



ASSESSMENT OF NEWS MEDIA CRIME COVERAGE (2007)

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December 4, 2007

Any assessment of crime coverage by the news media must consider both quantity and quality. Were important subjects covered adequately, and how good was that coverage?

As is true in most years, here certainly were a large number of stories about crime in print, broadcast, and online media. The Project for Excellence in Journalism reports that crime accounted for about 8 percent of the news hole in surveyed newspapers during the year. [Other major topics included politics, Iraq, the economy, health, homeland security, and immigration. The last two subjects often are covered by reporters assigned to crime and justice.] The PEJ survey did not measure local television news, where by conservative estimates crime takes up 25 percent of air time.

This summary of crime coverage in the U.S. is based on an unscientific survey of coverage. Co-author Ted Gest oversaw editing of about 3,000 crime-related stories in the daily Crime and Justice News sponsored by John Jay College of Criminal Justice (<http://cjj.mn-8.net>). Finding those stories involved reading many thousands of other stories that were not included in the daily summary. In addition, Criminal Justice Journalists conducted a conference call on Nov. 28, 2007, with several prominent crime-coverage watchers from the media and academia. An edited summary of that call is being posted on the Web site of the Center on Media, Crime and Justice (<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/academics/605.php>).

News stories on crime can generally be divided into two categories: those on individual cases and those dealing with the criminal justice system generally. Of course there are many hybrid stories that examine systemic issues in the context of one case.

Historically, above-average coverage of criminal justice has been done in the United States by major daily newspapers and national television networks. In 2007 there seemed to be less consistent coverage than has been the case in some past years. One reason is that the run-up to the 2008 presidential election campaign consumed a large

volume of the news hole in all media. Terrorism and homeland security was a fairly major issue but street crime was not, with some exceptions.

Individual crimes attracted considerable coverage, led by the mass shooting at Virginia Tech University in April. The Project for Excellence in Journalism said the case was the most heavily covered single story of the year; it made up 51% of total news coverage the week of April 15-20. According to PEJ, the arrest of U.S. Senator Larry Craig for disorderly conduct in an airport rest room was the second most covered crime story of the year (18% for August 26-31), the Scooter Libby conviction (13% for March 4-9) and the O.J. Simpson Las Vegas arrest (13% for September 16-21) were tied at number three. Other cases that commanded attention included the home invasion and killing of three members of a physician's family in Cheshire, Ct., the murders of three college students in a Newark schoolyard, demonstrations over a racially-tinged incident in Jena, La., and the killing of Washington Redskins player Sean Taylor.

MAJOR STORIES

Conference call participants commented on several of these cases. Please see the transcript for details. Here are some thoughts from Ted Gest:

- **On Virginia Tech**, news media generally did a good job of timely and accurate reports, which was helped by information given out by the university. The major controversy involved NBC's broadcasting portions of the videotape made by shooter Seung-Hui Cho. While many critics said the broadcast glorified the shooter, overall the media were justified in giving the public some insight into his thinking, rather than suppressing the tape. (Similar concerns were raised when many newspapers chose to feature front page still photos from the video, which featured Cho brandishing his weapons.) Many media followed up the case during the spring and summer with general stories on campus security nationwide. The Washington Post and some other media devoted considerable effort to reporting on flaws in the system of checking prospective gun purchasers with a history of mental illness—a prime issue in the case.
- **The Jena, La.**, case resulted in many stories focusing on a demonstration against the supposedly racially biased handling of the case. Craig Franklin of local Jena Times wrote in the Christian Science Monitor that much of the coverage, which he said described “white students hanging nooses barely punished, a schoolyard fight, excessive punishment for the six black attackers, racist local officials...” was inaccurate. Franklin said, “I have never before witnessed such a disgrace in professional journalism.”
- **Coverage of the Taylor case** was notable for uncritically featuring questionable statements by public officials. In this case, a Miami police official initially portrayed the home-invasion case as a random attack, when it was fairly clear—and

soon became obvious--that the attackers had some connection with Taylor. Of course, reporters should talk to police officials about crimes, but they need not report statements that may not seem credible.

FBI & OTHER CRIME REPORTS

The semi annual crime compilations of reported crime totals from the FBI received considerable coverage. As is common, many stories did not note that the FBI's Uniform Crime Report includes only reported crimes and that some jurisdictions did not file data. The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics' (BJS) annual National Crime Victimization Survey for 2006, which includes estimates of unreported crimes, got scant coverage, primarily because it did not show any major change in the crime rate and because a methodology change prevented comparisons of the totals to those of the previous year.

The Washington-based organization Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) got much coverage for periodic reports of crime totals based on the group's own survey of major U.S. cities. This coverage was largely driven by selective leaks by PERF to outlets such as USA Today and the Washington Post. PERF also provided commentary on why crime may have risen or decreased in various cities, making its reports somewhat easier for media to digest than were raw data from the FBI or BJS crime victimization counts.

