

CONFERENCE CALL ASSESSING CRIME COVERAGE IN 2007

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THE CENTER ON MEDIA, CRIME AND
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GEST: The general question is how well the news media did in covering the major crime stories and issues this year. Among general topics, we have had a rise in crime in many cities; capital punishment, drugs, guns & gun control; gangs and the crime aspect of immigration. We also have specific cases such as the Virginia Tech massacre, the end of the Duke rape case, the Jena Six case in Louisiana, the Connecticut “home invasion” murders, and just this week, the killing of a Washington Redskins player. And we have “celebrity” cases involving O. J. Simpson, Paris Hilton, and others.

ROSENSTIEL: From the news coverage index that we produced, we analyzed 48 different news outlets everyday. We issue a report every Tuesday, starting in January 2007. The biggest story of

the year was the Virginia Tech shooting. And the week that it happened, it got more coverage in the 48 news outlets that we've analyzed than any other story all year. The week that General Petraeus testified before Congress was the second biggest event of the year and it didn't come close to Virginia Tech. Overall crime hovers between sort of the Number 4 topic and the Number 6 topic overall. It was 8% of all the news that we measure. In the first quarter, 10% of the news hole. The second was the Virginia Tech quarter, and it dropped to 7% with the Number 6 story.

FOX: Previous studies have shown that there's very little connection between the rate of crime and the amount of crime coverage. In the 1990s, crime was the Number 1 topic on network news and that was a decade when crime was declining. You know the expression that no news is good news, it's really that good news is no news, and the bad news is big news, and of course crime is constantly something that when it happens and when it happens big, and when it's celebrity related, of course, it does make big news.

I think Virginia Tech was probably one of the all-time lows in terms of how media covered a crime story. And it started from the very moment that the gunshots were ringing out.

You had the cable news channels carrying the murder tally on the screen and almost in a giddy fashion, they would say, "Oh it's now the largest school shooting of all time." And then the numbers rose, "Oh no, it's now - oh it's the largest mass shooting of any time in history." And it was so much focused on the biggest and the baddest and the most, and of course, the next day the number 32 being the victim count was flashed over papers everywhere. Even before NBC made the mistake of releasing some of the images that they had received, and which allowed newspapers then to put on the covers the pictures of their papers, Mr. Cho pointing a gun at the readers.

The problem of course was how much had played into the mindset of people who see Mr. Cho as a hero that, you know, not only did he get even with the people he blamed but he was famous for it.

Plus the excessive focus on the record, the biggest. And this is done, by the way, every time there's a mass shooting. There's a list of sort of the biggest and the baddest and the worst. It challenges others to break the record, after all, what are records for? Records are there to be broken.

And we know that Cho wanted to outdo Klebold and Harris from Columbine, and now who's going to want to outdo Cho?

Oh, in addition to that, you had the cellphone recording of the gunshots, and we had to hear that over and over and over again as if people didn't know what gunshots sound like.

So I think the coverage was excessive, too much directed towards the horror, too much directed towards Cho. Some of it was positive - there were some good coverage of the memorial and the impact on the victims. But that was too few and far between - so much it was focused on promoting what Mr. Cho and what he did.

TOMPKINS: There are a couple of pieces of that that I would agree with. One of them has to do with the use of file tape over and over again. But I do think that we have responsibilities as journalists to release those photos and the public has a need to see what we can see from those things. I don't think we hold on to that stuff. How you use it, how often you use it, where you use it--all of those things are different but, it was a big deal and I think we ought to try to understand as much as we could understand the mind of a mass killer.

So, to that extent I think we have an obligation to report...

FOX: The story is important, why he did is important. I don't disagree with you about releasing it. But it's featuring and promoting him standing there with

his two guns on the covers of magazines and newspapers or even New York Times that just seemed to be inappropriate.

