



CRIMINAL JUSTICE NEWS COVERAGE IN 2012

Part 2

Criminal Justice Journalists

Conference Call on News Media Coverage of Criminal Justice 2012

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PARTICIPANTS

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(could not take part in call, comments appended)

TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATION

Ted Gest: Guns and mass violence were the single biggest crime and justice story in 2012. How well was it covered?

James Alan Fox: The school shooting in Newtown, CT, changed the whole discussion and debate about guns. It wasn't just the number of the victims, but also [their] age. We had shootings before that didn't produce this kind of conversation. For example, at an elementary school Stockton, CA in 1989, a man named Patrick Purdy shot and killed five students and wounded 29 others and one teacher before committing suicide. That happened in a poor neighborhood with Southeast Asian kids. It didn't get quite the kind of attention that Newtown did.

Another factor was Newtown's proximity to New York City. There was a stream of town cars between New York City and Newtown carrying news anchors going back and forth. The amount and type of coverage also had to do with the social class of the victims and the convenience to the media.

Amy Mitchell: We looked at the social media response to Newtown in this [report](#). What emerged was very different from the cases of the Trayvon Martin shooting earlier last year and the 2011 Arizona shooting involving then-Rep. Gabrielle Giffords. This time, there was a very immediate and passionate response that was focused on gun law and gun policies. There was little of that in the other two shooting cases.

After Newtown, about 30 percent of social media response was focused on gun rights and gun laws, with posts by a large margin calling for stricter gun laws. The tenor of the conversation was very different.

It's true that the convenience of getting journalists to Newtown—their ability to cover it—likely influenced the amount of coverage.

Gest: You've talked about the volume of coverage; how about the content:

Fox: Part of it may have reflected attitudes about guns in the Northeast, which differs from Arizona and Florida. "Stand Your Ground" laws are popular in Florida.

Mitchell: It would be interesting if we could do a geographic comparison of social media conversations to see if they were different in the Northeast

Gest: Why did the theater shooting in Aurora, CO last summer get comparatively less media coverage?

Fox: One difference was that Aurora happened at night when people in many parts of the country were asleep. People woke up to the news on morning television programs. Newtown happened during the day—you felt like you were there.

Also, some people consider Arizona and Colorado to be in the “wild west,” where guns are more common. In the Northeast, it’s different.

Gest: *Were the media justified in concentrating immediately on gun issues after Newtown, even though the details of the incident weren’t known very well?*

Fox: It made sense, but some of the early coverage was inaccurate. I got a call in the early afternoon on December 14 from *USA Today* saying that a teacher in Newtown had been shot by her boyfriend and asking if I could talk about domestic violence in the workplace. It turned out to have nothing to do with that. Initially, we didn’t know if the mother was a teacher or whether the shooter had a connection to the school. The only thing we knew for sure was that guns, and powerful ones, were involved.

Mitchell: One important point about the content of the coverage was that in the first week after the shooting, the National Rifle Association (NRA) was silent, offering no comment, no response for days. Its members and supporters were told to be silent as well. Not much came out during that period from the gun-rights side. We looked at newspaper editorials and op-eds to see what the balance was. The vast majority were calling for stricter gun control.

Fox: John Lott (author of [More Guns, Less Crime](#)) was on CNN’s Piers Morgan program. Some individuals aligned with the NRA did get on TV to support concealed weapons.

Gest: *With the NRA and others on its side speaking out now, has the coverage been more balanced?*

Mitchell: Now that legislation has been proposed, we’re hearing a lot about the thinking on both sides. We’re hearing a lot more about difficulties that will occur when legislation comes up for a vote.

Gest: *Has the media done well in explaining how gun legislation or changed gun policies would work?*

Fox: Initially it was very uneven. People were saying “let’s get rid of guns” before questions were asked about how we do that, will it actually be effective, and so forth. People started talking about things like the impact of an assault weapons ban and problems with background checks.

Mitchell: One issue is the lack of beat reporters in many news outlets. In the last decade, the overall number is diminished, with many turning into general staff reporters who hop from one story to the next. It may be an education story one day and the housing market the next. They may not have knowledge or the long-term perspective on an issue like guns: what has happened in the past, who to reach out to as experts. They may not have a Rolodex of people with whom they can have an in-depth conversation that will produce enlightened coverage.

Overall, crime coverage is very much built around individual events in the news—one- or two-day stories that you never hear about again. This is not just the local media but also national.

We study newspaper front pages, cable TV news, and network news. In the first half of 2012, 8 percent of the coverage was about the election, 4 percent about the Trayvon Martin case, and the rest on individual stories.

