

NEWS COVERAGE AND CRIME: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AGENTS INVOLVED IN
NEWS PRODUCTION

Nicholas J. Chagnon

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Approved by

Advisory Committee

John Rice

Randy LaGrange

Donna King
Chair

Accepted by

Dean, Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the social construction of crime through the news production process. In-depth interviews with law enforcement and media personnel, two parties integrally involved in the news production process, were used to investigate respondents' opinions regarding crime news. Respondents were questioned about their awareness of and views concerning the news production process as well as issues raised by previous research examining crime news. This thesis provides both the descriptive and analytical findings that emerged from these data. Interviews reveal the several themes affecting crime news to which respondents were most sensitive, including: the role of public information officers, business constraints, and media's impact on criminal justice policy. Respondents had a limited grasp of issues raised by previous research. The conclusions of this study outline a framework of themes that serve as filters and lenses shaping crime news which can be used for examining the news production process. Furthermore, through a grounded theory approach, two unanticipated themes, episodic thinking and hegemonic criminal justice ideologies emerge as primary forces shaping crime news.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all those who have suffered under the oppression of a misguided and misinformed criminal [in]justice system, especially police officers and offenders.

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INTRODUCTION

The various mass media constitute one of, if not the most, prevalent socializing forces in our society today. This pervasiveness has increased greatly over the last twenty years with the advent of the Internet age and increased usage of electronic media. The volume of information disseminated by mass media has grown by proportions that would be nearly impossible to measure. Media messages bombard us every day in a variety of contexts; at home, in the car, on our computers, and in a wide array of media; television, radio, movies, billboards, Internet, etc. Media influence is impossible to avoid and has an unquestionably significant effect on our society. Shared values, personal consumption, and public policy are only a few of the social dimensions affected by the media. As a result of the media's increasingly significant impact, media studies continuously gain gravity.

One of the most prevalent subjects of media discourse is crime. Crime is represented in many different media categories from entertainment to news and intermediate forms such as infotainment. While entertainment media doubtlessly have a significant socializing effect, they generally do not claim to be a true representation of reality. However, news media do make this claim (Mason, 2006; Surette, 2003). Despite this, studies show that when it comes to crime, media representations do not accurately reflect reality (Surette, 2003). Additionally, crime news is one of the most prominent categories in news media; it is covered disproportionately more than other social problems (Leishman & Mason, 2003; Gans, 2004). Research suggests that journalists are unaware or refuse to acknowledge their influence on official policy. Gans (2004) writes,

...virtually all national news organizations continue to swear by objectivity, and journalists still aim for fairness and detachment in reporting news. But the same journalists also remain stubbornly ignorant about ideology and the ways it shapes the public officials who currently make so much of the national news... they still do not see how their own professional values constitute an ideology (p. xvii).

It is self-evident that researchers must analyze the media's claim on reality and evaluate the social constructions of news media in order to effectively assess the media's impact on our society.

This study investigated some of the effects of news media's construction of crime in relation to law enforcement and news personnel using a social constructionist approach. Through qualitative interviews and thorough data analysis, I examined law enforcement and media personnel's views and opinions about crime coverage. Specifically, I investigated to what degree each group is aware of the distortions of crime; the symbiotic and/or conflictual relations between law enforcement and news personnel; the nature of each respondent's participation in the production of crime news; their rationales and justifications for their actions; and how these opinions, justifications and processes shape the construction of crime in the news.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Social Constructionist Perspective of Crime and Media

Much research analyzing the relationships among media coverage, the criminal justice system, and public perception utilizes a social construction perspective. Social constructionists hold that social problems do not materialize on their own but become social problems because they are brought to public attention by agents, referred to as claims-makers, acting in their own

interests (Best, 1990; Surette, 1996; Specter & Kitsuse, 1987). In other words, the empirical phenomena that become recognized as social problems are not always seen as problems immediately. The “problems” are constructed in a social arena, brought to the attention of the public by agents rather than independently attracting attention. Though social problems spring from empirical phenomena, the “problem” is a subjective category, assigned in a social arena. Furthermore, the social “problem” may have little to do with empirical reality, as the objective reality will be filtered and frequently distorted by the ways in which claims-makers bring issues to public attention (Best, 1990). For example claims-makers may use misleading statistics or sensational examples to portray problems as more severe than they really are in order to ensure that their claims are addressed.

Social constructionists hold that social problems compete in a marketplace of ideas (Best, 1990). Not all claims can be addressed. The government, media and public have limited time, mental capacity, and funding to address social problems. One of the major reasons claims-makers attempt to bring their respective issues to the public forefront is to obtain funding for their causes. Therefore claims-makers must compete with each other for attention to their claim. Though they often compete for public attention and funding, claims-makers often tie their claims to others’. Claims-makers will often try to connect their claim with one that has already received significant attention. For example, in the 1980s, while there were wide-spread concerns about child victims, many different claims were linked to child victims (Best, 1990). This will be discussed in more detail later. This strategy increases the chances that a claim will be recognized as important.

Social constructionism is a particularly insightful tool for analyzing the relationship between the media and the criminal justice system. Perhaps the most common way in which

claims are brought to public attention is through media exposure. Furthermore, crime is one of the most prominently covered social problems in the media (Surette, 1996). By looking at claims put forth in the media and the empirical realities behind these claims, researchers can dissect the processes and motives involved in creating crime as a social problem.

To analyze the construction of crime in the media, one must first look at who is making claims in the media. Claims-makers in the construction of crime as a social problem include law-enforcement personnel, politicians, activists, and media personnel, among others. Often their motives for bringing issues to public concern include budgetary concerns, election strategy, political posturing, community interests, the sale of media material and advertising, etc. (Jensen & Gerber, 1998).

Claims makers generally fall into two categories; primary and secondary claims-makers (Best, 1990). Primary claims-makers are essentially those that are the first to bring claims to a public format. Traditionally, media outlets are seen as secondary claims makers, meaning they filter and translate claims proposed by primary claims-makers, then convey them to the public in media material. It is important to note that media do not just relay claims. Some research recognizes that the boundaries between secondary and primary claims-makers often blur (Best, 1990). The media sometimes transcend their role as secondary claims-makers entering the arena of primary claims-making. This happens not only in editorials but also in non-editorial news content (Beckett & Sasson, 1998).

Another important element in the social construction of crime is the media's role in relation to public perception. Media play an integral role in the construction of crime reality for the public. Individuals construct reality through experienced reality (realities a person has actually lived first-hand) or through symbolic reality (realities conveyed to a person through

media, folklore, interpersonal communication, etc.) (Surette, 1996). The media constitute the majority of symbolic reality for postindustrial societies (Thompson, Young & Burns, 2000). Additionally, the average American citizen has little direct experience with crime or the criminal justice system. Because of this, most must rely heavily on the media to construct their crime reality (Surette, 1996). This results in an almost monopolistic control by the media on the construction of crime reality.

This study is concerned primarily with news media; however, I will discuss other forms of media such as movies, books, documentaries, etc. in the literature review. All play an important role in social construction and the effects of the various genres overlap. Often news media and other forms of media will be discussed in unison. Despite the differences in their nature (entertainment vs. informativity), patterns of their crime representations are similar. Additionally, the lines between entertainment and news often blur. Genres such as infotainment are often ambiguous, entertaining while claiming to inform (Surette, 2003). News itself is far from purely informative. Journalistic tenets mandate that stories are selected based on news values. These values include currency (how recent an event or story is), novelty (how unusual a story is), brevity (news material has limited space), among others. News values, particularly novelty and brevity, prevent news materials from conveying a representative and detailed portrayal of reality. Often news is produced in an effort to seize audiences' attention, resulting in sensationalism (Thompson et al., 2000; Surette, 1992; Best, 1990).

Though media practices and journalistic values greatly contribute to distortions in crime news, actions by news sources, particularly law enforcement, cannot be ignored when looking at the social construction of crime (Leishman & Mason, 2003). Law enforcement agents are particularly influential in the social construction of crime because they are the primary definers

of crime as a social problem. They are the first source of information for crime news and, as such, play an integral part in forming the public debate on crime.

One factor that is particularly important in how law enforcement shapes crime news is image management. The relationship between news personnel and law enforcement is complex, varying between contentious and symbiotic. While reporters sometimes criticize law enforcement, they must rely on them as sources for crime news. Additionally, while police officers often distrust media and withhold some information, they need media to inform the public of crime. In addition to using media as a conduit to disseminate crime information, law enforcement executives may use crime news as a tool for self promotion, improving public relations or boosting their public image (Leishman & Mason, 2003). Often while reporters are doing their best to critically assess stories, law enforcement agents are doing their best to ensure crime news will portray them in a positive light. Law enforcement executives are becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which their public image is shaped by news coverage (Leishman & Mason, 2003). Furthermore, law enforcement agencies are increasingly using complex and specialized tactics to manage their image in the press. Trained media spokespersons, often referred to as public information officers (PIO's), constitute one major way law enforcement agencies are increasingly managing their public image. Recently, public information officers are being used more frequently by more agencies. PIO's receive extensive training in dealing with the media. Many PIO's are not even law enforcement officers but civilians. Increasing their image management efforts, many agencies are also adopting a more corporate model of image management by doing things like hiring private public relations firms.

The complex but necessary law enforcement/media relationship and image management efforts by police, among other factors, leads crime news to often portray police as more

successful at catching criminals than they actually are (Leishman & Mason, 2003). News coverage of police also tends to ignore or simplify police corruption; the most common form of police misbehavior featured in the news is misuse of force, while more ambiguous forms of misbehavior, such as inappropriate acceptance of favors, is ignored by media (Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen, 2003). Important to note, as Leishman and Mason (2003) do, is that this overly positive portrayal is detrimental to police public relations; because police are portrayed in the media as more successful than they actually are, the public has unreasonably high expectations of the police. While it is important to analyze how news personnel participate in creating distorted crime coverage, the maneuverings of news sources like law enforcement must also be taken into account.

Problems with Media Representations of Crime

Whether it be because of agents involved in creating news or despite their efforts, media depictions of crime are often distorted. In fact, crime reporting displays a “law of opposites,” conveying the opposite of the objective reality of crime (Surette, 2003). For example, in media representations of crime, violent crime is more prominent than property crime and stranger crimes are more common than crimes in which victims know each other. Both of these are directly opposite actual conditions. Crime news also tends to portray risks of victimization as higher than they actually are (Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen, 2003). Furthermore, though distortions have always been present in crime news, studies suggest that these distortions have been increasing since World War II. Recent trends in news coverage of crime have indicated some specific shifts in coverage also. Since the 1960s, coverage of property and non-violent crime has decreased while drug crimes have become increasingly prominent in the news.

Crime reporting often cites spurious statistical evidence (Best, 1990; Cavender, 1981) that exaggerates crime problems both in severity and breadth (Thompson et al., 2000). Media outlets frequently ignore the fact that statistics are social products, affected and sometimes distorted by the processes involved in their creation (Best, 1990). Journalistic ethical standards hold that media practitioners attribute information to sources. However, journalists tend to focus on the truth of the attribution, not the truth of the actual evidence. Consequently, information coming from official sources is seldom subject to independent verification. Often this spurious evidence is reified, gaining a life of its own. Many sources will cite each other or previous stories containing information put forth by themselves, resulting in a tautological justification of falsehoods. Media practitioners must rely heavily on official sources for crime representations (Best, 1990), perpetuating the effects mentioned above. Also, after reporting supposed spikes in certain crimes, news outlets often ignore or downplay further research or stories that dispute previous claims due to waning public interest (Jensen & Gerber, 1998; Roberts & Indermaur, 2005).