TOMPKINS: Well, you know, criminals over time occasionally are portrayed as heroic. Bonnie and Clyde were. We love names like Baby Face Nelson and Joey The Bull. They make their way into the public mindset, and you know, the fact that you can name him is fascinating to me. Cho took the photograph, and the photograph was an assaulting photograph and it's meant to be. And the way that it was played I thought the biggest problem that I find with it are two things. One is I believe NBC should have released all of these as a pool arrangement to everyone. I also think that it was sad that NBC decided to put their logo on it when they did release it so that everybody who use it - it's as if NBC attempted to own the images that were sent to them. And I think that was one of the big mistakes.

So competitive zeal, myopic zeal I think is what the CBS investigation said. They're on the (Watergate) days and I think that it applies here too. I think it's a myopic zeal that drove the coverage in some ways.

DORFMAN: What we did after Columbine was study that coverage compared to how crime was covered the whole year in California, how crime was covered all year. One problem is that coverage tends to focus on what's in the foreground and leave out what's in the background. And from my perspective the problem with how audiences interpret crime in America has to do more with what's left out in the background than what the problems are in the coverage of incidents like this.

I think everything that's been said so far is valid and interesting, and important, and these things should be examined and of course they are going to be examined when there are big shootings like this.

But the reason the public or part of the reason the public overestimate homicides, for example, is the fact that other crimes doesn't get covered in any sort of systematic way. And like other things in the

newspaper get covered systematically like business, like entertainment, like politics, the day-to-day aspects of those get covered so that when there is an extreme event it can be measured against some baselines and we have no baselines here except a baseline of, you know, episodic type stories that tend to scare people and not inform them. So that's why it's important to investigate and examine and critically look at the coverage in these kinds of events.

GEST: Did the coverage of Virginia Tech do any good as far as focusing public attention on the problem about mental illness and dangerousness? Just today, the Washington Post did a front-page story relating to how Virginia is handling this. I think we would all agree that's an issue that probably hasn't gotten as much attention as it should. But does anyone feel that that part of the coverage was constructive?

FOX: Sure, there was some focus on issues of mental illness, but the belief being that we could spot these guys because they all look like Mr. Cho after the fact. Of course, it's very difficult to spot mass shooters in advance. But when you look at the - again the statistics on how often these things occur, I mean, there are - an average of 10 homicides a year on college campuses in United States, which means that when you consider the fact that we have about 15 million college students, and the chances of finding a potential killer are one in a million or one in two million. Whereas, there are about thousand suicides and there are even more cases of drug and alcohol related deaths of college students every year. So we're concerned about students in trouble - psychologically in trouble and we should be. Murder is probably the least of our problems. Suicide and binge drinking and also some other issues are much more critical yet we don't want to focus on those. We want to focus on the mass shooting spree on campus. There were very, very few cases like Virginia Tech. Parents are worried about the safety of their children that go off to college.

Colleges are spending money they don't have to implement security strategies that will do no good except maybe scare people a little bit.

ROSENSTIEL: The numbers we have suggest that actually the media moved off Virginia Tech and moved away from these story lines about should schools have systems for alerting students when there's a crisis or is the mental health system doing a good job of tracking troubled students who might be a danger to others. Those story lines got evaporated surprisingly quickly as big a story this was, there wasn't much followup and two weeks later it was pretty much over with. so there was less of a kind of tracking of those things than there might be typically be and to the extent that there were bigger issues here even if these issues are to some extent the wrongs issues, those bigger issues weren't followed up a heck of a lot after Virginia Tech.

WENGER: In the Duke rape case, critics have pointed out that most journalists didn't do enough to question the prosecutor's motives when we started making statements about the suspects that most other prosecutors would have considered unethical. In terms of criminal coverage and crime coverage in general, do you think that journalists covering crime are just too quick to accept what law enforcement are saying and not asking enough questions?