Controversy in the media and elsewhere increased over the annual publication purporting to list the safest and most dangerous U.S. cities. The list, published by the Kansas-based Morgan Quitno, has been issued for 14 years after the UCR is released, but it provoked wide attention after it called Detroit and St. Louis the most dangerous cities just after those teams had competed in the 2006 World Series. The purchased of Morgan Quitno in early 2007 by Congressional Quarterly Press coincided with an effort by St. Louis officials to get the U.S. Conference of Mayors and FBI to join in their criticism of the rankings on various grounds. Among them were that the publisher combined dissimilar crimes and that it took no account of the differing demographic configuration of cities and metropolitan areas that is not reflected in raw population numbers.

The protests effort was successful in getting major media such as the Associated Press and St. Louis Post-Dispatch to reflect criticisms when reporting on the Morgan Quitno-Congressional Quarterly Press publication in 2007. Criminal Justice Journalists made its members aware of other rankings compiled by criminologists, including one that ranks crime rates by metropolitan areas rather than by cities and another that takes other demographic factors into account when comparing city homicide totals.

Some media did a better job of using crime mapping and geographic information systems (GIS) to analyze crime and law enforcement. KPRC-TV in Houston, for example, recorded positions of local police cars over several days, tracking where the cars were and when they were available. The station reported that the most cars were available for calls when the least time occurs, and vice versa. The site journalistopia.com provides other

examples of crime mapping. A site called EveryBlock will aggregate an unprecedented depth of local news and information in select cities. The Web site chicagocrime.org has been providing a detailed report of local crime independent of any major news organization. The Knight Foundation funded its founder Adrian Holovaty, to create EveryBlock sites that perform similar analysis in other cities.

OTHER JUSTICE ISSUES

Among other crime and justice issues that received notable coverage in 2007:

- Police use of force was examined carefully in series in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.
- Capital punishment was the focus of an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* series three years in the making that looked at how the Georgia courts reviewed capital cases. The series, which highlighted the role of poor defense representation, was discussed at a Criminal Justice Journalists panel at the American Society of Criminology convention in Atlanta. The pending Supreme Court challenge of lethal injection methods was covered frequently, especially by the New York Times.
- *The Denver Post* investigated shoddy handling of DNA evidence in Colorado in a series that won an award at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in December.

DUKE UNIVERSITY “RAPE” CASE

The widely publicized “Duke rape case” that began in March 2006 warranted much coverage in 2007 because of the dismissal of charges against students for sexual assault and the subsequent disbarment and resignation of prosecutor Michael Nifong for misconduct. The New York Times was a target of criticism for a long page 1 article on August 25, 2006 that was supportive of Nifong. The then-Times public editor, Byron Calame, wrote on April 22, 2007 that the August 25 article’s “overstated summary” that presented the evidence supporting Nifong’s decision to pursue the case was a “major flaw in the article.” The media also came in for much criticism from Stuart Taylor and KC Johnson, who wrote a book on the case and who said the media pursued a “mythical story line” of “sensationalism.”

OVERCOVERED, UNDERCOVERED

The CJJ-sponsored conference call of experts discussed crime and justice subjects they judged as overcovered and undercovered.

Among overcovered topics were tales of missing white women, a phenomenon that had been more pronounced in earlier years. Many media covered the supposed increase of domestic violence around holiday periods. The Wisconsin State Journal, one of the few media outlets to look at actual data, said the story was a myth, at least in its

circulation area. Some commentators believe that media coverage of sex offenders is excessive; others said the coverage was justified if it involved public policies. Other topics judged by Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute as overcovered included drug and prostitution roundups, and senior citizen crime victims.

Undercovered topics cited by CJJ experts included ID theft, white collar crime, juvenile crime and punishment, expanding prison populations, and non-white crime victims. There were notable exceptions: The Seattle Post-Intelligencer devoted several stories, for example, to the decline in the FBI's pursuit of white collar crime as resources devoted to terrorism detection and prevention increased. The Houston Chronicle and Austin American-Statesman, among other media, provided thorough coverage of a scandal of sexual abuse in Texas facilities for juvenile delinquents. The Sacramento Bee pursued court challenges of California's huge prison population and poor health care provided to inmates. The Associated Press did a national review of the result of trying juveniles as adults, raising questions about the practice. Still, these subjects and many others remain undercovered by the news media as a whole.

LACK OF CONTEXT

Media critics told CJJ that many stories lacked the proper context. For example, criminologist James Alan Fox of Northeastern University noted that despite the huge volume of Virginia Tech coverage, there is an average of only 10 homicides annually on college campuses, while there are more than 1,000 suicides and even more drug- and alcohol-related deaths, which get relatively little coverage.

OVERRELIANCE ON LAW ENFORCEMENT SOURCES

A historic media tendency cited by Lori Dorfman of the Berkeley Media Studies Group is excessive reliance on law enforcement sources for crime and justice stories. Dorfman contends that coverage would benefit by more reporting with health department data, educators, and other community leaders. Her group's suggestions can be seen in more detail at <http://www.bmsg.org/prof-violence-reporting.php>.