Another common theme in media representations of crime is the use of sensational typifications (Best, 1990; Surette, 2003; Wood, 2005; Jenkins, 1994). My research defines sensational typifications as prominent examples of crime in the media with a horrific or particularly novel nature, often used as symbols to gain attention or mobilize the public in regards to a certain claim. Sensational typifications of crime often involve super-violent, animalistic, predator-criminals, perpetrating grisly crimes that effect public outrage, whose deviance is ascribed purely to individual flaws (Best, 1990; Surette; 1996, 2003; Jenkins, 1994). These typifications are common and recurring, especially in representations relating to crime waves and moral panics. Sensational typifications closely relate to Innes's (2003) concept of

“signal crimes.” Signal crimes are those that galvanize public concern over a particular crime. These crimes are often covered in extreme detail in the media, often featuring white, young, female, middle-class victims. When discussing the media’s role in promoting signal crimes, Innes writes,

The mediated accounts and representations of these crimes have not simply reported the facts of the cases, they have functioned as dramatic articulations of popular fears about the seeming encroachment of the forces of disorder, drawing upon diffuse and inchoate existential anxieties about the state of contemporary society. (p. 52)

Innes’s signal crimes and sensational typifications differ in some ways. Specifically, Innes’s concern with signal crimes encompasses police activity and collective anxieties as well as media coverage while sensational typifications more specifically address media action. However, Innes’s ideas on the media’s role in promoting signal crimes overlaps my own ideas concerning sensational typifications.

Media explanations of crime closely relate to these sensational typifications. Media representations of crime are simplistic, ascribing blame to personal deviance and moral shortcomings (Best, 1990; Surette, 2003). These explanations are devoid of structural explanations involving social context such as poverty, inequality etc. Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen (2003) found that discussions of causes of crime in general have decreased since WWII. Additionally crime news has become less sympathetic to the plights of offenders.

News values are a major culprit in these patterns. News personnel have limited space, thus they are required to make crime stories short, unable to address complex explanations. Gans (2004) contends that the need for financial and time efficiency, along with audience and source

power, is a key factor in determining the nature of news. News values emphasizing novelty and drama also contribute to this effect. This is often typified in news rooms by the phrase “If it bleeds it leads” or “the dog bites man criterion” (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003). However, one must not forget that documentaries and other longer, more detailed media products also often neglect to address social explanations for crime. While all media products have finite space and resources, many of these more in-depth productions reproduce news constraints that occur in the extremely terse world of print and television journalism.

Further contributing to the simplistic nature of media crime coverage is its front-end loaded nature (Surette, 2003). Representations are rich with accounts of the commission of crime and law-enforcement activities. Less coverage, but still a significant amount, is given to court proceedings. The least amount of coverage is given to corrections. This results in limited public understanding of the consequences of criminal justice practices as well as the social context of crime.

In addition to broader distortions, crime news has been accused of disseminating “myths” about both female offenders and victims (Leishman & Mason, 2003; Benedict, 1992; Carmody, 1998; Stanko, 2001; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 2004). Many of the problems that plague crime news in general are replicated in news about female crime. Many news stories use sensational crimes to typify female crime then back them up with somewhat unrelated statistics, presented in a misleading manner (Chesney-Lind, 1997). For example, a news story may provide a detailed account of a particularly heinous murder committed by a woman, then discuss statistics that suggest violent crime perpetrated by females is rising. While these statistics may be accurate when looked at for their face value, they suggest that horrific murders committed by females are on the rise when, in fact, the “violent” crimes included in

these statistics represent a wide range of crimes including many that are far less reprehensible than murder. Another trend identified in crime news is that violent female offenders are disproportionately portrayed as lower-class and minority (typically Hispanic or African American teenagers). Stanko (2001) contends that media also make the Lombrosquesque assertion that female offenders are non-feminine and imply that female offenders are more dangerous to society than equivalent male offenders.

Much like representations of female offenders, media representations of female victims are equally distorted. Specifically, sex crime victims are portrayed in a distorted manner by the media (Benedict, 1992; Leishman & Mason, 2003, Greer, 2003). Korn and Efrat's (2004) case study analyzing media coverage of two rapes in Israel found news stories sometimes blame the victim, ascribing "otherness" to the victim. The researchers found that papers tended to focus on aspects such as the victim's sexual history, assigning them some culpability in the crime. Benedict (1992) contends that sex crime news portrays victims as either virgins (pure, completely innocent, and unaware victims) or vamps (lascivious temptresses who have encouraged their own victimization). Such a blind dichotomy conceals the complexities of and cogent issues relating to sex crimes. Furthermore, Stanko (2001) claims that publicity over female victims constitutes fear mongering on the part of the media, suggesting women are not able to ensure their own safety.

Identifying perhaps the most dangerous distortion in media representations of female crime, scholars have suggested that news and other media representations of crime have perpetuated the "liberation hypothesis" (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). Some media accounts have framed the liberation hypothesis to suggest that that female crime, particularly violent crime, has increased due to the women's liberation movement. This

hypothesis essentially contends that as women increasingly participate in traditionally masculine environments and activities, they will increasingly engage in typically masculine crime, such as gang related crime. Another iteration of this hypothesis contends that as women enter the public-work sphere they will encounter more opportunity to commit crime, and thus commit more crime. (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Vold, Thomas & Snipes, 1998). Supporters of the liberation hypothesis contend the hypothesis is supported by female arrest rates that have increased since feminist movements have begun to get traction. However, some proponents of this theory ignore recent net-widening, resulting in many acts that were previously not treated as criminal now being treated as such (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). Additionally, crimes previously seen as non-violent offenses by law enforcement are now labeled violent. Physical altercations involving a woman fighting back in a domestic dispute constitute an example of acts that are now caught by this widened net. Regardless of any debates over the validity of research leading to the liberation hypothesis, many journalistic accounts of crime have referenced the liberation hypothesis in an inappropriately expansive way, suggesting that female crime is surging, fueled by female liberation. Though it may not be intentional, it is important to note that the media's framing of academic research in a way that equates gender equality with increased crime has problematic implications for gender equality.

Domestic violence is one of the areas in which media representations have been heavily criticized. Not only news but other genres such as infotainment and reality TV have been criticized as distorting reality in relation to domestic violence. While analyzing episodes of COPS and Real Stories of the Highway Patrol (RSOTHP), Carmody (1998) found many inaccuracies in representations of domestic violence. Minorities and lower-class individuals were overly represented as offenders and victims. Victims were often portrayed as either

masochistic, inviting their own abuse, or uncooperative with police (26.5 % of officers on the shows discussed their frustration with domestic violence victims). Additionally, these shows tended to exaggerate the use of weapons in domestic violence cases while still suggesting most injuries suffered by victims were relatively minor. Another exaggeration found by Carmody involved the relationship between alcohol use and domestic violence. Episodes of COPS and RSOTHP frequently suggested that alcohol use was to blame for domestic incidents. In reality, use of alcohol is much less prevalent as a contributing factor toward domestic violence (Carmody, 1998). Finally, as with many other crimes, discussions were simplistic, lacking acknowledgement or explanation of the complex emotional, sociological and psychological issues that relate to domestic violence.

Much research suggests that, like women, racial and ethnic minorities are inaccurately represented in crime news (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gans, 2004; Leishman & Mason, 2003). Gans (2004) found that news stories disproportionately feature black offenders, especially poor ones. He also claims that news stories about the Black Panthers have been overly critical. After analyzing local news in Chicago, Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that, “racially distinctive images pervade news of blacks and other minority groups...” (p. xi). The authors qualify this remark, adding that this is particularly true in crime news. These researchers found various racialized themes in crime news. Local television news tended to portray risk of crime victimization as more robust than it actually is, often linking this risk to minority offenders. In opposition to reality, whites were portrayed as victims of crime more often than minorities in the news. Additionally, stories featuring white victims were found to be longer. Conversely, black victims were disproportionately under-represented in the news while black offenders were over-represented. Entman & Rojecki contend that these themes increase misguided anxieties over

minority crime. In addition to over-representing black offenders, crime news painted minority offenders in a less favorable light than whites. Stories of black offenders were more likely to show mug shots and blacks were twice as likely as whites to be shown being restrained by police, in street clothes, or in jail attire. The authors contend that these problems result more from the structural arrangements of the media and society rather than individual bias in media personnel. They also distinguish print news from television news. They found that print news was far less sensationalized and identified the race of offenders and victims far less often than television news. The authors point out that the problems they identify can have varying effects; news distortions of minority crime both increased racial animosity in audiences and effected sympathy for minorities wronged by the criminal justice system. They qualify this by reminding us that the most important thing to keep in mind is that essentially, crime news perpetuates a distorted view of the relationship between race and crime.

Researchers often reference issues surrounding the Willie Horton case when discussing issues of race, crime, and media. Though reflective of a complex and sometimes impossibly unclear relationship among politics, media, and public opinion, the Willie Horton debacle provides a familiar illustration of the effects of racialized crime news (Mendelberg, 1997). Horton, an African-American multiple felon, held a white couple hostage in their own home, assaulted them and raped the woman after he had escaped while on a weekend furlough from prison. Political claims-makers used the Horton case to typify presidential candidate and Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis as 'soft' on crime. The George H.W. Bush (Dukakis' competition) campaign was not directly responsible for bringing the Horton case into the public spotlight. However, evidence suggests Republican political groups and the media share responsibility for bringing attention to the case and posing it as a racial issue. Media accounts of

the Horton case were often accompanied by Horton's menacing mug shot, frequently referencing his and his victims' race. Mendelberg (1997) writes, "the news media (unwittingly) and unofficial pro-Bush groups (wittingly) jointly provided the menacing mug shot of Horton and made his victims' white race salient" (p. 138). The debate surrounding the Horton case and subsequent public perception of Dukakis as 'soft' on crime have been identified as key factors that led to Bush's victory in the 1988 presidential campaign. While the Horton case does not illustrate an intentional racialization of crime news by the media, it shows how problems in the media's representations of minority crime can have political and policy implications.

Also important to note is the classist nature of crime news. Crime news disproportionately relates tales of crimes committed by the poor and disempowered (Reiman, 1995; Leishman & Mason, 2003; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Far more media attention is devoted to street crimes committed by the poor than crime committed by the affluent (e.g. white-collar crime). Street crime is described in vivid and threatening language while white-collar crime is often completely ignored. Even when white-collar crime is covered by the news (it has become increasingly prominent recently) it is often regarded as tragically accidental rather than criminal, despite the sometimes extreme havoc wreaked by white-collar crimes such as corporate violence (Slingerland, Copes & Sloan, 2006). Furthermore, journalists shy away from discussions of class issues and crime, dismissing them as "Marxist" (Gans, 2004). Disproportionate coverage of street crime, coupled with inadequate coverage of white-collar crime result in an ideological diversion of public attention; the public and politicians are overly concerned with street crime while unaware of or ignoring the extensive threat posed by white-collar crime. When discussing this diversion Reiman (2004), writes;

It is important to identify this model of the Typical Crime because it functions like a set of blinders. It keeps us from calling a mine disaster a mass murder even if ten men are killed, even if someone is responsible for the unsafe conditions in which they worked and died. (p. 67)

Reiman's "Typical Crime" is a reference to the media's ubiquitous characterization of criminal acts as street-level, interpersonal incidents. Like issues with the media's discourse around gender, race and crime, these shortcomings of media coverage of crime are important because they have both direct and indirect effects for public perceptions and criminal justice policy. Media coverage of crime frequently increases factual knowledge of crime. However its simplistic nature stifles understanding of crime as a social problem (Best, 1990, Surette, 2003). Additionally, media coverage of crime tends to be supportive of punitive, "get-tough" strategies and to foster public support for these measures (Mason, 2006; Surette, 1996; Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen, 2003). Media coverage of crime results in several specific effects in regard to public perception (agenda setting, framing, etc.) (Surette, 2003). However, it is particularly important to analyze media effects related to criminal justice policy since such effects are often more tangible, demonstrating a distinguishable link between media coverage and poorly constructed crime reality.