FOX: Sometime yes. But sometimes I think what they ask publicly may not be what they ask privately in the newsroom because of sensibilities. I mean I'm taking for example - it's an older case but, you know, we had the Charles Stuart case here in Massachusetts. There are lot of newspaper people locally who'd thought that from the very start that he should be a suspect. But they wouldn't print it, they wouldn't ask it, they wouldn't - they would only whisper it to their colleagues because they didn't want to be seen as cynically accusing the man who is in a hospital that grieving the loss of his wife and child. That's also true in

a rape case, when there are some questions that people may want to ask, but boy they are concerned about asking them.

DORFMAN: There is a symbiotic relationship almost between the reporters and the police department in part because cub reporters get their start often on the police beat. There's of course an immediacy if there's a crime or a possible criminal loose that the police are in charge, so they are finding that person, so they ought to be consulted immediately and that reporting has to be done very quickly. From our perspective, from a public health perspective, what's invisible is that crime is seen almost exclusively through a criminal justice and law enforcement frame. That could be changed then, could benefit the way the reporters go about investigating any sort of crime.

When we did workshops inside newsrooms, for example at the Los Angeles Times with very seasoned reporters, some of them had no idea that the health department had homicide data, had direct contact in these kinds of situation and had some different things to say about what was going on. You can imagine how reporting crime might be different if they consulted local educators, they consulted other people who have connections in the community. The really interesting question is not whether reporters are too quick but who else they should be talking to.

We try to think about what sorts of questions should reporters be asking with the idea of reporting on the context around an event, the consequences not only to the victim and the family and the neighborhood--kind of moving out in concentric circles--but also the perpetrators, the perpetrator's family, the perpetrator's neighborhood. They should be including the risk factors for violence, asking about them and alcohol in particular and then, including some sort of resources for immediate protection if that's necessary, but also for how people can get engaged in whatever prevention is available. I

understand that may be distant from the immediate crime, but nonetheless the context of consequences is moving out in circles like that would open whole new avenues for storytelling that aren't being explored right now.

FOX: Another problem, when you're talking about less experienced reporters, is dealing with crime statistics. Every time the crime reports are released whether there - it's the national data from the FBI or state agencies giving the state data or a city, the tendency or the approach is it's - what is that this year versus what is it last year.

People focus on one-year changes. Now if the change is good, if the crime level is going down, of course, there's not a lot of coverage. If crime goes up quite a bit there is.

The problem is that this is extremely myopic point of view, sometimes when crime levels go down in the cities because the previous year was particularly bad not that this year is that good. And when crime rates go up sometimes it's not because this year is so bad, is that last year was particular good.

The Police Executive Research Forum published a report on crime in 56 cities. Saying that a city like Seattle had the largest increase in homicide one year to the next was misleading because it it was only actually because of one mass murder where five were killed and a double murder that occurred the same year. If you take those cases out, there was really no change.

The media tend to focus on the anomalies rather than looking at what is the trend compared to where we were three years ago, five years ago, ten years ago. When it's just this year versus last, some cities happen to be unlucky that the crime rates, particularly homicide, shoot up in one year. Because last year they just did so well, they're blamed for one year and asked what they are doing wrong.

Boston was seen as a model for fighting juvenile crime and almost in one year, our murders went from 34 to 68. USA Today said that we have the largest increase in murder in the whole United States. Our rate wasn't bad. It's just that we were a victim of our own success that - is that the 34 was so unusually low. So this up and down of looking a crime from one year to next really has got to change.

GEST: The level of crime in this country is lower now that it was in the early and mid-1990s. Does that mean that we shouldn't be focusing much on the fact, for example, that the national figures went up slightly this year, as compiled by the FBI? Is that a big story? Is that no story at all?

