



JOHN JAY COLLEGE
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OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

THE CENTER ON MEDIA, CRIME AND JUSTICE

Covering Crime

US NEWS MEDIA CRIME and JUSTICE COVERAGE: 2011

PART II Transcript of Conference Call*

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prepared by

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Criminal Justice Journalists

**EDITOR'S NOTE: Every year, Crime and Justice Journalists brings together some of the country's foremost academics and editors to analyze the major crime stories of the previous 12 months—and how the media covered them. A report of the 2012 session is below.*

Participants:

Ted Gest, Criminal Justice Journalists (moderator)

James Alan Fox, Northeastern University

Tom Rosenstiel, Project for Excellence in Journalism

Forrest Carr, KGUN9, Tucson

Deb Halpern Wenger, Criminal Justice Journalists and University of Mississippi

(THE FOLLOWING TRANSCRIPT IS EDITED FOR CLARITY AND SPACE)

The Media's 'Myopic' Focus on Year-to-Year Statistics

TED GEST: Let's start with general comments about crime and justice news coverage during the year.

JAMES ALAN FOX: I'm amazed at how frequently reporters kept asking questions about the economy—whether crime rates are related to the economic downturn—throughout the year, and not just when the FBI releases its reports.

Invariably, the question is asked about why crime is not going up because of the nation's economic problems. It should no longer be a surprise that crime rates are not going up. Even though the crime rate continues to decline nationally, in some jurisdictions around the country, crime rates are going up. The media often show great befuddlement about why that is.

In fact, it is extremely unreliable to track crime statistics from year to year. There seems to be a myopic view in the media of following crime statistics only from year to year without understanding long-term patterns. Reporters should get access to historical data, not just numbers from the last year. It may turn out, for example, 2011 rates were worse than 2010 but better than 2009, 2008, 2007, and 2006.

When reporters get historical data, they may find natural bumps up or down. The numbers may be low, the only way to go is up. It's sort of like going on a crash diet. Your weight may get so low that you decide to put on a few pounds, but that doesn't mean you are obese.

When journalists report, say, that homicides were up 5 percent last year, they should report where they were a few years before that. If a recent uptick is out of line with numbers reported in recent years, they should be asking why.

Often a change is a statistical artifact. It may be a natural fluctuation with no particular cause.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: As far as media reporting numbers are concerned, here is what we saw last year: coverage of crime, including trends and individual crimes, went up to 5.7 percent of the news hole that we study. A year earlier, it was 4 percent. That is a fairly sizeable increase, but in 2009 it was closer to 5 percent. This was a notable increase.

What we see year in and year out is that news that breaks gets more attention, such as a big crime event. Last year, an incident that accounted for some of that increase—the Tucson shootings—was a bigger story than the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, which was itself a very large story.

Some of it involved a whole spate of stories following the Tucson shooting about gun violence and related issues that politicians tried to exploit that event. It was also a big story in the social media, can help re-set the media agenda.

The Tucson shootings accounted for two percent of news coverage during the year. That includes stories associated with them, such as those about political rhetoric. Some of them are not counted as crime stories.

To track the news agenda, we track 52 outlets on a daily basis—a cross-section of network television, newspapers, cable, and news websites based on their audience reach. It includes daytime cable, newspapers of four circulation sizes, talk radio shows, NPR, the 12 top news websites. It doesn't include local television news. Almost all the stories are local; they wouldn't fit into major categories like Middle East unrest or China.

For more data, see <http://stateofthedia.org/2012/year-in-the-news-3/>

Impact of Cable TV Crime Reporting

FOX: Are there more cable channels focusing on crime?

ROSENSTIEL: Yes, but they don't affect our numbers. It's a funny arc: Many cable channels started in the 1980s thinking that they could fill a niche. Bravo [for example] featured foreign films and classical music. Then the channels began to discover that if they became more populist, tabloid-like, celebrity-driven, dramatic, they would get higher numbers, sometimes at lower cost.

Bravo now is a reality TV channel. The History Channel, which once ran things like historical World War II Nazi footage, now is doing a lot of shows that are reality-TV-based. There are many crime-oriented channels that weren't there 10 years ago. What we're discovering is that television is a more populist medium than newspapers.

Tabloid papers and afternoon papers died and became local tv newscasts. In cable, channels that were high-minded in the beginning turned to a more tabloid audience.

GEST: Forrest, can you talk about coverage of the Tucson shootings and the aftermath in terms of gun control and mental illness?

FORREST CARR: On the day of the shootings, we were one of the few news organizations not to "kill" Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. We didn't report her dead; that earned us an immense amount of good will.

Gun control was only a very small percentage of our coverage. It is not a big issue in Arizona. A bigger issue was mental health.

Few television stations did much on mental illness except us. We had to pierce a blackout at Pima Community College, where Jared Loughner attended, with some help from the Arizona *Republic* newspaper in Phoenix. The college didn't have a procedure to trigger mental health intervention. They trained their faculty erroneously to believe that there was no such trigger in Arizona. Because of our stories, they are beginning to change that.

Another issue was that our local sheriff, a left-wing version of Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Phoenix, said the morning of the shooting that talk radio was to blame. He immediately politicized the issue, and stirred up a hornet's nest. In fact, no one has shown the remotest connection between what Loughner did and anything anyone said on cable news or talk radio.

GEST: The Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* later did good coverage of the mental health and violence issue, but there was not much else.

FOX: Overall, coverage of the Tucson incident was good. The only negative was the continual tendency to talk about the largest, record-setting cases. On the first anniversary of Tucson, CBS Evening News wanted a list of the largest mass murders in American history, as if records really mattered.