Studying Media Effects

Media effects, especially in relation to criminal justice policy, are difficult to understand and study (Surette, 1992.) Some of the research problems associated with studying media effects are common in many other research areas. Reliability and validity issues exist. Finding appropriate measures for concepts such as "amount of television watched" are difficult to formulate. There are many psychological variables involved in measuring media consumption

(such as “attentiveness”) which make producing scales difficult. Standard measures and scales for these concepts have not been formulated yet. Many effects that can be observed on a macro scale are difficult to understand on a micro level. One of the confounding factors of studying media effects on a micro scale is that “effects will not only vary from individual to individual but for the same individual from media exposure to media exposure” (Surette, 1992, p. 294). In other words, personal psychological characteristics will influence media effects but those effects will also vary in relation to different media selections. Furthermore, while studying media effects on policy, individual characteristics of decision makers confound micro analysis.

Other concerns with studying media effects are less common and somewhat unique to media studies. Media effects are seldom isolated from other variables and are often complex. The “most pervasive effects” of media on policy are indirect and difficult to study unless using large numbers of cases (Surette, 1992). There is seldom a linear causal effect between media coverage and criminal justice policy. The public, criminal justice agents, and the media are involved in a complex three-pronged relationship that is difficult to decipher. Often media coverage spurred by political claims-making galvanizes public support for a particular claim, resulting in policy change. Sometimes media attention is drawn to a subject without the influence of primary claims-makers. Sometimes the media bypass the public and directly affect criminal justice policy; however this is far from the most common scenario. Also, when issues have gained social momentum, for example during a moral panic¹, journalists sometimes abandon some of their objectivity, leaning more toward advocacy (Hallin, 1986, as cited by Best, 1990).

¹Moral panic, a concept first developed by Stanley Cohen, refers to a social condition of over-concern relating to some phenomenon (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Basically, a moral panic is when society’s concerns over a phenomenon exceed the actual threat posed by the phenomenon. Moral panic will be explained more in-depth later.

Surette (1996) gives three main models for media effects on criminal justice policy. In the first scenario, media coverage leads directly to criminal justice policy. For example an investigative report on a flourishing prostitution district could prompt the police of that community to crack down on prostitution. In the second scenario an external event occurs resulting simultaneously in media coverage and a policy shift. In this scenario perhaps a murder occurs in the prostitution district prompting reporters to write stories about the district. At the same time, police crack down on prostitution. Initial analysis of this situation without time consideration might lead one to believe media coverage had caused the shift in policy change, when it did not. In the third model, an external event and media coverage occur simultaneously, resulting in policy change. In this case, the press may have been covering flourishing prostitution while the murder occurred; both contributing to a policy shift.

In addition to these singular models, broader effects occur. Anticipatory effects occur when criminal justice officials change policy in anticipation of media coverage (Surette, 1996). For example police may step up patrols in a particular area to combat rising burglary rates in order to avoid negative press coverage of the problem. Offenders also demonstrate an anticipatory effect sometimes. Often after extensive media coverage of a type of crime, offenders may abstain from committing that crime in anticipation of a law-enforcement crackdown (Surette, 1996). Another effect, the echo effect, involves officials automatically adopting harsher policies because of being conditioned by earlier publicized cases in which the media demanded action. In this scenario, after a particularly publicized case of child abuse, officials may treat all similar cases harshly. These effects are particularly difficult to study in the same way that it is difficult to study crime that doesn't occur because of deterrence. Since the

effect was not due to actual media coverage but the specter of media coverage, media effects are difficult to trace.

A brief discussion of some prominent categories of media representations of crime will help illustrate and explain the concepts mentioned above.

Moral Panics and Crime Waves

One of the widest and most prominent categories in this genre of research deals with the relationship between media coverage and moral panics and crime waves. In line with Cohen's (1972 as cited by Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994) original definition, this study defines moral panics as disproportionate social preoccupations with perceived moral outrages that may or may not have been rooted in real increases of social threats (Best, 1990; Jenkins, 1994; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This study defines crime waves as perceptions of increases in certain crimes, which may or may not be rooted in objective truth, that draw public attention, characterized by political and media discourse, often resulting in policy change (Best, 1990; Jenkins, 1994). Moral panics and crime waves are similar. However they cannot be referred to interchangeably. Moral panics are more pervasive, often involving more than one type of crime, and possibly relating to concerns over behaviors not considered crimes. Crime waves may contribute to moral panics and vice versa; they are interrelated.

One of the widest moral panics in recent history involved child victims during the 1980s. Best's (1990) *Threatened Children* comprehensively analyzes this large scale preoccupation with child victims that occurred at this time. Best (1990) recognizes the integral role media coverage played in this panic. One of the most memorable aspects of media coverage during the time period was their depiction of atrocity tales of terrible crimes used to typify the problem of threatened children. Adam Walsh, the son of *America's Most Wanted* host John Walsh, who was

kidnapped and brutally murdered is one of the most prominent examples of sensational typifications. The main issue tied to these sensational typifications was stranger kidnappings. Stranger kidnappings were portrayed by claims-makers as reaching epidemic proportions, posing a substantial threat to American society. Overblown statistics about stranger abductions were thrown around in the media as well as in Congressional hearings (Best, 1990).

The moral panic over child victims was not isolated to concern over stranger abductions (Best, 1990). Unrealistic concerns over subjects such as Halloween sadism and ritual sexual abuse at daycare centers pervaded society at this time. Once again, media coverage was often distorted, including overblown statistics that overestimated the occurrence of such crimes. Even issues such as controversial rock music and smoking were linked to threatened children.

Congressional hearings were held and financing for new branches of federal agencies, such as the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, was appropriated. Little evidence exists that suggests an increase of child victimization during this period. Instead it is apparent that public concerns were fostered by claims-makers and the media. Best does not blame the media for constructing this panic or the resultant policy shifts. He ascribes most blame to primary claims-makers, such as politicians, law enforcement, government agencies, and crusaders such as John Walsh, and common folklore such as urban myths. However, Best contends that media coverage is often the determining factor in the success of claims-makers. He also admits in some situations “the press itself may have urged policymakers to action” (Best, 1990, p.87).

Another moral panic, often linked to the aforementioned one and chronologically proximal to it, was the public and media preoccupation over serial killings that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Jenkins, 1994). As with the threatened children preoccupation, this

moral panic was fueled by sensational typifications such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Aileen Wournos, and Joel Rifkin (Jenkins, 1994). Journalists used overblown claims to try to illustrate a serious problem with serial killers. The term “epidemic” was even thrown around. Some stories claimed serial killings accounted for 20-25 percent of homicides in America. In reality the figure is closer to one or two percent (Jenkins, 1994). Journalists even criticized officials for making conservative estimates, stating their estimates were far too low; journalistic actions such as these illustrate a clear leap from secondary to primary claims making.

As a result of the moral panic over serial killers, policy changes similar to those associated with the child victims panic occurred. New branches of federal agencies such as the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program and the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime were created and inter-jurisdictional cooperation was encouraged in an effort to track and apprehend interstate serial murderers (Jenkins, 1994). Some of these actions overlapped the results of the child victim panic. During the congressional hearings on child victims, serial killer experts testified on multiple killings of children.

It is important to note that the coverage of serial killers illustrates several patterns that are prevalent in general homicide coverage. Homicide in general receives an inordinate amount of media attention in relation to its actual occurrence and is portrayed in a distorted way (Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerley, 2004). Homicides featuring sexual motives, child victims, and unapparent motives (uncommon crimes) are most likely to be reported. Those arising out of arguments or involving abuse or neglect (some of the most common) are the least likely to be reported. Homicide is unquestionably a heinous crime that deserves media attention. However this distorted coverage doubtlessly leads, directly or indirectly, to the development of ill-conceived policies to combat it.

Another prominent moral panic during the 1980s that persists to this day involves the “war on drugs.” While several moral panics over drugs have occurred in American history, the one that began in the 1980s surpassed them all in length and intensity. Before Reagan’s declaration of “war” on drugs, the public was largely unconcerned with drugs. Within months, drugs became the public’s number one concern (Jensen & Gerber 1998). Despite the fact that this moral panic was started mainly by politicians, the media was complicit in its proliferation using sensational typifications and distorted statistics once again, justifying and perpetuating the war on drugs. Media representations explained the drug problem in terms of personal shortcomings, ignoring underlying social conditions (Beckett & Sasson, 1998). Media stories exaggerated the drug problem calling it an epidemic and even a pandemic. In many areas, drug use was actually receding at this time (Jensen & Gerber, 1998). Furthermore, drug stories also tended to support get-tough policies that mandated severe punishments for users as well as dealers (Reinarman & Levine, 1989).

Crack cocaine was the unquestionable “star” of the war on drugs during the 80s and early 90s. Crack itself could be considered a sensational typification of the negative effects of drugs. Claims-makers and the media touted crack as the ultimate evil drug with awful health effects, extreme addictive properties, and ties to incredible violence (Reinarman & Levine, 1989). The media significantly exaggerated the addictive properties of crack, claiming it was “instantly addictive.” The relationship between crack and violence was also overblown, with the victimization of innocent bystanders overemphasized. Even the famed “crack baby syndrome” was proven to be exaggerated.

The moral panic over drugs in the 1980s had immense policy effects that continue today. The criminal justice system was hugely expanded due to the war on drugs (Beckett & Sasson,

1998). Law-enforcement, corrections and even regulatory agencies all received increased funding. Prisons were particularly affected. After the 1989 drug bill, federal prison capacities doubled (Reinarman & Levine, 1989).

Media effects cannot be directly blamed for the moral panic caused by the war on drugs. As stated before, politicians were the main claims-makers that created the war on drugs. However, it is unquestionable the media played an integral role in fostering concern, spreading misinformation, and galvanizing support for the policy shifts associated with the war on drugs. Furthermore, one must note how media's emphasis on drug crime serves the interest of elites while further stigmatizing many disadvantaged people (Chomsky, 2002; Reiman, 1995). Media emphasis on the "horrors" of drugs perpetuate current criminal justice measures that tend to punish the poor and/or disadvantaged disproportionately while distracting the public from the harms caused by elite deviance (Reiman, 1995).

In the 1990s, as the war on drugs continued to rage, a moral panic over gangs, linked with the extant concerns over drugs, came to the forefront of American society. The media play a huge role in the creation of people's perceptions of gangs (Lieber, Sandstrom, Engstrom & Puls, 1998). Media representations link gangs with drugs and random violence. The drive-by shooting is the ultimate typification of gang violence, forever etched into media consumers' minds by news reports, documentaries, and movies like *Menace to Society*. Many reports of drive-by shootings are explained as gang violence though, in many cases, there is little evidence suggesting these shootings are the result of gang violence. More generally, research suggests lower amounts of criminality in gang members than portrayed by claims-makers in the media. Gang reports often include high profile crimes such as shootings and robberies, gang busting stories that depict law-enforcement officers actively, successfully fighting gangs, stories about

innocent bystanders being harmed by gang violence, among other common themes (Thompson et al., 2000). These stories tend to portray law-enforcement in a positive light, yet they portray the gang problem as not getting any better in many ways. This all leads to support for more “get-tough” policies that expand law enforcement but don’t fight underlying social conditions (Lieber, et al, 1998). Though the media cannot be solely blamed for this, research shows media attention often does precede official attention and can provoke claims making.

More recently, rising concerns over sex crimes, especially those perpetrated upon children, could be characterized as an emergent moral panic. News content about sex crimes has grown substantially over the past two decades (Greer, 2003). Furthermore, infotainment shows have been created, like NBC’s *To Catch a Predator*, that are completely devoted to sex crimes. Greer (2003) found that sex crime coverage in Northern Ireland grew by 206 percent between 1985 and 1997. Greer characterizes the coverage as stereotyped, sensationalized, exaggerated, and simplistic. Coverage focused on random sex crimes, ignoring the frequency of sex crimes committed by persons known intimately by victims. Greer points out that news coverage of sex crimes has some deleterious effects regarding public understanding of sex crime. Coverage conflates many different sex crimes with pedophilia, causing all sex offenders to be seen and treated as pedophiles. Additionally, the media’s focus on stranger sex crimes causes public concern over these crimes to be overblown, distracting public concern from more prevalent sex crimes such as sexual abuse within the home. However, Greer does qualify his findings, pointing out that increased coverage of sex crimes has been beneficial in some ways. Specifically, media coverage has raised awareness of sex crimes in general, bringing many sex crimes that were previously treated as private or family matters to the public forefront and encouraging more victims to come forward.