Gest: *Are the media wrongly reporting that mass shootings are increasing in the U.S.?*

Fox: In some cases, yes. *Mother Jones* magazine said so, based on criteria that they must be committed by a lone gunman and must not be family related. (But) the magazine used convoluted criteria. It concluded that mass shootings were on the rise, but that is wrong. Mass murders are not on the rise; the total has been level for the last 30 years.

Mitchell: The fact that there have been three major ones in the last two years suggests that there are more. Obama has been faced with many during his presidency.

Fox: Presidents respond in different ways. Clinton had five mass shootings during his administration. In 2006 there were three school shootings. President George Bush held a White House conference but there was no discussion of guns.

Gest: *Are the media spending too much time on mass killings rather than more commonplace ones? More than 9,000 killings in the U.S. each year are committed with guns.*

Fox: Cases like Newtown suggest that anyone could be shot at any time. It could be your kid. As far as gun laws are concerned, we may be doing the right things for the wrong reasons. Many recommendations made after Newtown won't do anything to prevent another incident like that, but might prevent crimes that are more common.

Gest: *Can the media exaggerate some local crime trends in the short term?*

Fox: Last year around Memorial Day, the *Wall Street Journal* and other media focused on what then was a 50 percent increase in homicide in Chicago. It was a very short window of time. It may have been an aberration because of a warm winter. Eventually, there were more

homicides in 2012 than in 2011. The city seemed to go from one of its best years to one of its worst. There was a lot of short term media attention.

Gest: *Until the Aurora, CO and Newtown shootings, the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida was the single biggest crime story of 2012. It initially had little coverage, then a large amount of national attention involving race, guns, and Stand Your Ground laws.*

Mitchell: It was simmering in social media, then it really exploded there and the mainstream media responded. It became the first story last year to get more coverage than the 2012 election. At first, it was primarily a cable and talk radio topic over a couple of weeks. Then the focus turned to Florida's self-defense laws.

We see social media pushing something to light, and mainstream media responding with new elements that talk shows and others can dig into to keep the story going

There is a big difference in the amount of coverage among different cable networks. MSNBC devoted almost half of its coverage the Martin case during one point, but it was only 15 percent of Fox coverage.

Here is a [report](#) we did on how media covered the Martin case generally. In the last five years, crime as broad topic has had more coverage on cable news than on network news.

Gest: *Did the coverage of Stand Your Ground laws have much impact?*

Fox: I don't think so. The coverage was more about race than about Stand Your Ground.

Mitchell: The self-defense laws got much coverage on cable TV but it was mostly about this incident, not on the use of these laws around the country.

Gest: *Marijuana legalization in Washington state and Colorado was a major development in drug policy, but did the news media do enough about it?*

Fox: It probably got the right amount of coverage. We don't know the outcome and the long-term effects of these votes.

Mitchell: Only some of the election coverage deals with state referendums. Of that, marijuana got a pretty big focus. You don't know what it's going to mean, with federal laws in place. It had a decent amount of attention, relatively.

Fox: It got swamped by the bigger news, about the candidates.

Gest: *How about the overall numbers on crime coverage?*

Mitchell: Since 2004, crime as a topic overall has grown generally. It got about seven percent of coverage last year through May. It was five percent in 2011. It's been hovering in the high single digits, higher on cable TV, about 10 percent.

Note that more people are turning to YouTube for news.

Fox: These days, national data are covered mainly by the wire services. People are getting it straight that it's not correct that crime goes up when the economy doesn't.

There were some incorrect stories when the National Crime Victimization Survey said that estimated violent crime for 2011 went up 17 percent. Some stories wrongly said that included rape and murder. In fact, it was only simple assaults. A few TV reports talked about the increase but showed a visual of murder scenes....

Gest. What about the Supreme Court ruling overturning mandatory life without parole sentences for crimes committed as juveniles?

Fox: Some media reported on the dramatic impact in their states. The media need to follow up and see what states are doing in response to the ruling.

Comments provided later by Mike Cavender, executive director, Radio Television Digital News Association on the topics covered above:

"Coverage of Newtown and the gun issue from what I saw seemed to be balanced. The media have been portrayed by gun enthusiasts as in the pocket of the Obama administration, but that is not borne out by the facts. The National Rifle Association's initial refusal to talk made coverage difficult.

"After a newspaper in New York State published the names and addresses of people with gun permits, legislation was passed to make those records private. RTDNA said that was an overreaction. We've had a fair amount of criticism about that. People are still angry that the material was covered in the first place. People outside of the journalism community have a difficult time separating the two issues. It's all tied up in so much emotion.

"I don't believe that the media are reporting incorrectly that violent gun crime is on the rise. People might infer that but not because the media are reporting that.

"On local TV news, crime coverage still is a staple. It occupies a prominent position in a lot of newscasts.

"On the Trayvon Martin shooting, the racial issues almost became a bigger story than the shooting itself.