th</sup> person wrongly convicted and sentenced to death by the state of Florida. In Holton's case, prosecutors had withheld evidence, a DNA test had been falsified, and the jailhouse snitches who testified against him later admitted they were lying.

As he left the Tallahassee-area mall, Rudolph Holton tossed a few pennies in a fountain. He made a wish as he threw. "For guys on the row who are left, trying to get help," he said as he walked on.

For Rudolph Holton, the moral of the story was clear. "Too many people getting off death row," he said. "That should be telling them something. That the system's got a lot of holes in it" (Hallifax, 2003a).

For Florida's Governor, Jeb Bush, the moral was somewhat different. He took the occasion of Holton's release to announce a 40% cut in state funding for legal services for those facing the death penalty, and renewed his call for a time limit on death row appeals (Hallifax, 2003b). Either move could have resulted in the state's execution of Rudolph Holton and other innocent people<sup>1</sup>.

Holton was struck by the juxtaposition of the governor's budget proposal and his release. "Just when innocent people get off death row, you want to cut off the funding?" he wondered (Hallifax, 2003b).

The death penalty in the United States is primarily utilized in the south. Indeed a large majority of death penalty convictions and executions in the United States arise from the 11 southern states of the former confederacy (Zimring, 2003). All 11 southern states utilize the death penalty and the sentence enjoys strong support from both political elites and the public there (Borg, 1997; Whitehead, 1998).

How do southern newspapers respond when, as has happened with an eerie regularity, jurisdictions announce that a person convicted of murder and condemned to death has been set free? Does the resulting media coverage suggest a justice system in crisis, or a simply a freakish accident?

Complicating expectations on this issue area is the fact that coverage of exonerations from death row falls at the intersection of competing media values. That is, the media love dramatic, compelling, surprising stories, and the notion of an innocent person convicted of murder and condemned to death surely fits that description. However, the media also are apt to conform in the face of consensus issues – which would encourage coverage that tempers the finding of innocence in the larger context of the need for the death penalty. This study takes measure of these conflicting impulses and examines the degree to which southern newspapers (a) cover exonerations on death row, (b) the degree to which these situations are portrayed as isolated mistakes or symptomatic of a flawed process, and (c) the degree to which coverage portrays the suffering endured by the former inmate or the 'fish out of water' experience of the newly released inmate.

The significance of coverage patterns is suggested by the nature of public opinion on the death penalty. Moy, Scheufele, and Eveland (2001) find that responses to the death penalty, to a greater extent than other crime policy issues, are unstable and affected by emotions. Concomitantly, Sotirovic (2001) finds that exposure and attention to more complex media formats is related to more complex thinking on the death penalty, whereas exposure and attention to more simplistic media formats inhibits complexity. Alarmingly, Lipschultz, and Hilt (1999) criticize the media for covering executions as carnivals, and missing the substantive issues of the moment. If the media gloss over the facts of the exoneration story and the larger trend, then the effects of exonerations may be blunted, with the media, in effect, acting to protect the death penalty from popular scrutiny (Haines, 1992).

### ***Theories of media priorities***

Three theories of media behavior outlined below suggest quite distinct possibilities about how the media will react to exonerations from on death row.

*Man bites dog.* Research suggests that what is surprising is generally more newsworthy than what is important (e.g., Fallows, 1997). In that vein, Jacobson and Dimock (1994) lament that there was greater media scrutiny of the very surprising 1992 House banking scandal, in

which members habitually bounced checks but did not cost the public any money, than of the very important House role in the savings and loan crisis, which cost the public billions.

According to this line of thought, news is what we do not expect to happen, and the more regularly something occurs, the less it can be considered news. The implication for coverage of death row exonerations is that early exonerations will be more newsworthy than later exonerations, as over time the precedent of death row innocence will have already been established. Further, since what is interesting here is the unusual outcome, little attention will be paid to the legal system's malfunctioning that resulted in the flawed conviction. Finally, greater attention will be paid to inmates' lives after prison (such as former inmates' first trips out of prison, meeting relatives for the first time, or seeing commonplace buildings and services that did not exist the last time they were free), which are inherently unusual, rather than inmates' lives in prison, which are not.