Greer's (2003) analysis of Northern Irish crime news also demonstrates that media-fueled moral panics and crime waves are not limited to American news; indeed there is a more general sociological character to this issue. Another prominent European example was a supposed wave of mugging in Britain during the 1970s (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). Until this time period, mugging was neither defined as a category of crime nor used in the media in Britain; it was an American term. Mugging was constructed by the media as a type of crime in Britain during the supposed mugging wave. The mugging wave was brought to public attention by a sensational case involving an elderly man who was murdered in the course of an attempted mugging. Research indicates there were no new increases in violent crime at the time; in fact, statistics show increases in violent crime that had begun more than a decade earlier were beginning to ease. However concern was created by putting the new label "mugging" on crimes that had been occurring with similar frequency for over a century. The "wave" of mugging prompted officials to hand out tougher sentences, step up police patrols, and create new police units.

Another study that illustrates the relationship between moral panics and media coverage on an international scale is Roberts and Indermaur's (2005) analysis of news discussions of road rage in Australia. Media discussions of road rage, another issue that has received disproportionate news attention that effectively fueled a moral panic, display many of the distortions common in media representations of crime and suggest a leap from secondary to primary claims making by news personnel (Roberts & Indermaur, 2005). Roberts and Indermaur found that while media coverage of road rage incidents increased greatly from 1991-2000, actual road rage incidents did not increase. In fact, the researchers state that coverage of road rage increased "exponentially" across the entire English speaking world during this period.

Media representations of road rage were distorted, overstating risk. Many incidents labeled as road rage by media were not criminal acts. Furthermore, actions by law enforcement suggested their doubts about the severity of the problem. Additionally, during this period of increased news coverage, public perceptions of risk relating to road rage increased significantly. Roberts and Indermaur claim that the moral panic over road rage was distinctly different from other moral panics; in this case, it seems media agents, instead of a special interest group, were mainly responsible for fueling this panic. The authors also noted that as media attention toward road rage subsided, so did public concern. In conclusion, the authors found that this problem was promoted by the media because of its newsworthiness, not the actual risk road rage posed to the public.

Memorial Legislation and Other Prominent Programs

In addition to moral panics and crime waves, examples of memorial legislation should be analyzed to help understand the relationship between media and the criminal justice system. Memorial legislation refers to laws enacted in the name of publicized victims or triggered by such cases (Griffin & Miller, 2008, Wood, 2005). Most of these cases involve white female victims of violent crimes (Wood, 2005).

Perhaps the most controversial example of memorial legislation is the three strikes law (Surette, 1996). The case of Polly Klaas, who was abducted from her home, sexually brutalized, and murdered, was the “key symbolic crime” that helped to galvanize support for three strikes. Before the media attention surrounding three strikes, there was little interest in the three strikes law and it had been defeated in the Washington state legislature. In California, since three strikes has been adopted, the corrections budget has doubled. The majority of three strikes inmates are non-violent offenders (Wood, 2005). Three strikes laws have become increasingly

controversial because of these issues and many see them as a failure. There is little evidence to support their supposed deterrent effect. Additionally, there is evidence suggesting offenders have become more violent because of fears of receiving a life sentence if caught (Surette, 1996).

Another prominent example of memorial legislation is the AMBER system (Griffin & Miller, 2008). The system, which is designed to aid in the recovery of abducted children, utilizes media alerts to notify citizens when an abduction has occurred and spread descriptions of the abductee and possibly the abductor. Despite its innovative nature, there are several problems with the system. The main shortcoming of AMBER alerts is that they seldom work in cases of stranger abduction involving a perpetrator intending to seriously harm or kill the child. Most of the cases in which AMBER alerts result in recovery of the child involve a relative snatching the child because of a custody dispute. Also, AMBER alerts bring a disproportionate amount of focus on stranger abductions while taking attention away from abuse and neglect, more common problems (Wood, 2005).

Important to note about these types of memorial legislation is that they are usually triggered by a media storm or a sensational case that involves an innocent victim. However these victims do not accurately typify the most common victims of crime, a young adult black male, not a preadolescent white female. Also important to note is the fact that these memorial legislations don't work, they have counter-productive tendencies, often stifling crime control or actually augmenting crime (Surette, 1996; Wood, 2005).

Griffin and Miller (2008) identify memorial legislation as "crime control theater," meaning crime control efforts that are more symbolic than effective. Often when criminal justice officials cannot effectively control a crime issue, they develop symbolic efforts that give the appearance of effectiveness but not the reality. This may not be a cynical ploy on the part of

criminal justice officials to deceive the public but rather an earnest response that is conditioned by intense media criticism, pressure to “do something” or as an effort to foster positive media coverage.

An older example of “crime control theater” that has numerous relations with media effects was the “scared straight” program. Scared straight was a program which took juveniles into prison and attempted to deter them from crime by showing the harsh reality of prison life (Cavender, 1981). Scared Straight was touted as a great success in the media; a documentary was made about it that was aired on national television and countless stories about it were produced. However, media attention ignored significant problems about Scared Straight that came out.

Evaluation by the New Jersey State Department of Corrections indicated the program was effective but flawed (Cavender, 1981). They revealed that much of the information shared by the inmates with the juveniles was exaggerated or even false. Other studies showed that the deterrent effect of the program had been exaggerated as well. Studies used to illustrate the deterrence had severe scientific flaws. Also, the program explained crime in simplistic terms, isolated from social causes, and it ignored the differences between adult and juvenile criminality. Obviously this program was no more than a temporary symbolic success. Media attention touted Scared Straight as a panacea for juvenile crime fostering public support for it and other ineffective “get-tough” strategies.

Mason’s (2006) study of prison discourse in British media is another example of research that outlines how media support punitive justice policies. As stated before, crime news is front-end loaded; law enforcement is covered frequently by the news but corrections is seldom in the news. However, Mason’s research suggests that crime news dealing with corrections issues

replicates the problems that other crime news demonstrates. Mason (2006) found that media promote punitive policies in their prison discourse. Prison coverage suggested that current correctional institutions are effective treatment sites for correcting criminals and solving the crime problem. Mason identifies the media as one of the major factors responsible for the increasingly punitive policies of the British government. He claims that by supporting the idea of prison as the only option for dealing with criminals and simultaneously criticizing current prison practices as too soft, the media foster increasingly punitive criminal justice policies and swollen incarceration rates. Outlining his ideas on the connection between media coverage and policy, he writes, “[the] prison population is not created by crime but by political decisions influenced in part by inaccurate media (mis)representations and silences” (Mason, 2006, p. 257). Mason claims that prison discourse in the media is so pro-prison that it precludes discussion of other options. Mason identified three main themes in prison stories that increased punitive attitudes and fear of crime; 1) media label prisoners as thugs and murderers, covering only the most horrific crimes; 2) media create fear of crime by emphasizing stories of prison escape, lax security and early release; 3) media depict prisons as ‘soft,’ emphasizing stories of prisoners with too many rights and luxuries, and ignoring the harmful effects of incarceration. Additionally, Mason found that prison discourse ignored issues such as prison overcrowding and the social causes of crime. While his study analyzed both entertainment and news media, Mason acknowledges the claim of informativity that the news makes. He writes, comparing entertainment media to news, “news has much more to answer for” (Mason, 2006, p. 263). Mason contends that while entertainment media may be excused for distortions in their crime discourse, news media are betraying the public by spreading misinformation through inaccurate and sensationalized crime stories. Furthermore, Mason identifies a direct link between media

coverage and policy. Noting that the media is more supportive of punitive policies than the public, he claims that media coverage can directly effect policy change, leaving out public concern.

While discussing media influence on punitive policies, public opinion on crime must be taken into account. As mentioned earlier, the processes through which media representations of crime influence justice policy are complex, involving various levels of interplay between and among media, law makers, justice system agents, and the public (Surette, 1992; Mason, 2006). While media influence often transcends public opinion, the hegemonic ideologies relating to crime still significantly affect justice policy and contribute to media effects. Specifically, the public's overwhelming concern over crime and support for punitive policies are salient themes that must be taken into account while exploring media influence. As of 1996, a hearty majority of Americans (78%) believed that our current justice system is too lenient, despite our rapidly swelling incarceration rates and the fact that we are far more punitive than most developed nations (Reiman, 2004). Furthermore, most Americans (73% in a 1996 survey) support our most punitive and controversial justice measure; the death penalty. Though the public tends to support increasingly harsh penalties for crime, they don't truly understand crime; in a 1981 survey only six percent of Americans identified poverty as a major cause of crime (Reiman, 2004). While it could be argued that media support for public policy is driven by the public's thirst for punitiveness, the assertions of social constructionism concerning symbolic and experienced reality suggest the opposite is true; it is most likely that the public's support for punitive measures is greatly fueled by media representations of crime (Surette, 1992; Best, 1990). While understanding the nebulous trialectical relationship among justice policy, media and public

opinion may be so difficult as to border on impossible, we must account for all contributing factors if we are to attempt to disentangle these complex relations.

The relationship between the media and the criminal justice system is obviously an intricate one. It is difficult to study and findings are difficult to generalize (Surette, 1992). However, from this information, it is clear that the empirical reality of crime is not conveyed accurately by media depictions of crime. Media often cite distorted statistics, typify crime with non-representative cases, and fail to contextualize crime. This coverage perpetuates, and sometimes causes, both directly and indirectly, overblown public attention to certain crimes and ineffective policy shifts. My study will analyze the social construction of crime by looking at law enforcement and media personnel as prominent agents involved in the social construction of crime. Through thorough analysis utilizing these agents as sources I hope to clarify the obstructions, processes, and motives that lead to such a distorted construction of crime as a social problem.

METHODS

During this study, I utilized in-depth interviews to study the views of upper echelon law enforcement and news media personnel in relation to the media's construction of crime (Greer, 2003). Although there is unquestionably a relationship among news coverage, public perceptions, and the formation of law enforcement policy, as noted, this relationship is extremely complicated, involving so many factors that linear causal models are nearly impossible to produce (Surette, 1992). I believe the flexibility and depth of qualitative interviews helped to reveal information that would have been difficult to elicit with quantitative methods. For example, as new salient themes arose, my interview guide evolved significantly; the preliminary

guide that was developed at the advent of this study is almost unrecognizable when compared to the guide that was used for the last interview. Using open-ended, non-dichotomous questions, I elicited lengthy responses that clarified some of the complexities of crime news.

Sample

A purposive sample was used for this study. In a purposive sample, participants are selected because of specific characteristics or properties that they possess which are relevant to the research. Participants in this study were recruited because of their position as active agents in the relationship between media and the criminal justice system. Law enforcement officers were recruited based on their status as decision makers who are involved in the formulation of law-enforcement policy and for their status as dominant sources of crime information for the media. News personnel were chosen because they are integrally involved in development and selection of news stories, one of the major agents of the social construction of crime. Print and television media were used because they are prominent sources of crime information for the public. I acknowledge the recent rise in the consumption of Internet and other electronic news media, significantly challenging the dominance of television and print media. However, all media outlets from which respondents were recruited produce electronic news material in addition to their primary medium; thus, they are actually multi-media news outlets.