DORFMAN: It's important to report that when it comes out. But when that comes out against no detectable background of regular reporting on what crime is happening, how people are dying, what's being done about it, then it's hard to think about how to make changes in that particular report

ROSENSTIEL: There should be different components to the picture of crime, different elements, different levels of elevation. The press should be getting these different elements in some rough approximation of their relevance. Specific incidents like Natalee Holloway or O.J. Simpson are going to get covered, but I hope that these events are put into context. If it's a story about a missing girl and she's an attractive blonde, that's not typical if most people who are missing are poor and male and people of color.

You also have what's going on with crime in general. Is it going up? Is it going down? What kinds of crime? You also have new trends in crime, crime detection, changes in the kinds of drugs or the kind of way that people are being attacked in cities.

You also have what's going on in the criminal justice system. Is it working, incarceration and courts and the jury system.

So it seems to me one of the questions is, what's the mix of stories, another is, are the stories that are being done being put into context. We need some anatomizing of what it is that needs to get covered have to happen before we can really say okay, is this good coverage or bad. We need a sort of template. But a big story is a big story and it's going to get a lot of coverage and at that point when Virginia Tech is happening, you hope that the coverage of it is contextualized. Because of the nature of 24-hour news and morning network TV and the fact that TV has decided that it is an emotional medium to the exclusion of almost any other quality, that stories that 15 years ago would not have been as big a deal are magnified because you can get people to talk emotionally on screen about a murder in Modesto, California, or a missing woman in Los Angeles, or Natalee Holloway because you have an architecture of programs that essentially are built around that, those kind of things.

FOX: The new technology helps the satellite tracks get there immediately. The networks certainly wouldn't have covered some of these stories because they would have broken away from the soap operas, but cable news channels were sort of desperate for anything that to stake their claim on. Once they started covering things 24 hours a day, the traditional networks had to go along with that.

As for the missing kids, a few summers ago there were three cases of white girls all abducted around the same time—Runnion, van Dam, and Smart, which led to some the phrase on the media, “The summer of abduction.”

Of course that kind of stuff has happened before. The numbers actually have been going down, but when you get a cluster of a few cases that seems to attract the attention of some journalists, who find all of the cases that might have similar characteristics that declare an epidemic

and then, of course, call a couple of criminologists who might agree that it's an epidemic.

But so many of these new crime wrinkles are not wrinkles at all, just someone begins to pay attention to them, largely because the characteristics of the victims or the perpetrators whether it'd be their gender or their age or they're celebrity that attracts attention and then we start scaring the public into thinking this is the new parents' worst nightmare and we got to do something about it like pass all sorts of legislation.

WENGER: The Jena Six case would not have reached the level that it did this year if hadn't been for the Web. What is the role in crime coverage of blogosphere, citizen journalism, that type of thing and how might journalists respond?

ROSENSTIEL: The Jena Six case cooked on the Web and in minority press for 10 months. Despite the fact that it happened in a market where a chain of newspapers is covering it, it was certainly available to the AP and others, but until there was a big demonstration there, nothing happened. The march also occurred very close to the 50th anniversary of the Little Rock school crisis. I think the moniker Jena Six obviously was a drawback to the Little Rock moniker. So those words, you know, you can describe a complex story in three, you know, three words, the Jena Six and that makes it appealing to journalist to cover because it stands for something. Unfortunately it stood for all the wrong things and hardly anything that you knew about the Jena Six case was really true.

So, in that way the blogosphere or the Internet really didn't help us to eliminate very much. It only helped to draw attention to a story that otherwise would have been buried.

GEST: I haven't seen very many journalists really do good stories on the level of racial bias in the justice system.

ROSENSTIEL: There had been a lot of reports about coverage of bias in the jury system, for example in the Dallas Morning News.

GEST: I meant that the Jena Six case did not itself unleash a lot of good reporting elsewhere on that topic.

ROSENSTIEL: Part of it is because the case is so bad. It's only an example of people's mistrust of the system not of the system failing.