*Moderatism/Indexing.* Conversely, according to some scholars, the media are, at bottom, most comfortable with traditions and set patterns (Gans, 1980). When journalists find themselves in need of confirmation of their inclinations, they are apt to turn for comment to a very closed circle of elites who have a stake in the long-term protection of the status quo (Croteau & Hoynes, 1994). This pattern results in what Bennett (1990) and others see as the media indexing its coverage around the mean of elite discussion.

In short, the media tend to present the range of mainstream political elite thinking on major issues in general (Zaller & Chui, 1996), and especially on legal controversies (Grey, 1968; Lawrence, 1996; Newland, 1964; Slotnick & Segal, 1998). When those elites disagree, the story the media tells has two sides. When those elites agree, however, the story the media tells has but one side.

The death penalty is an issue on which, outside of the Congressional Black Caucus, there is almost no elected opposition. Indeed, studies on the state level find as much as 95% support among state legislators for the death penalty (Whitehead, 1998).

Thus, the implication of this theory is that coverage of exonerations will remain essentially flat, becoming no more or less newsworthy over time. Each exoneration would represent a potential threat to the normal order of things, but reporters would continually turn for analysis in these situations to mainstream political leaders who would typically offer calm. As such, coverage would also be expected to emphasize the unusual circumstances which led to the death sentence, and the life after prison elements of the inmate's story.

*Government as failure.* Alternatively, other scholars argue that whenever possible, the media's first inclination is to criticize government. That is to say, the prominence and play of negative stories about government is found to predominate over positive stories in study after study (e.g., Diamond, 1978; Lichter & Noyes, 1995; Niven, 1999, 2001).

Here the suggestion is that exonerations should generate increasing attention as the unfolding scope of the government's failure becomes clearer. Further, coverage should emphasize the systematic failures in the system and answer the 'why this keeps happening'

question, rather than isolating the circumstances of the case. Finally, the serious nature of the problem should result in greater attention to the suffering of the former inmate in prison – thus emphasizing the consequences of the problem - rather than life after prison. Table 1 summarizes the expectations given each of the three theories.

**Table 1**

*Theories of Media Behavior and Implications for Death Row Exoneration Coverage*

Theory	Coverage Prominence	Legal Emphasis	Personal Emphasis
Man Bites Dog	declines  *more coverage than for executions	system working/ unusual circumstances	experiences after prison
Government as Failure	increases  *more coverage than for executions	systematic failures	experiences in prison
Moderatism	flat  *less coverage than for executions	system working/ unusual circumstances	experiences after prison

## METHOD

To explore the nature of southern media response to the innocent on death row, newspaper coverage of the 16 individuals exonerated from the death rows of Florida, Georgia, and Texas from 1990-2003 has been examined<sup>2</sup>. No other southern state had an exoneration from death row during this period. The sample includes coverage from all Florida, Georgia, and Texas newspapers available in either the Lexis-Nexis or Newsbank database<sup>3</sup>.

Three measures of coverage prominence have been recorded. For each of the 16 exonerated individuals, trained coders recorded the total number of articles featuring the subject (with a mention of the person in the headline or three leading paragraphs) in the 12 months before and after their release. Coders also noted the page number and word count for each article. For comparison, the number of articles published on those executed since 1990 in the three states was also recorded (using the same newspapers and time frame).

Then, each of three coders was assigned primary responsibility for reading approximately one-third of the articles ( $n = 510$ ) to record the variables discussed below. To reflect the characterization of the legal system, coders were asked to note if any independent voice (elected official, judge, writer, etc.) suggested the legal system was broken or failing<sup>4</sup>. For example: "Former chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court, Gerald Kogan, had this to say about the state's death penalty: 'There is no question in my mind...that we certainly have, in the past, executed those people who either didn't fit the criteria for execution in the state of Florida or who, in fact, were factually not guilty of the crime for which they have been executed.'... 'You

don't dig up a coffin, open up the lid and then tell the accused, 'Oops, sorry. We made a mistake. Just go home, go on about your business.' It doesn't work that way"(Littlepage, 2003).