The sample included 13 participants from various law enforcement and media agencies in Southeastern North Carolina and Southeastern New England. I interviewed upper-echelon police officers in various departments. Upper-echelon positions in this sample included police chiefs, sheriffs, deputy chiefs, a chief deputy, and a former public information officer. From the media, I interviewed news directors, editors, and reporters from both print and television news. Southeastern North Carolina and Southeastern New England were used for convenience. Also, a

balance of data was generated between media and law enforcement respondents. Six respondents were law enforcement and six were media personnel, the 13th had extensive experience in both fields

Though I did not ask the age of respondents, I can safely assume that the age of respondents ranged approximately from mid-twenties to late middle age. The sample was mostly male and white. However, one African American and one Latino were in the sample as well as four females. Since all respondents had a stable career in either media or law enforcement, it is safe to assume that all respondents fell somewhere within the middle class.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted at various locations convenient to the participants. Interviews averaged about forty-five minutes; the shortest interview was about 35 minutes and the longest was over 90 minutes. I conducted all interviews and recorded them with a digital audio recorder. I transcribed all but two interviews (two were transcribed by a hired assistant). I had hoped to transcribe each interview within 24 hours of conducting it. However, as the pace of data collection picked up, I was not able to do so. I transcribed approximately half of the interviews within 24 hours their completion. After transcription, recordings were destroyed. Respondents' identities, positions, and agencies/companies are confidential. After data collection was finished, any identifying information was kept under lock and key. Subsequently, responses were only identified by their category (law enforcement or media personnel) or a non-identifying job title to ensure anonymity for respondents.

As stated earlier, interviews were semi-structured, using an interview guide featuring open-ended questions. The interview guide did not strictly determine the interview flow and trajectory, however. Each interview had its own conversational flow. As anticipated, the

interview guide did not cover every theme that arose during interviews. Because of this, the interview guide expanded and evolved substantially during data collection. Some questions were added, others were removed, and some were altered to elicit more productive responses from interviewees.

Areas that were explored for law enforcement included, but were not limited to, the nature and breadth of respondents' relationship with news media; their view of the accuracy of news coverage of crime; their view on the news media's interpretation of the information they provide to them; their view on news media's ideal role in relation to crime; their view on how news coverage shapes public opinion of crime; and their view on how news coverage shapes criminal justice policy. For additional information, see Appendix A. Areas that were explored for news personnel included, but were not limited to, the breadth and nature of their relationship with law enforcement; their views on the accuracy of the information provided to them by the police; their view on the accuracy of news coverage of crime; how they select and report crime stories; their view on the news media's ideal role in relation to crime; their view on how news coverage shapes public opinion of crime; and their view on how news coverage shapes criminal justice policy. For additional information see Appendix B.

Key Concepts

Several concepts are central to this study and must be defined. By "news coverage of crime," I mean print or television news stories and editorial content pertaining to violent, property and white-collar crime. "Crime control theatre" is defined as "a public response or set of responses to crime which generate the appearance, but not the fact, of crime control" (Griffin and Miller, 2008, p. 161). For the purposes of this study, "upper-echelon law enforcement" is defined as law enforcement personnel in charge of large scale decision-making in a police

department such as patrol assignments or major investigation supervision. “News personnel” is defined as reporters or editors involved in the selection and/or production of crime stories.

Through a grounded theory approach, two unanticipated concepts, episodic thought and hegemonic crime ideology, which will be addressed in-depth later, emerged as significant conclusions in this study. By episodic thought, I mean a natural tendency to think on an individual or incident-level basis, while ignoring broader trends and sociological factors. Hegemonic crime ideology is inspired by Marxian scholarly ideas on hegemony and ideology. Barker (2008) defines ideology as essentially a set of ideas, thought to be truths, that maintains power of the existing order. Also, he defines hegemony as the process by which the values and ideas of the powerful are reinforced and perpetuated. Partially inspired by these ideas, I define hegemonic crime ideology as the dominant set of ideas surrounding crime and criminal justice, so omnipresent as to go unnoticed, thought to be truth, which validates, reinforces, and perpetuates the existing order of criminal justice.

Analytical Approach

A thorough, grounded theory² analytical approach was used, partially inspired by Dr. Kim Cook’s (personal communication, 2009) eight step method for qualitative data analysis. During interviews and after, I took extensive notes which later guided my analysis of each interview. During transcription, I performed preliminary coding, identifying themes that were included in the interview guide and those arose in the course of interviews and building a codebook. After transcription, I thoroughly reviewed each interview, coding and recoding several times to ensure rigorous analysis. Themes that I was particularly sensitive to included;

² Grounded theory is an approach, somewhat exploratory in nature, that allows the data to determine themes, analysis and conclusions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)

crime control theater, feelings of distorted coverage, feelings of accurate coverage and conflicts between law enforcement and media, episodic thought and hegemonic criminal justice attitudes. However, as I shall discuss in the conclusions section, the two most significant themes that arose from this study were unanticipated. These two themes, hegemonic crime ideology and episodic thought, emerged from the data as I conducted interviews, reviewed interview notes, and performed my analysis.

The code book that was generated through analysis was expansive, not all themes could be addressed in this paper. However, many themes are addressed; those which I believe are the most salient and most accurately reflect the data wholly. Though I believe theoretical saturation had been reached after 12 interviews, I conducted one additional interview because the 13th respondent had worked in both law enforcement and media and I believed this respondent may have been able to bring in a fresh perspective. Furthermore I believed such a perspective might generate additional themes. However, the data generated from the 13th interview were consistent with data generated from previous interviews.

RESULTS

Relationships Between Law Enforcement and Media

During interviews, respondents were questioned on a wide variety of issues relating to both the production of crime news and their opinions of criticisms leveled against crime news. Many recurrent themes emerged that related to a range of subjects such as logistical issues in the production of crime news to respondents' attitudes toward crime and the criminal justice system. A prominent theme that emerged was the relationship between law enforcement and the news media. Due to the front-end loaded nature of crime news (Surette, 2003) and media's emphasis

on current or ongoing events, the relationship cultivated between law enforcement and news personnel is integral in the production of crime news, and, thus, has direct implications for the social construction of crime. Respondents agreed unanimously on the importance and prominence of this relationship in both fields. Law enforcement agents all agreed that a professional, cooperative relationship was necessary in order for them to disseminate information to the public. Characterizing his agency's relationship with the media, a North Carolina sheriff, stated,

I think it is highly cooperative. One of the things that I think is important as an organization is transparency. And one of the ways that you are transparent is by responding to and interacting with your local news media.

This passage is typical of law enforcement agents' discussions of the importance of a media/law enforcement relationship. Law enforcement respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of trust, transparency and cooperation in their relationship with the media. As illustrated by the previous quote, these remarks were often tied into law enforcement respondents' view that a relationship with the media is necessary to disseminate crime information to the public.

However, few law enforcement respondents acknowledged the importance of this relationship for their efforts to promote their own agencies and accomplishments (agency promotion and image management will be discussed in more detail in a later section).

Media personnel also recognized the importance of their relationship with law enforcement. Media respondents acknowledged that this relationship was essential to crime reporting. One respondent, a television news reporter in Southeastern North Carolina, stated,

I just think it's imperative for law enforcement to have a good relationship with the media. We're only there to help them. Without any communication we can't do anything for them and communication's everything.

Both media and law enforcement generally had a positive overall view of this relationship. Despite a few matters on which law enforcement and media came into conflict, both parties seemed to feel that their relationships were cooperative, productive and respectful. However, both parties recognized that, historically, this was not always the case. Many respondents emphasized how the media/law enforcement relationship had vastly improved over the last decade or so. Describing this, one sheriff stated,

My relationship is good with the media. When I became chief deputy about two years ago, we actually had problems a lot. And the sheriff who is now retired kind of asked me if I would work with the media and try to improve our relationships and that is when we brought in our public information officer.

While they seemed to have an overall positive view of this relationship, both media and law enforcement respondents also repeatedly pointed out that their relationship varied at times. Among other factors, characteristics and philosophies of different law enforcement agencies and media outlets, individual personalities and issues arising from controversial stories were all cited as reasons for differing levels of cooperation and amity in interactions between law enforcement and media. A deputy chief of police illustrated this view, stating,

It's uh, it's good, I never say exceptional because there's always a natural, there's natural barriers to anything outstanding. I think we accommodate it pretty well. Some media thinks we do a good job, some media thinks we don't bend over backwards enough but uh, there's always going to be some conflict because we all have, sometimes we have

different end results we're trying to get to. Sometimes we think of something, "why are you even reporting on this?" Other times, other things, you can't get them to say a word about. So, there's a conflict at times but I feel pretty positive, most of the reporters I think try to do a fair job.

Shadowing this view closely, a print reporter stated,

Well that depends on the person I'm dealing with, because I've had both experiences. There's law enforcement officers that I know and that I'll talk to whether it's on or off the record and we get along well, even if they don't agree with what I'm doing. And, there's also times when it's adverse because they don't like the questions you're asking or the information you are trying to receive. So it's really run the gamut. But again, if I have a personal source type relationship with them, it tends to be friendly even if they don't necessarily want to tell me everything about the investigation or whatever.

Though they acknowledged they sometimes came into conflict, both parties seemed to feel that they had a common goal of informing the public, and it was upon this common ground that they built their working relationships. A southeastern North Carolina sheriff stated, "and our philosophies at times do tend to differ. But what we both need to look at is the citizens have a right to know, let's give them the information, they have a right to know." One media respondent went so far as to imply that the main function of crime reporting was to aid law enforcement. He stated, "I just think it's imperative for law enforcement to have a good relationship with the media. We're only there to help them." Both these subjects, the media's role to inform the public and the possibility of the media merely relaying information from law enforcement, will be discussed in later sections.

Areas of Conflict

Both law enforcement and media personnel identified specific issues on which they repeatedly conflicted. Issues with reporting on police misconduct and the release of information were by far the most commonly cited reasons for conflict between law enforcement and media. Law enforcement agents felt that many, but not all, stories about police misconduct were insensitive, exaggerated or sensationalized. They stated they believed some reporters had a vendetta against law enforcement, exaggerating police misconduct in order to further their own agendas. Also, some law enforcement respondents stated that media personnel often accentuated stories of police misconduct because they believed it would help them build their careers, bringing them notoriety as investigative reporters. A deputy chief gave an example that he felt was particularly egregious,

Basically they went back over a period of years, we had 200 plus troopers state-wide, over the course of 2 or 3 years, there was like ten or eleven of them that had been charged with minor criminal offenses, maybe one or two had something serious. Some of them were really petty. But I always remember the big headline had the state police badge and it was “tarnished badge.” I mean, that just really over-did it and when you read it, the charges were just, one was hunting without a license somewhere in North Carolina. You know, it’s embarrassing enough but it just went overboard. It wasn’t like the department had a systematic criminal element in it.

Law enforcement respondents’ remarks on this issue ranged from emotional, illustrating significant resentment and anger over such stories, to more neutral tones, recognizing that part of the media’s ideal function is to serve as a watchdog, monitoring public offices for corruption and misconduct.

Conversely, media respondents felt that law enforcement agencies frequently attempted to cover up misconduct and scandal, causing friction between the two parties. One North Carolina newspaper reporter stated,

We had a situation where we were, I don't know if you were here for this, but a college student was shot to death by [a law enforcement agent] who was serving a robbery warrant. Well I covered this, I was there the day after it happened, and basically, we as the press, were really digging on this, and trying to find out what happened and doing numerous stories on it and that kind of thing. And it was critical of [law enforcement] because, again, a kid who had nothing in his hands, who was unarmed was shot to death for no reason. I mean, there is seemingly no reason, right? As a result of that, and as a result, from my understanding, of some editorials being critical of that process, we then had a time period in which they refused to release any sort of crime news on anything specifically to us. So they basically cut us off essentially.

Both parties admitted that when police misconduct did arise, it most often led to friction between media and law enforcement. However, most respondents seemed to think police scandals were very rare, only disrupting their interactions sporadically.