Covering the shooting at Virginia Tech a few months ago, there was a tendency to discuss the Cho shootings in 2007. The *New York Times*, for example, mentioned the Cho massacre prominently when it discussed the current shooting. I don't think anyone needed a reminder.

The media discussion of the "largest, biggest, worst" focuses on records and evil, and may play into notions of small number of people who see themselves and heroes and want to break the record that is there to be broken.

GEST: Many stories fail to note that only a small number of mentally ill people commit crimes.

Are the Mentally Ill More Dangerous?

FOX: There is a tendency to play up the idea that the mentally ill are more dangerous, which is not the case. Most of the large multiple shootings are committed by people who are not mentally ill. Loughner in Arizona is an exception. When such a crime is committed, it plays into stereotype that the mentally ill are dangerous.

CARR: The larger issue is not that the mentally ill will kill, but that the mentally ill aren't getting much help. Very few people were covering that story. In the Loughner case, for three days last January, every TV station was asking Pima Community College why they treated him the way they did, then everyone but our station dropped the issue when the college wouldn't discuss it.

It was not a generally known fact that Arizona had a law that could trigger a mandatory intervention. We explored that law. No one in the media has looked into legacy of health care decisions of 20-30 years ago that dropped people on the street.

FOX: There were abuses in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Psychiatry was used to get people involuntarily committed because they were difficult, and not necessarily dangerous. Now, we may have gone to the other extreme.

CARR: Today, people say: 'why bother to try committing people because there is no place to put them?' There is a pervasive feeling that nothing can be done about the mentally ill. Pima Community College

told people they had no right to intervene because they were not mental health professionals. This is pervasive in Arizona if not the nation.

‘Teaching Moments’

GEST: Does anyone think gun control should have had more coverage?

CARR: The local Republican chairman approved a fundraiser for the party in which a Glock was to be given away as a prize. He lost his position, but gun control hasn’t received a large amount of coverage.

GEST: What about coverage of policy issues such as crime and justice generally?

ROSENSTIEL: The larger trend is that newsrooms are cutting back, there is pressure in terms of staffing.

The ability of the press generally to use events and as teaching moments to explore the broader implications of events has diminished. Just keeping track of what officials with a megaphone power in our society are saying takes up a lot of the media bandwidth.

You either need a committed news outlet that wants to distinguish itself or you are relying on a news organization that can devote any amount of resources to an issue. The capacity to look at the bigger lessons is limited to a handful of major media, and is diminishing.

FOX: Many gun control issues are Washington, D.C.-based, and fewer reporters are working there.

ROSENSTIEL: That’s part of it. Wire services aren’t covering local news, and with a more conservative House of Representatives, there is not going to be gun-control legislation passed, so the issue becomes less important.

CARR: TV news covers what is flashy and explosive. Getting your fingernails dirty with the issues is something you’re not seeing much of. It’s a news philosophy issue, not a resource issue. Also, television is loath to anger people. TV general managers pay attention to criticism, and are sensitive to angering people in the pursuit of news.

FOX: When the National Rifle Association held its national convention in Pittsburgh, a host of political leaders spoke, but it happened to take place at the same time as the British royal wedding, and it got little attention in comparison.

Coverage of Capital Punishment & Occupy

GEST: Capital punishment came up in news coverage during the year, such as in the examination of Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s record on the issue while he was running for president.

FOX: Capital punishment had excellent media coverage, such as stories focusing on the cost of it. It was a good year of coverage, at least from the abolitionist point of view.

GEST: Another major subject of media coverage was the various Occupy demonstrations around the U.S.

CARR: We had the most polite “occupiers” in Tucson. The police showed great restraint. Occupiers were lining up to get their tickets from police. Our newsroom was not taking the occupiers seriously enough. I had to remind people that this is democracy in process. There was a tendency to look down their noses at these people as homeless people or ‘wacks.’

GEST: How about the immigration issue—its relation to crime and the Arizona court case and others?

FOX: The *New York Times* did an excellent job of dispelling the idea that immigration was responsible for a large number of crimes in Arizona.

CARR: The immigration issue is huge here. It colors everything we do. It’s one of the most emotional issues we cover. Last year, however, a controversy over ethnic studies in the Tucson schools got more coverage than did Senate Bill 1070 (the Arizona law on immigration enforcement.) People are waiting for the courts to decide on it.

ROSENSTIEL: Nationally, immigration is becoming a smaller story. Last year, it took up less than 1 percent of total coverage that we tracked, and the year before it was two percent. It’s another example of how whatever policy makers want to talk about sets the news agenda. In Arizona, it may be a front and center issue, but to the average American, it’s a shrinking issue.

Blanket Coverage of Casey Anthony Trial ‘Disgraceful’

FOX: I want to mention another justice issue: the Casey Anthony trial. It was labeled by some the trial of the century. TIME magazine had an interesting story calling it the social media crime of the century, because so much of the case was covered by Twitter accounts. I think it’s disgraceful how much coverage it got.

ROSENSTIEL: Anthony was a major newsmaker, one of the biggest of the year. Gabrielle Giffords got more coverage but not by much. Giffords was named in 1 percent of all news stories, and Anthony .5 percent. Anthony was one of the first celebrity crime figures to show up high on our list in quite a while. Still, we’ve seen many fewer such celebrity trial stories recently. In the years since 9/11, the media have have focused on more serious news.

The Michael Jackson death did get big play, but we haven’t seen much of that since the late 1990s. Casey Anthony was a return to the idea of tabloid crimes. A decade ago there were always one or two such stories dominating the news. Now, we don’t have an empty vessel that press will fill in with a celebrity crime story the way it used to happen.

DEB WENGER: How about the trend of law enforcement’s using social media to report crimes?

FOX: It makes people more fearful if they follow tweets about crimes in their neighborhood. In earlier years, they may not have known about it. ###