Coders also noted independent supportive statements<sup>5</sup>, including those which supported the legal system's functioning, or characterized the current situation as not being indicative of any larger problem. For example, [Governor Jeb] "Bush does not support a halt to executions, said his press secretary Elizabeth Hirst. 'The governor does not believe there is a need for a moratorium in this state,' she said, adding that there is a lengthy appeals process before death row inmates are executed" (Associated Press, 2002).

Articles were coded ( $I = yes$ ,  $0 = no$ ) if any paragraph in the article contained an independent critical statement. They were similarly coded if any paragraph contained an independent supportive statement. Articles could, of course, contain both. A subsample of articles was coded by multiple coders, resulting in an intercoder agreement of .92. Any disagreements were resolved by the third coder.

To reflect how coverage presented the personal experiences of the former inmates, coders were asked to note if any aspect of the article focused on experiences during incarceration. For example: "During his 11 years at the state prison in Jackson, Nelson said he saw prison guards escort 15 inmates to the death chamber. 'These were guys I was seeing every day, talking to,' said Nelson...'We could look out and see the hearse. It was horrible the way they let us smell him cooking. The burnt flesh is something I will never forget. As time went by, I began to wonder if it was possible I was next...The guards were verbally abusive all the time. They humiliate and intimidate, basically dehumanize the inmates, strip-searching us all the time'" (Curriden, 1991). Coders were also asked to note if any aspect of the article discussed the former inmate's new experiences once released. For example: "Now, the 22nd man freed from Florida's death row spends as much time as possible outside. He smokes cigars at his 'favorite place,' a dead tree trunk in the back yard. He watches the leaves rustling in the wind -- appreciating the scene as few others can. He talks to old classmates and well-wishers in his driveway, under the sun" (Roman, 2002).

Again articles were coded ( $I = yes$ ,  $0 = no$ ) if any paragraph in an article contained a reference to life in prison. They were similarly coded if any paragraph contained a reference to life after of prison. A subsample of articles was coded by multiple coders, resulting in an intercoder agreement of .98. The rare disagreements were resolved by the third coder.

## RESULTS

As Table 2 reveals, there has been no great increase in attention to the exonerated as their numbers have mounted. Nor has there been any substantial decline. Instead, the results suggest attention to each additional exoneration has been largely flat. Overall, the exonerated can expect just under 32 articles featuring their plight, placed on average on page 8<sup>6</sup> and just under 672 words long. The correlation between the exoneration number (that is, the number of exonerations that have taken place in the state when the inmate was released) and the prominence of the coverage varies between -.03 (for number of words) and .11 (for number of articles), but in each case fails to reach statistical significance (using  $p < .10$  as a benchmark).

**Table 2***Prominence of Coverage of the Exonerated in Southern Newspapers*

	Mean	SD	Correlation between exoneration # and measure
Number of Articles	31.9	13.2	.11
Placement (Page number)	7.8	3.6	-.06
Length (Word Count)	671.7	189.6	-.03

Note.  $N = 510$ .

As notable as the lack of a trend in these results is the relative paucity of coverage. For example, the same search guidelines applied to the inmates executed by the states of Florida, Georgia, and Texas between 1990-2003 reveals a mean number of articles of 105 ( $SD = 25.8$ ). The difference between coverage of the exonerated and the executed is statistically significant,  $t(22) = 1.99, p < .01$ . In short, those who were executed received more than three times as much coverage as exonerated people on death row, which is akin to giving three times as much coverage to the planes that land safely compared to the ones that crash.

This pattern is not consistent with either the 'Man Bites Dog' theory, which suggests coverage of exonerations should decline but be greater than coverage of executions, or the Government as Failure theory, which suggests coverage of exonerations should increase and be greater than coverage of executions. Instead, it supports the Moderatism/Indexing theory, which suggests coverage of an issue with a clear elite consensus should remain flat and attract less coverage than executions.