Along with issues relating to police misconduct, respondents from both fields often cited issues relating to the release of information as a major area of conflict. Media respondents tended to be less vocal about this type of conduct than law enforcement agents. They often made somewhat vague references to it, couching these discussions in their views about the media as guardians of the First Amendment or their obligation to be aggressive in seeking information in order to be an effective reporter. Law enforcement agents seemed to be more concerned with conflict over the release of information; they felt that media efforts to obtain information in a

timely manner often needlessly jeopardized investigations. One law enforcement respondent stated,

We're going to tell you what we can and we're going to tell you what we can't tell you because of whatever reason. Like the whole thing, you know, last year when [an officer] got killed and the news is there suing us for the video. We weren't trying to keep the video from anybody. All we said is give us some time to get it and what that whole suit was about, and this is where the media is self-congratulating, we would never try to deny them. The media just wanted it yesterday. We were trying to give it to them tomorrow, because we don't want to stop the world and they said no it's not up to you to decide when we get it. That was the crux of their argument. It wasn't the fact. We never were denying them that video. But give us a chance to look at it, we have to bury this young man and deal with the issues in our department. We're investigating everything that's going on, all we are asking for is a little bit of time and they got pissed off because we didn't jump quick enough.

In addition to concerns over the release of information jeopardizing investigations, law enforcement respondents voiced concern over inappropriate release of victim information, especially concerning victims of sex crimes. Though both parties agreed crime victims deserved a degree of privacy, they seemed to differ on the degree of privacy that should be afforded to victims. Though other issues that caused conflict were mentioned by respondents, these two themes, conflict over police misconduct and release of information, were the only recurrent themes that emerged from questioning respondents about conflict between media and law enforcement.

These findings outline a relationship that is unsurprising; one involving two separate parties, frequently working together for similar ends that may diverge sporadically, that is generally cooperative and even symbiotic, yet sometimes adversarial. Though these findings are far from surprising, it is important to investigate this relationship in order to build a foundation for examining the role of crime news in the social construction of crime.

Image Management and Agency Promotion by Law Enforcement

As Leishman and Mason (2003) point out, it is essential to account for law enforcement's efforts at image management when investigating the production of crime news. Interviews in this study illuminated several themes relating to law enforcement's image management efforts. Almost all respondents agreed that image management affected the way that law enforcement dealt with media. Though no respondents had a conspiratorial view of law enforcement's image management efforts, respondents' ideas ranged from seeing image management as purely positive to viewing image management as a potential filter, obscuring facts surrounding crimes. As stated earlier, many respondents acknowledge that relations between law enforcement and media were not always as cooperative as they are now. Some respondents suggested that many law enforcement agencies were not concerned with image management in the past. A North Carolina news director stated,

I've also worked with sheriffs and police chiefs who do not care one iota about the public image or the public perception and would not go out of their way to help the media and when you called they would even stonewall you to some extent on getting this.

A chief deputy in a North Carolina Sheriff's office expressed a similar view, adding that this had perpetuated negative stereotypes surrounding law enforcement,

I would say that in the past we have not managed our image as well as it should be done. And that is law enforcement as a whole, that is not specific to [our office]. If you looked at law enforcement as a whole, in your traditional view of law enforcement, it would be your fat, overweight officer eating doughnuts and things of that nature, or your Barney Fife, or your Mayberry, and things of that nature. I would look at it and say that law enforcement hasn't managed, as a whole has not managed their image as well as they could have.

Though respondents acknowledged image management had been ignored by law enforcement in the past, most law enforcement respondents were aware of the integral role currently played by media in creating their public image. Many respondents expressed a view that media had the power to "make or break" agencies in terms of public perception and therefore must be accounted for. One sheriff stated,

The media can, many times can, make or break our relationship with the community, and quite frankly, it's the community that we are serving, not the media; but the media many times is the mediator, and they just have a huge influence on our success.

Another law enforcement respondent added that a positive relationship with the media was essential to building a positive public image that could minimize bad press and public scrutiny during and after controversial events,

Sooner or later we're going to have a shooting, sooner or later we're going to have something, but if we don't fill a reservoir of positive community contact, when we're out there on that ship, we're out there alone. What you're trying to do, is you're trying to develop a positive image that you are a department that is not on an island, that you are

part of the greater picture of what we do here. So we do try to make sure that when the media calls us and they want to do a story we're responsive to it.

Law enforcement respondents seemed to view image management neutrally; as a necessary activity for law enforcers, for better or worse. However, media respondents were somewhat skeptical of image management efforts. One news reporter alluded to his concerns,

It would be interesting to hear what law enforcement would have to say about this, but, being completely honest, I think that in an effort to promote the department, you'll hear from what they're doing. They want to get out the impression that they are protecting the citizens of this area so some departments are more apt to toot their own horn, which also helps us fill our newscasts.

Media respondents didn't seem to view image management as having a hugely negative impact on their ability to report on crime. However, some alluded to the fact that image management efforts could lead to a filtering effect, distorting crime news to portray law enforcers in a more positive light than they perhaps deserved. One respondent who had worked in both law enforcement and media stated bluntly that law enforcement agencies demonstrated favoritism toward reporters who produced more favorable stories. She was not implying this was a conspiratorial effort on the part of law enforcement but more of an unintentional result of adversarial and cooperative interactions. However, she did acknowledge this could have implications for the way in which law enforcement is portrayed by media.

Overall, respondents seemed to have a vague understanding of image management efforts and their implications for the social construction of crime. Almost all respondents acknowledged that image management could affect coverage but none had a resolute opinion; most respondents seemed to think of it as somewhere between potentially negative to completely neutral.

However, unsurprisingly, media respondents tended to have a more critical view of image management than did law enforcement.

The Role of Public Information Officers

One of the most commonly discussed subjects in these interviews was the role of public information officers (PIO's). As stated earlier, respondents almost unanimously agreed that relationships between media and law enforcement were necessary for informing the public on crime and law enforcement's efforts to cultivate a positive public image. When discussing these subjects, respondents constantly referred to the activities of public information officers. I experienced the functions of PIO's personally while conducting this research. Many law enforcement interviews were set up by PIO's of various agencies. PIO's that I dealt with were friendly and helpful and made the recruitment process easier than I anticipated. Several respondents confirmed Leishman and Mason's (2003) contention that PIO's were a somewhat recent innovation. Law enforcement agencies have used PIO's increasingly during the last decade. Furthermore, most respondents felt that PIO's were integral in recent improvements in relations between media and law enforcement. A radio news director stated,

Well, it's been interesting over the five years, about two, maybe three years ago, the [police department] got [a PIO] who came in. Before then we really didn't interact with law enforcement too much. One is the nature that we are public radio, and, uh, we sort of have a joke that we only dabble in crime, but we don't do a lot of crime news. We're more legislative and environmental; it's just sort of following the NPR philosophy. So I didn't have a lot of interaction in crime news unless it was exceedingly outstanding, since it's been, [the PIO] came to town and started the overnight reports. By [the PIO's] arrival, [the PIO] stepped up the game for everyone so then the sheriff's department got

somebody who was in charge of sending out mass media alerts... So, before I had almost zero contact with law enforcement but now if you count email updates, I have a daily contact with law enforcement in that capacity.

Law enforcement respondents held resoundingly positive views of PIO's. They seemed nothing but pleased with the performance of PIO's and felt that PIO's were absolutely essential in our current media-pervaded society. A deputy police chief expressed his opinions on the need for law enforcement agencies to have PIO's,

In this era, you have to have 'em. Any agency of any size, because other than that it would drive me crazy. To be honest with you, we don't usually have that much time to get detailed or oriented. Our PIO does a fabulous job dealing with the media. You have to have that in a modern police department. The other thing is, you have to make sure you're trying your best to get out your side of information. You want accurate information put out there. That's what her job is, when the media calls she does her best to go back, find the report, find out exactly what happened. You've got to have them.

Media respondents tended to agree on the importance of PIO's though some did express skepticism. Overall though, media respondents reported that they often interacted with PIO's while investigating crime stories and acknowledged PIO's made their job easier in many ways.

One television reporter stated,

I would say that we, and me personally, I am close to the public information officers as much as any individual person in our local offices. You know, it's the PIO's responsibility to provide us with information. In my cell phone, you'll find pretty much every PIO's number listed. Around here, I would say they are decent, some are better than others but they do a good job in giving us the crime material.

While remarks about PIO's were generally positive, some media respondents did reveal concerns. They pointed out that, as media-savvy agents, PIO's could serve as a filtering agent, preventing damaging information from being released to media and the public. Additionally, some respondents seemed to feel that PIO's often determined which information was important or relevant, a role that news personnel felt they should perform. A news director stated,

I think that some of that's changing so we get our information directly from the source, sometimes what LE wants to do is interpret the results of an arrest and then provide that interpretation to the media. What we prefer to do, if we can, is to look at the actual police reports, there's usually a lot more information there about what happened and who it happened to and where it happened and what was involved in the crime than what you're going to find from the PIO.

Also, some media respondents felt that PIO's could make their jobs too easy in some ways. They felt that press releases could constitute ready-made news material, leading to media becoming a mere relay station for law enforcement views. Reporters found this objectionable seemingly because they held their role as public watchdogs in such high regard. One reporter stated,

The way the relationship works now is we essentially get press releases from the Sheriff's Department and the [police department] and other agencies as well. And I can definitely speak most knowledgeably [sic] about those. So a lot of times we get this information, as reporters, and I mean just in general, it doesn't matter what media and you just kind of run what you get from them, without asking a lot of questions about the information that's sent.

Not surprisingly, some law enforcement respondents ignored any problems with reporters simply relaying press releases from PIO's, instead enthusiastically pointing out the increased efficiency these press releases lent to news production. A sheriff expressed these views, stating, "He [the PIO] gives them, he sends them information and all they really have to do is take it out and paste it."

Overall, respondents felt that PIO's were a positive innovation that streamlined media/law enforcement interactions. It seems that PIO's both effect a more efficient exchange of information and help to cultivate improving relations between both parties. However, acritical acceptance of PIO's ignores serious pitfalls such as the relaying effect mentioned earlier. Further research dedicated specifically to investigating PIO/reporter interactions could help to illuminate the presence and prevalence of such issues.

General Assessments of Crime Coverage

Though I felt it was important to investigate the relationship between media and law enforcement as a foundational subject, the main focus of this research was to investigate the opinions and attitudes of each respondent relating to news coverage and criticisms leveled by academic researchers. When investigating such views, the first avenue of inquiry I pursued was respondents' overall assessments of crime coverage. Respondents almost unanimously felt that coverage was generally accurate and fair. Respondents identified some issues with coverage but when asked for their overall impression they generally approved of crime news. No respondent said that they had a major objection to crime news as a whole. When asked if crime coverage did a good job of informing the public on crime, one sheriff stated,

I think most times it does. There are times when something might be sensationalized or under, you know we may try to hold back. The media might want to push us. We do

conflict like that. But I think as a whole, we need the media and the media needs us because we need to get the information out for that trust with the citizens. And it's a third party, the media's not like I'm giving it out with my own twist the public's got that middle man, the news media. So I think overall, it's necessary, and it does a pretty fair job of letting the citizens know.

This response was typical of both groups. Respondents' views of crime coverage were positive, though almost always qualified with the acknowledgement of some issues with coverage.

However, respondents' resoundingly positive assessments of coverage may have been an artifact of these questions being some of the first ones asked. As interviews progressed, respondents more readily elaborated on their complaints, which most often seemed far more than trivial.

Positive Aspects and Functions of Crime Coverage

Although respondents identified many issues with crime coverage, many respondents also repeatedly made references to positive aspects of crime coverage. One theme that was especially recurrent for media respondents was their view that the media were essentially providing an invaluable service to the public, keeping them informed. A television reporter described this public service role, "I mean that's what we're always going to do, providing a service to the public, no matter what. I mean I'm a public servant if you will." This respondent and several others emphasized their role as public informers while describing their positive opinions of news. However, they later rationalized problems with coverage by referencing business constraints (the constraining role of business interests will be discussed in a later section). Since this study focused specifically on crime news, respondents' discussions of media's public-informer role were couched in discussions of how the media constituted one of the only sources of crime information for the public. Though social construction was never

mentioned specifically, some respondents expressed views that shadowed some of the principles of social construction. When asked about the media's role in informing the public on crime, one respondent stated, "Absolutely, I don't know where else they would get it from unless you live in the neighborhood where it's happening and you hear rumors from neighbors." This statement reflects not only the respondent's acknowledgement of the near monopolistic control media have in creating crime reality but also his acknowledgement of possible secondary sources of vicarious reality (interactions with family, peers, etc.).