TOMPKINS: I have some examples of stories overcovered and undercovered: Done well:

I think there's a lot of interesting crime mapping going on. Right now, I just did a piece on KPRC-TV in Houston, which actually used GPS to analyze the positioning of Houston police cars for 24-hour periods over a period of several days and tracked where the cars or how many cars are actually available, where they are and when they're available. What the station learned is that the most cars are available when the least crime occurs and the least cars are available at 2:00 in the morning when the most violent crime occurred. It was a fascinating project.

There have been some really good reporting on juries. The secret juries project from the Seattle Times, the Dallas Morning News stories we mentioned, and the Connecticut Post's interesting if not controversial coverage in which they actually named the people who were being seated in a case.

There's been a lot more attention in the last 12 months on the coverage of jury systems, also secret negotiated settlements in court cases, trying to pry open sealed court cases.

In terms of undercovered, I think ID theft and phishing are both big ones, white collar crime obviously, juvenile crime and punishment is just a gigantic undercovered story for a lot of reasons, expanding prison population, private vendors are all way undercovered stories. And I would put on the overcovered drug and prostitution roundups of all sorts, nonviolent crime is consistently undercovered, nonwhite victims of crime are consistently undercovered.

The missing white women would be overcovered, senior citizen victims are way overcovered and the granddaddy of them all, sexual predators are way, way, way overcovered including the questions of where they should live whether or not they are, whether they supposed to live whether they're checking in and datelines to catch a predator, scaring the bejesus out of people.

ROSENSTIEL: On the Web, I would echo what Al said that I think there's no question that the Web represents the opportunity for stories that sort of came and went to have a second life if people want to keep talking about them and the media doesn't, or a story that is resonating with the public and isn't resonating with the press, it can sort of simmer there, the notion that citizen sentinels are going to discover something that the press has completely neglected. I don't think there's evidence yet if it's ever going to happen that that's happening yet.

The suggestions that the press doesn't do enough of whatever can come off like hand ringing. The Center on Media, Crime and Justice might offer templates or roadmaps or examples of how the press can cover the issue or the issues of crime differently or better--the right way to sort of handling incident to put it in the context things to look for questions to ask, context to try and provide. Give people constructive criticism.

FOX: A Massachusetts judge is being sharply criticized for releasing a sex offender on his own recognizance who ended up in Washington State and killed a young couple. The problem, as I said earlier, is that the good news is no news and bad news is big news. Whenever the criminal justice system fails—a mistaken decision, whether it's someone who is released who shouldn't be, someone gets paroled who shouldn't have been, there's tremendous attention on the mistakes and the American public gets a view the criminal justice system is bankrupted.

Especially on talk shows, the focus is never on the judge does the right thing, a prisoner who still in prison. People complain about murderers getting out of prison;, when do we have a story about someone who still is in prison? We have life without parole in 48 states. We don't hear stories about people still remaining in prison for the rest of their lives because it's not a big story.

So the perception is that the criminal justice system doesn't work.

Consider the Willie Horton furlough issue that helped decide the 1988 presidential election. In Massachusetts, we had a 99.9% success rate. The one failure is the one that gets publicity. In Connecticut now, the decision making of the parole board works well. In one case [the murders of three Cheshire residents in their homes], two guys, they don't have any history of violence, they get paroled. Something bad happens and people want to then get rid of parole. It's this constant focus on without the context. When something goes wrong, let's examine how often does it go right. This idea that the criminal justice system just doesn't work—that all parolees will commit more crimes—is wrong. In fact they don't and the system does work most of the time. The only way to prevent mistakes is to never let anybody out.

DORFMAN: Jamie Fox mentioned that when a crime happens, if something is unusual, it needs to be put in context and we need to say this is unusual.

The thing that needs further examination is the reason that's not efficient is because when you look at the audience research on how people interpret news stories, the mention of the event being unusual doesn't get taken into consideration. If those are the only stories that people see, even though it says, this is unusual, this is highly unlikely, that's not a strong enough effect if those are only kinds of stories generally speaking that appear.