Does the coverage exonerations attract emphasize a system in crisis or a system in no particular need of change? By a wide margin this coverage gives voice to supportive words which portray the exoneration as an isolated mistake, or, perversely, as evidence the system is working. For example, "[Governor Jeb Bush] says the fact that mistakes were caught before these prisoners were put to death is proof that the system works" (St. Petersburg Times, 2000); [Attorney General Charlie] "Crist and other death penalty supporters said exonerations are proof the system works - those who aren't guilty eventually are spared" (Allison, 2003). Rare were the instances in which public officials questioned the functioning of the system, as Texas State Senator Rodney Ellis did in the *Austin American-Statesman*, "I don't think the governor's folks put a lot of time into looking at Texas and comparing it to the rest of the nation, because when you do, it's pretty embarrassing. If we're going to lead the nation in incarcerations and executions, then we should at least make sure the defendants get effective legal representation" (Herbert, 1999).

In all, 51% of the articles include some form of independent supportive comments, while only 21% include independent voices pointing out systematic failures. The difference between coverage of supportive and critical comments is statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 9.40, p < .01$ . That there were nearly three times as many articles which included supportive independent statements of the death penalty system as condemning independent statements is again inconsistent with the

Government as Failure theory. Government as Failure would suggest an emphasis on the staggering failure of death penalty prosecutions to produce accurate outcomes. The Moderatism/Indexing and Man Bites Dog theories are supported, as in the case of the former, avoiding criticism is completely consistent with maintaining the status quo of the current execution system, while in the case of the latter, it is the very unusual nature of an exoneration that would make it interesting, therefore, the systematic implications would not likely be stressed.

Finally, the personal emphasis in these articles also reveals an interesting pattern. More than twice as many articles feature the inmate's experiences after being released (39%) than the inmate's experiences while being incarcerated (17%). This difference is also statistically significant,  $\chi^2 = 7.97, p < .01$ . Readers are treated to first trips to stores, events, family reunions, and a veritable time machine odyssey as former inmates view a home area they may not have seen for 10, 15, or more years. Interspersed are bits of trivia about the former death row residents. Readers learned that after he was exonerated from a death sentence in Texas, Ricardo Aldape Guerra returned to his native Mexico where he found work acting on a Mexican television soap opera (Johnson, 1997). Meanwhile, Georgia's Gary Nelson celebrate his exoneration "by drinking a lot of coffee" (Cummings, 1991).

Coverage that emphasizes the suffering endured in the day to day experiences of trying to survive waiting to be exterminated by the state because of an improper conviction are often terrifying. "I was more afraid of them [the prison guards],' Green says now, 'than the electric chair.' Retaliation came in the form of shakedowns and house tossings – guards dumping his personal belongings on the floor and tearing up his cell. Green said he saw two death row inmates hang themselves under the pressure. Others suffered strokes or were dragged to the clinic, beaten and bloodied by officers. 'You could hear fists hitting flesh,' he said" (Freedberg, 1999). But they are also rare compared to the lighter descriptions of life after death row.

Again this pattern is inconsistent with the Government as Failure theory, as the suffering of the former inmate inflicted by the government would presumably be emphasized if that premise was guiding coverage. Both Moderatism/Indexing and Man Bites Dog are supported. Moderatism/Indexing suggests attention to the inmate's experience after prison as a less system-challenging area to explore. Man Bites Dog suggests attention to the inmate's experience after prison as a window onto the experiences of a distinct kind of adventurer.

## **DISCUSSION**

Together, the measures of coverage examined all offer support to the Moderatism/Indexing theory. In a situation in which the government has repeatedly committed egregious mistakes by threatening the lives of people who do not belong on death row, newspaper coverage offers only modest scrutiny and little objection.

The state of Florida, which leads the nation in having sent innocent people to death row, the state of Georgia, and the state of Texas release death row inmates to less fanfare than they execute them. They receive less condemnation in the southern press for their system than apologies and praise. They read less of the pain inflicted on the exonerated than of their

adventures in shopping malls. In sum, in response to the continuing failure of these states' justice systems, and in the face of their continued commitment to executing people based on their systems, the southern newspapers collectively shrug.

The contrast between the results here and the responses of some northern newspapers is notable. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* reacted to the continuing nightmare of exonerations from Illinois' death row by covering not only individual cases, but also questioning the functioning of the larger process. The paper's response was in part responsible for a reform effort to alter the process of death penalty sentencing in the state.