Law enforcement respondents also acknowledged the role media play in informing the public on crime. Though they emphasized these views less than media respondents did, law enforcement respondents often admitted that media played a major role in raising public awareness of crime problems. A deputy chief identified media's role in spreading public awareness of open prostitution in his city,

I think it definitely brought it to the forefront where it kind of forced the legislature to take a look at the issue, to address it. I think if it had been kind of in the background more, that it would probably not have forced it to a head, so I think it kind of forced it to a head. So I think it does impact policy.

Although this quote reflects the recurrent acknowledgement by law enforcement respondents of the positive role media play in bringing crime problems to the public's attention, it also demonstrates another theme; law enforcement's recognition of the impact of crime reporting on legislation and public policy (media's impact on criminal justice policy will be discussed further in a subsequent section).

In addition to their assertions that media often play a vital role in illuminating crime problems for the public, many respondents also repeatedly referenced media's role in exposing

corruption in police departments and other public offices. Respondents often referred to this as their “watchdog” role. Many respondents expressed their views that one of the essential roles of a crime reporter was to be sensitive to corruption and misconduct. Media respondents saw this as resoundingly positive. One reporter described media’s role in exposing rampant police misconduct in Chicago,

I’m from Chicago. The Chicago Tribune has done a ton of stories on police corruption and just a bunch of different problems in the police department there that have led to, again, changes where people shouldn’t be working there because they were beating confessions out of people. It’s like to get, fired or whatever. So again I feel like I’ve seen only positive outcomes of the light being let in to the agencies and what’s going on.

Almost every media respondent made at least one reference to this type of effect.

Though these remarks were less common during interviews with law enforcement, some law enforcement respondents made references to media as a “watchdog” often stating this was a positive effect. One sheriff stated, “That’s a good thing that the media does, they hold us accountable and they should, they should always be pushing.” Though they acknowledged media’s role in exposing police misconduct, many law enforcement respondents felt that media members were often overzealous in pursuing such ends which, as mentioned earlier, often lead to conflict between media and law enforcement.

Differences Across Media Types

As stated earlier, respondents mostly had a positive view of crime news as a whole. However, every respondent identified differences across different media types, specifically print and television news. Generally, respondents felt that print coverage of crime was more in-depth and analytical. Respondents believed that because of time constraints involved in television

news, print news had far more depth. This view was expressed repeatedly by both law enforcement and media respondents. One respondent who had worked in both law enforcement and media stated,

I also gave some kudos to the Star News because their reporters have a little more time. But they do the research and I think that's the biggest criticism. Now, you as a TV reporter have a minute. You have a minute and thirty seconds...

A law enforcement respondent added,

Well, the printed media frankly, here in [this city], specifically the Journal, and some others, some of the college newspapers, they actually, they delve a lot deeper into stories than the newscasts. You know, the television news, they want something short, sweet, they want a sound bite, they don't really get in-depth, into what is the real story here.

In addition to believing that it provided more depth, many respondents stated that print coverage was more critical or analytical than television news. Respondents felt that print journalists often investigated stories and analyzed information while their television counterparts often merely relayed information from law enforcement. One news director stated,

A lot of if you look here, we are one newspaper in a town with a lot of radio stations, you know, a couple of TV stations. In general, what we see from other media is that they pretty much take what the police tell them as gospel without checking it out.

A law enforcement respondent expressed a similar view, stating,

Certainly there is a difference. Now, what immediately comes to mind among the differences are that print news, in my experience, are less willing to back away from an issue. Back to the barrels of ink, whereas it seems that the television news, they only have that thirty minutes, well, a small portion of that thirty minutes to report; so their stories

are going to change day to day. In turn, you may not get a correction, but meanwhile, these folks who are buying ink by the barrels, really just have all the time in the world, it seems, to continue to propel a story; reprint the same story with one or two more details.

Differences across media types was one of the areas of greatest agreement for respondents in this study. Both law enforcement and media generally agreed that print news provided more detailed, analytical coverage compared to television. Most respondents believed that these differences were inevitable due to the nature of each medium. However, one respondent who had extensive experience working in television news felt that these claims were mythical. She said, “A lot of people say we don’t have the time, yes we do. We have the time and if you’re a smart enough reporter, you know the kind of questions to ask so you can get that information.” Although this was not a recurrent theme, an inconsistency in respondents’ ideas about time constraints supports this respondent’s view; many respondents simultaneously claimed that reporters did not have enough time to provide appropriately analytical coverage and complained that in their localities, the news reported nearly every crime, even ones they considered trivial. Repetitively emerging inconsistencies like this suggest that many respondents’ rationales and explanations for problematic coverage are professional ideologies that have been acritically accepted by respondents, inhibiting their ability to critically assess crime news and its production process (rationales and explanations of problematic coverage will be discussed further in a subsequent section)(Gans, 2004).

Sensationalism

Many respondents brought up sensationalism while discussing differences across media. Some respondents accused television of being more sensational while others felt that print was more sensational. Respondents seemed to have varying conceptions of sensationalism; for

example, one law enforcement respondent believed print news was sensational because they were more critical of law enforcement while another respondent felt that certain stations had reputations for being sensational because they often exaggerated details of crimes. Some scholarly definitions of sensationalism have focused on the overuse of emotional appeals and imagery (Perry, 2002). However, the varying conceptions of sensationalism exhibited by respondents in this study make it difficult to analyze “sensationalism” as a distinct concept. This is most likely a result of sensationalism’s status as somewhat of a media buzzword, used to refer to a wide array of topics. Regardless, I believe it is important to illuminate some of the recurrent themes that emerged from respondents’ comments surrounding sensationalism.

A few media respondents felt that sensationalism was a mischaracterization of aggressive reporting, an inappropriate criticism leveled at media by those who didn’t understand journalism. One print reporter stated,

It’s just a different perspective. If you’re outside the newsroom, and the newspaper does some like, big, investigative project, people are going to look at that and think it’s sensationalized. I’m going to look at it and think it’s good reporting. I guess the stuff that people think are sensationalized is more in-depth. First of all I had people call and complain to me about, especially my old paper, they would think that something is sensationalized because it ran on the front page. Well this was a small community newspaper, there’s only like ten spots on the whole front page. So it’s just somebody saying, “ok we’re going to run it on the front page or the inside.” I think the reporter did a better job on this one than the reporter did on that one, I think this is more interesting to read so let’s put that on there.” I think there’s some of that here too. But then the only thing was, uh... When you do a big story, I think people may see that as sensationalized

while I look at that and see good reporting. You know maybe it gets a big headline not because editors are trying to slam the headline into a reader's head but because I got to do a more in-depth story so I got to ask more questions I interviewed more people so the story takes up more space on the page and needs a bigger headline. It's geometry. You know, things like that, that I don't think people understand. So a lot of times that some things seem more sensational are just more in-depth.

Although this view was far from universal, several respondents, all media, had views similar to this. Though it would be a great leap to claim that sensationalism simply doesn't exist, these views speak to the fact that "sensationalism" has become somewhat of an overused media buzz word without distinct meaning.

The belief that crime reporting was sensational at times, but only to a limited degree, was far more common than the view that sensationalism was essentially a mischaracterization. Respondents from both law enforcement and media acknowledged sensationalism but only in relation to certain stories, problematic reporters or outlets. One television reporter stated,

Some, you know, there are stations around the country who have a reputation for, I don't want to say yellow journalism, but sensationalizing crime. They will do that, a lot of viewers don't like it but a lot of viewers do.

A North Carolina police chief expressed a similar opinion,

I'm very hesitant to categorize or to group all the media together. I know some stations, at some point some stations...that there were...there was a real contrast between how the same story would be presented locally, just depending on which station, or other media outlet was covering it. So, I think that's really individual to the outlet that's covering the

story. Some of them do just a superb job, and some of them could instill panic in an area that there is absolutely no reason at all to do so.

Another law enforcement respondent stated,

I see it happening in recurring events but I don't think that it's a problem that is so expanded that it's a problem... it may be a recurring issue in terms of sensationalism with that particular event or events for the community, but I don't think it's a large scale problem in terms of media coverage, no I do not.

While the concept of "sensationalism" may have become so overused as to lose some of its validity as an analytical concept, it emerged repeatedly enough in these interviews that some of the ideas relating to sensationalism must be acknowledged. Essentially respondents' remarks about sensationalism revealed two themes; that some media personnel feel that the label "sensationalism" is misused, reflecting media consumers' lack of understanding rather than problems in coverage. Also, both law enforcement and media personnel are concerned about sensationalism in the media but don't feel that it is a pervasive problem.

Infotainment

This study is principally dedicated to investigating news. However, scholars have recognized that as media have changed and expanded over the last few decades, the delineation between entertainment and news have become increasingly blurry (Surette, 2003). Infotainment, media products such as *60 Minutes*, *COPS*, and *Dateline*, that blend both informative and entertainment orientations, make a significant contribution to the blurring of these lines. Additionally, many of these shows have been criticized for portraying crime in a distorted fashion, sometimes more so than news (Surette, 2003; Carmody, 1998). I felt it was important to investigate respondents' views about infotainment for two reasons. First, infotainment, because

it claims to be based in fact, can make a contribution, similar to that made by straight news, to individuals' constructed reality concerning crime. Second, because much infotainment has the same journalistic trappings as news, it is easy to accept infotainment as news rather than entertainment. Therefore, infotainment can have direct implications on how news is perceived. I was surprised by respondents', especially media's, remarks about infotainment; I expected remarks to be generally negative, reflecting the distortions common in infotainment (Surette, 2003; Carmody, 1998). However, positive views of infotainment were far more common than I anticipated, especially among law enforcement respondents. Many law enforcement respondents saw shows such as *COPS* and *Dateline* as serving a vital role in illuminating crime problems and the criminal justice system for the public. One North Carolina Sheriff said,

Well, I think the shows get the public thinking about it... A show like *Dateline*, that's going to have some credibility to it. I think we're going to be watching that and people will say, 'wait a minute, that's happening here, I wonder what it's like in my community.' And so then they're going to reach out and start looking and asking and, uh, so yeah.

Another law enforcement respondent expressed his approval for infotainment, stating that such shows provided a perspective which was absent in news coverage,

Actually, let's start again with the *Dateline* show. *Dateline* is strictly reporting after the fact; they're highlighting certain crimes that have happened, particularly murder cases things of that nature; same thing with *48 hours*. In terms of the *Dateline* sexual predators, those are things that are happening right in front of you. So there's a difference between what they're showing between an investigation that happened and saying you know "this is what led up to this." They follow the case through court; the

person is either charged criminally and it goes to trial, or the charges stand against the person, or the person beats the charge, goes to jury trial and they give you a background on the victim or victims and the suspect or suspects. Fast forward to the sexual predator stings that they show the reverse thing, those are completely different. You've got upwards of seven to ten people coming before you, perhaps in a one hour show, and they're coming one after one after one. There's obviously a time lapse between whose coming in and when. There could be different days but they're set up, they've got a reverse thing set up and they're acting on it. They do go into the backgrounds of the people. They tell you, I remember one person was working as a person for Homeland Security, other one's a school teacher, professors, things of that nature. So they're actually getting into the mind set and the occupation of the suspect. Something you really don't see a lot of on the other *Dateline* specials or *48 hours* because you're not talking about an actual event that's transpiring in front of you as you're watching it, even though it's taped. The *COPS* show is a little different, you've got that they are riding with designated officers from an actual department. They're riding in a section that is probably going to be one of the hotspots in town. And they're following in on calls. They're riding with either the responding officer or the assisting officer so they're going to the scene. Now obviously I don't think they pick up every little thing that's happening at a particular scene depending on when they arrive. But for the most part, you've got a bird's eye view of what's happening on a call or what's going to happen as an officer walks up. So I think it actually gives the public a very good insight into what an officer goes through when he, he or she, is arriving at a call as to how to handle a call. I think that's actually probably one of the most realistic shows in terms of what's going on in the

mind of a police officer when he or she is in that cruiser and getting that call to go or if something happens right in front of them they have to act.