So the problem of what it means to contextualize something is what has to be examined. That gets to the last thing that Tom Rosenstiel

said: that the thing to do is not hand wringing, but offering templates, road maps, and examples.

That is right on the money. The example Al mentioned about crime mapping is a perfect example because it's not about a specific incident of crime. It's about the news media illuminating our citizens. Mapping is a wonderful tool that people are just starting to make better use of. Questions can be asked that operationalize, in the context of daily journalism, what the real issue is. We can't be satisfied with the saying that something unusual.

GEST: Is there much hope of improvement with the number of journalists covering these issues declining because of economic conditions in the industry:

FOX: Remember Jerry Springer? At one time, he had a very decent show. He was the mayor of Cincinnati and he had very good talk show. He had no ratings because people didn't want to listen to that stuff. You find lots of newspapers basically changing their approach and changing the kinds of materials that they cover because they have to hold on to readers. If they don't, if they maintain a standard of what they call decency and don't lower their standards for the sake of becoming almost like tabloids, maybe they won't get readers.

TOMPKINS: I don't believe for a minute that the way to attract readers is to lower your standards. Explain to me how "60 Minutes" has been successful one date line and others have not, you know, the higher standard newspapers are the ones that have continued to do relatively well, while others who don't put as much effort or expense into coverage do not. And there's nothing really terribly different about the news world compare to automotive or restaurants or others, people have an expectation and when you don't reach that expectation, you simply don't thrive.

The best newspapers, the best television stations, best Web site, however, you want to measure them by circulation, by income, by

long-term success, I believe are the ones that also continue to have the unwavering standards of truth and accuracy and thoroughness. I'm in St. Petersburg, Fl., and have been around local news for 30 years. Some broadcast stations continue to do excellent work and some don't. Some do a great job, some do a lousy job, but it's terribly unfair to say, look at local news and then proceed to make some sort of arrangement. I mean it's exactly the kind of statement you criticized journalists for making about crime coverage. It's all lumped into some sort of feeling as opposed to some sort of fact.

GEST: Are there any other suggestions about improvement of crime coverage?

TOMPKINS: It would do a lot of good for us to find examples of media coverage that are excellent and to try to find out how did they do it, what did they overcome, what did they learn along the way and how can others replicate the process. For my money that's where I want to put my time and effort because crime coverage has been badly covered for 150, 250 years. And it hasn't changed a lot. The only thing that changed is that we now have photographs and moving video to go with it. Crime coverage a hundred years ago was probably worse than it was today. Crime coverage in the old west was even worst. So, you know, there's not a hell of a lot new about that.

FOX: Well let me say something that's positive. I know you mentioned crime mapping, which - and I agree with you, but just the whole, there are many news outlets that had become quite sophisticated in terms of handling crime data. A number of newspapers have quantitatively-trained people on board who do excellent work at analyzing patterns not just map - in terms of maps, but a crime generally and in fact they just mentioned Houston. I've worked a couple of times with a television station in Houston on homicide, going through case by case and identifying deaths that actually were homicides and that were sort of covered up.

Newspapers in Philadelphia and Detroit, USA Today, and the New York Times had some wonderful work at analyzing crime patterns in ways that would make most criminologists quite envious.

WENGER: I would echo what Al said and hope that we can figure out a way to do what he and Lori suggest in terms of getting to journalists the information they need to do a better job of covering crime because it continues to be a staple of the news environment and yet very, very little is being done to try to improve the quality and we just continue to talk about the problems versus the solution.

FOX: In my own industry, the academic world of criminology, the vast, vast majority of people will have nothing to do with media. They talk to each other, publish only in their own little academic journals that read by very few people. We we'd rather complain about the media and say I don't want to talk to them, because I'm going to get misquoted, rather than her than contributing in ways that can impact the debate on guns, the death penalty, crime control or whatever. Unfortunately far too many academic criminologists would prefer not to.