### ***A newspaper responds***

The ombudsman of the *Palm Beach Post*, C. B. Hanif, was challenged by a reader to explain why his paper's coverage of the exoneration of Juan Melendez was so limited (Hanif, 2002). In response to the release of Melendez, who served 17 years and became the 24<sup>th</sup> person released from Florida's death row, the *Post* ran a four paragraph story on page 7.

To address the complaint, Hanif decided to find out more about Melendez. Piecing information together from other newspapers, Hanif learned the basics of Melendez's case, including the fact that the state had withheld evidence at his trial, and that another man had confessed to the murder Melendez was convicted of. In a halfhearted nod toward the reader's concern, Hanif admitted "Though *Post* editors made sure readers got the Melendez story, some might say it was underplayed."

The bottom line for Hanif, however, was that there were bigger stories to cover that day. Hanif's list of stories more important than the state of Florida's efforts to execute an innocent man included the University of Miami's Rose Bowl victory and a snowstorm in the northeast which delayed hundreds of northbound travelers at Palm Beach International Airport.

### ***Implications***

What effect does this coverage have? Justice Thurgood Marshall (in *Furman v. Georgia*, 1972) argued public opinion polls on the death penalty were misleading because the average American was ignorant of the basic details of the death penalty debate. Scholars responding to Marshall's argument were indeed able to document the severe lack of information under-girding death penalty opinion (Ellsworth & Ross, 1976, 1983; Haas & Inciardi, 1988; Sarat & Vidmar, 1976; Thomas & Foster, 1976).

Toward that end, recent research has found that responses to the death penalty vary dramatically not just with information about exonerations, but with any additional information provided to the respondent or any additional consideration of the issue by the respondent (Murray, 2003; Niven, 2002).

Thus, the implications for covering the innocent on death row in the fashion found here are significant. By providing less information about the exonerated than the executed, by providing voice to defenders of the system, and by avoiding attention to the lives affected by



exonerations, southern newspapers are likely reducing both the quantity and quality of information people have about the death penalty, and in the process, helping to bolster support for death sentences in the south.

### ENDNOTES

David Niven is an associate professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University. His most book is *The Politics of Injustice: The Kennedys, The Freedom Rides, and the Electoral Consequences of a Moral Compromise* (University of Tennessee Press, 2003). David Niven's research on the death penalty has appeared in *Social Science Quarterly*.

1. Those who have been exonerated are innocent as a legal matter, as their convictions have been overturned. While there is no procedure available to them by which they can prove factual innocence of the crime they were charged with, there is evidence, including DNA results in some cases, which suggests each of the 16 exonerated individuals studied here was factually innocent.
2. Sources for the list of those exonerated from death row include The Death Penalty Information Center, <http://www/deathpenaltyinfo.org>; and Radelet (2001). Including exonerations from earlier dates would result in a very limited set of available newspapers. Therefore, this study focused on exonerations from 1990-2003.
3. Newspapers included in the study: (a) Florida: Associated Press, Bradenton Herald, Florida Times-Union, Florida Today, Fort Pierce News, Fort Pierce Tribune, Jupiter Courier, The Ledger (Lakeland), Miami Herald, The News-Press (Fort Myers), Orlando Sentinel, Palm Beach Post, Pensacola News Journal, Press Journal, Sebastian Sun, St. Petersburg Times, Stuart News, Sun-Sentinel, Tallahassee Democrat, Tampa Tribune, (b) Georgia: Associated Press, Atlanta Journal and Constitution, Augusta Chronicle, Columbus Ledger-Enquirer, Macon Telegraph, Gainesville Times, and (c) Texas: Associated Press, Austin American-Statesman, Beaumont Enterprise, Corpus Christi Caller-Times, El Paso Times, Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Houston Chronicle, San Antonio Express-News.
4. Criticisms of the legal system by the former inmate and the inmate's advocates were ubiquitous, but are also presumably less credible to readers than assessments by independent voices.
5. Again, given their vested interest in the case, comments from the prosecutor are not recorded.
6. Page numbers of articles published outside of the front page section were multiplied by the section number. For example, articles appearing on the second page of the second section were recorded as appearing on page four. This technique has been used in journalism studies to better reflect the relative prominence of inside materials (Niven, 2003).

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