Chapter 40

Flipping the Script: Newspaper Reporting of the Trayvon Martin Shooting

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to examine newspaper coverage of the George Zimmerman-Trayvon Martin shooting and the frames of race and crime used in the context of newsworthiness. The researchers analyzed 1,177 articles in one local, six statewide, and three national newspapers. The local paper focused on the shooting and the ensuing police investigation instead of social and political issues, and local-interest stories instead of national events. There was virtually no mention of race. Coverage in the six Florida papers was mixed between details of the case and social issues such as Florida’s Stand Your Ground law. There were few uses of racial descriptors. The three national papers focused on social and political issues such as Stand Your Ground, guns, and race, and referenced the shooting for context when discussing similar local incidents. Racial identifiers were used frequently, and Martin’s clothing was referenced as a covert racial identifier or as shorthand for the shooting and its aftermath. The researchers then discuss the ethical implications of such coverage.

INTRODUCTION

George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin Feb. 26, 2012. Martin had purchased Skittles and an iced tea at a local 7-Eleven and was walking back to his father’s fiancé’s house in the gated community The Retreat at Twin Lakes in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman, a local neighborhood watch volunteer, saw Martin, called police to report a suspicious person, and then confronted him. Before police arrived, Zimmerman had shot Martin, telling police that he acted in self-defense because Martin attacked him.

Violent crime such as this incident happens every day, but most crime does not make national headlines or remain part of the news agenda for months. The purpose of the current chapter is to examine
newspaper coverage of the Zimmerman-Martin shooting and the frames of race and crime used in the context of newsworthiness, e.g., degree of relevance to newspaper audiences. Given the size of Sanford, Florida, and the age of Martin, it is obvious that this story is worth reporting. However, crime reporting typically follows a stereotypical script where the perpetrator is black, and the victim is white (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000); in the case of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman—that script does not fit.

Characteristics of the media message are important to the public’s understanding of crime (McCombs, 2013). Walter Lippmann wrote that news media are powerful forces in shaping the “pictures in our heads” because “the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (1922, pg. 18). While Lippmann largely was writing about the political pictures in our heads, the news media also explore the day-to-day happenings in citizens’ lives—including the Zimmerman-Martin shooting. The news values that are considered important when reporting crime and violence, as well as the frames used to tell the story, must be understood.

BACKGROUND

The Newsworthiness of Crime

Surveillance, which includes crime reporting, is just one of the five major functions of news, along with correlation, transmission, entertainment, and economic service (Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1995). Newspapers generally are regional, reaching audiences in defined markets and producing news that is relevant to those readers. There are reasons why one story is selected for coverage versus another; journalists construct stories to be newsworthy (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

The selectivity of crime stories in the news may relate to journalistic news values. News values “play an important role in helping to structure public opinion” (Price & Tewksbury, 1997, pg. 177). News values are the characteristics of an event that, in part, determine its salience as a potential news story (Entman, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). These values may vary across culture or newsroom environment (Naylor, 2001). Galtung and Ruge (1965) first defined the concept when they identified 12 news values: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, compositional balance, elite nations, elite people, personalization, and negativty. They argued that these values are additive, that a story including more of these components would be considered more newsworthy.

News values are culturally specific (Naylor, 2001). As society (and media) change, the criterion that influences the selection and production of news also changes. Some crimes impact wider society, resulting in changing behaviors or beliefs (Innes, 2004). For example, school shootings may influence the public’s attitudes toward gun control. Chermak (1995) identified criteria that news organizations use to assess the newsworthiness of crime, including the violent nature of the crime, demographic factors (e.g., age, race, gender) of both the victim and perpetrator, characteristics of the news outlet, the novelty of the event, and localization. Other scholars have found similar determinants of news organizations’ assessment of the newsworthiness of crime (Jewkes, 2004; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). The extent to which a story contains these elements influences the likelihood that it will be reported.

Many criticize news outlets for the abundance of crime reporting, reinforcing the old adage: “When it bleeds, it leads.” However, the public desires news reporting of crime and violence, often forming their opinions about such from the news (Pew Research Center, 2005). The reporting of crime is essentially selective (Ditton & Duffy, 1983); journalists could not possibly report on every crime in every city in