A television reporter also expressed his approval for infotainment shows, however, with a different rationale,

I mean, *To Catch A Predator*, if you, people, people are just so intrigued by that stuff. I think it's mostly, they just want to see the reaction of the person that, who Chris Hansen approaches, who came to have sex with a minor. Shows like that, they do well.

Personally, you know *60 Minutes*, *Dateline* I think they're great, I think the editing is phenomenal. The reporting is great, but shows like that have always done well. *60 Minutes*, the ratings on *60 Minutes* is [sic] great. *60 Minutes* is a bit more newsy than *Dateline*, shows like that, they just do well because, again, if we're just talking about a story that has to do with sex, you know, people are going to watch.

One illuminating thread in this quote is this respondent's business-oriented evaluation of infotainment. This respondent's acritical remarks center on the success of these shows in attracting viewers, ignoring infotainment's possible implications for framing the public's understanding of crime (business-oriented rationales will be discussed further in a subsequent section).

Respondents who expressed such positive views of infotainment also tended to express views of crime as out of control to some degree. These respondents seemed to believe infotainment was valuable in that it spread awareness of crimes of which the public was largely unaware, a role that traditional news had not adequately performed (this connection between acceptance of the media status quo and views of crime as out of control will be discussed later).

Though many respondents had positive views of infotainment, many others had criticisms of infotainment. Some respondents felt infotainment was responsible for inflaming public fears. *Dateline's To Catch a Predator* series was mentioned specifically by several respondents. One news director stated,

I think Chris Hansen's *To Catch a Predator* is responsible for this. I grew up in the 80s and my parents; you know, I would go out in the morning and I wouldn't see my mother for thirteen, fourteen hours, I'd be playing in the creek and just running around. And she'd ring a bell at the end of the day and I'd come running home. And then in the 80s the kidnappings got all the attention and kids getting stashed everywhere. But I think the evidence pointed out that the majority of kidnappings are from somebody who's known in the family, it's not a random person grabbing people. But the perception is out there and I started getting more, I remember as a child. And I have two daughters. Man, they do not go outside without our supervision and it's just the reality of the world now and it's weird. And it's a shame, it really is, I know I'm getting off track a little bit, but I think you look at *To Catch a Predator* and Chris Hanson and what they did on *Dateline NBC*, yeah, sex offenders are getting more attention probably because of that situation. I think, yeah, there has been an increased attention on that, and people are more aware of that and society is reacting because of that situation.

A print reporter expressed a similar opinion, adding that infotainment can build unrealistic expectations for law enforcement,

And beyond infotainment, and stuff like that, whatever you call it, just like *Law and Order* type shows, those type shows, yeah they definitely influence the public. Because people think that, I mean, those shows, and even now I watch them, they give the public

an unrealistic view of how things work. Because in reality a trial does not go by just like that. You know, a person's testimony does not go by like that. Cops cannot just suddenly, magically, figure out; I mean yes it's very unrealistic in many regards. Or it paints an unrealistic view of the real world of crime and how investigations happen...

A few law enforcement respondents expressed negative opinions of infotainment. One North Carolina Sheriff stated,

I think, I know, cause anytime you have all these shows, cause I know you have these crime scene shows that are so cool you know Miami and all these things, they don't show realistic, you go in a room and you've got fingerprints and you know who it was. It just doesn't work like that. And the community, a lot of them, expect it to work like that. When they have a crime against them, 'well go ahead and check this and check that.' Cause they hear it on TV, so I think the television shows do have... [They] can misrepresent things but [they] get people thinking about them.

One important aspect of the two preceding quotes is the conflation of infotainment with crime-oriented entertainment, such as *CSI Miami* and *Law and Order*. When asked about infotainment, several respondents made references to entertainment shows. This could be a result of respondents' confusion over the term infotainment or their unconscious conflation of infotainment with entertainment. This is also indicative of the increasingly blurred lines between entertainment-oriented and informative media products. However, it is clear from the data generated from these remarks that respondents had two main criticisms of infotainment; that it often incited overblown fears of crime and built unrealistic expectations about law enforcement's ability to quickly solve crimes, especially through the use of high-tech devices and forensic methods.

Overall, respondents' views of infotainment and its effects varied widely from acritical acceptance to harsh criticism. However, most respondents had firmly-held opinions about these hybrid media products. Several respondents even brought up infotainment before I asked them any questions about it. From these unsolicited and solicited responses it is apparent that infotainment is a pertinent subject to most respondents when discussing crime coverage and its impacts.

A Distorted Picture of Crime and the Criminal Justice System

As stated before, almost all respondents had a positive assessment of crime news overall. However, many respondents also acknowledged that crime news formed a distorted picture of crime and the criminal justice system in some ways. Distortions identified by respondents varied widely from claims that crime news greatly overemphasized some types of crime, generating a grossly distorted picture of crime locally and nationally, to claims that crime news ignored important crimes.

One theme that was common throughout law enforcement interviews was the view that media overemphasized violent crime, specifically murder. Many law enforcement respondents felt that crime news over-reported murder and robbery, giving the impression that these crimes were more common than they actually were. One police chief stated,

I think that there is too much emphasis on murder. Murder, if you wanna get a true picture of violent crime anywhere in the country, murder isn't to me the measuring stick.

People use that one as a benchmark.

Another law enforcement respondent added,

I think crime statistics indicate there's not a great shift in violent crime, but certainly if you follow by the crime news, there seems to be an image of quite an increase, and certainly an increase in certain segments of the population such as [individuals who live in projects].

This view was far less common among media respondents. Most media respondents explained the abundant presence of violent crime in the news with one of several rationales such as claiming viewer preferences determined such coverage. However, some media respondents did acknowledge that the abundance of violent crime in the news could be problematic. One North Carolina reporter stated,

Well again, I mean that's kind of our downfall, because, you know, we report on the unusual. And the unusual is to have a murder. You don't have a murder every week, thank god. But again, to me, that gives people an unrealistic view our community and what is happening almost every other day are armed robberies. We don't do a big story on an armed robbery, so it, yeah, there's a disconnect there. But just news organizations in general; that's how it is. Your focus is always on what's unusual, not what's usual.

It is important to note this respondent did not acknowledge an overabundance of *violent* crime in the news but specifically an overabundance of murder, stating that armed robbery should be covered more instead. Still, this respondent's remarks indicate her awareness of the possible problems caused by news' emphasis on unusual crimes. However, it is worth reiterating that law enforcement seemed far more likely to identify an emphasis on violent crimes as a serious problem with crime news.

One law enforcement respondent, conversely, felt that violent crime was not emphasized enough. He stated that violent crimes were often covered in a matter-of-fact manner that normalized them. He stated,

I look at the media reports coming out of Channels X, X, or X out of [a neighboring city]. They are reporting another gang shooting, another gang shooting, they are almost downplaying [to the point] where it's become almost a socially acceptable thing that there's another shooting in downtown [neighboring city], rather than looking at each and every victim, looking at the causes, looking at the potential suspects. I just think more attention should be given to that, as opposed to just reporting it and going to, you know, whether it be "in today's news we have some serious fires, an elderly woman lost her life."

Though this is not a recurrent theme, it demonstrates the range of respondents' opinions concerning the emphasis of violent crime in the media. While some respondents believed that violent crime was overemphasized and at least one believed that it was underemphasized, most respondents felt that the emphasis of certain crimes in the news was appropriate.

Some respondents acknowledged an overabundance of coverage dealing with violent crime, whereas many others acknowledged a dearth of coverage concerning white-collar crime. In line with Reiman's (1995) assertions, almost all respondents felt that news coverage of white-collar crime was lacking. One Deputy Chief stated,

I think that there's not a heck of a lot of it unless it's a case for some reason that jumps out. I think it's, again, if you look in every police daily log, you'll see a ton of white collar crime every day, day in and day out. You go into the court system, you'll see a number of people day in and day out charged with offenses. You'll see people from all

over, from all colors, races and creeds and there's not a lot of publication to me on white-collar crimes. You may see FBI statistics, UCR [Uniform Crime Reports] numbers and things like that, but you don't see a lot of publicity on that in my opinion.

Many respondents admitted that white-collar crime was under-reported while its occurrence in society was comparable to street crime. However, respondents' understanding of white-collar crime was vague; most respondents identified white-collar crime as purely economic.

Furthermore, though they felt it caused significant harm to society, few felt the harm caused by white-collar crime was on the same level as street crime (this lack of understanding concerning white-collar crime will be discussed further in a subsequent section). Only one respondent even brought up class issues relating to white-collar crime. In fact, his remarks were inaccurate, claiming victims of white-collar crime were disproportionately rich. Though they expressed an incomplete understanding of white-collar crime, most respondents admitted that coverage of white-collar crime was one of the glaring inadequacies of crime news.

Another inadequacy acknowledged by almost all respondents was crime news' ignorance of corrections. As noted earlier, Surette (2003), calls this front-end loading; crime news is heavy with accounts of law enforcement and their activities, has a lesser but still significant amount of coverage dealing with courts, and almost completely ignores corrections. Almost all respondents acknowledged this, emphasizing the need for crime news to report on corrections more frequently. One print reporter stated,

And then, corrections, yeah I think that's a problem. With me, that's an area that I would like to do better, and I have tried to do better and I have recently. We don't know what's going on in prisons, we don't. That's an area where I think we need to get better. Corrections is behind, we could do better.

A law enforcement respondent agreed,

I don't think there's a lot of coverage on corrections in terms of the criminal justice system. I think there may be some coverage as to what goes on in a correctional facility but I don't think you see a lot of TV programs that engage in that type of coverage. I think there's more coverage on [that], for that matter, even inside the police departments.

While most respondents acknowledged that news could do a better job of reporting on corrections, few acknowledged that it ignored one of the most important aspects of our justice system. Not one respondent acknowledged that covering corrections could spread awareness of the consequences of our current justice policies. Instead respondents took the acritical view in that they felt coverage was lacking but that this did not constitute a severe problem in crime news.

Another recurrent theme concerning problematic coverage was the view that media reports often over-emphasized victimization of innocent victims. This view was not expressed by a majority of respondents but several law enforcement and media respondents repeatedly mentioned how crime news often gave the impression that criminals often victimized individuals arbitrarily, inflicting harm upon individuals who were completely uninvolved in criminal pursuits. One print reporter stated,

You know, if especially we are doing something quick on deadline, people might get scared because they see that if we wrote a bunch of different stories of armed robbery downtown, then they think "Oh my god. Downtown is the most unsafe place on earth." You know and, there's sections that are. So yeah, I don't think, you know, if you don't know anything about crime, you don't really have the big picture of; and also you might also think that a ton of people are going out and robbing random strangers. So they don't

even understand the targeted victims, and usually that's not the case. In a lot of the cases, armed robberies are stemming from drugs; people know each other, the victim and the perpetrator. So it's not like as if they are walking up to random victims. Same thing with murder or other violent crimes, in many cases, many people committing the crimes know the people they are targeting.

Another respondent who had worked in both law enforcement and media expressed a similar view,

What happened when the news media would report it, they would report it as though, Joe Blow citizen was just randomly attacked by another citizen. I felt that what they were doing, they were sending this panic throughout the community and making people think that just sitting in your home or walking down the street, you were going to be victimized. Yeah that could happen, and it happened every blue moon, but 99 percent of the violent crimes that we had or the homicides we had when I was working were violence on top of violence, meaning criminal retaliating on top of criminal.

While it may seem that these respondents are engaging in victim blaming, most were quick to say that they did not blame victims of violent crime but they felt news misleadingly framed violent crime. Though the term was never used, respondents were essentially pointing out the decontextualized nature of crime news. As Surette (2003) has argued, news reports seldom contextualize crimes, instead giving the impression that criminal victimization is random and spontaneous.

The above quotes also point out another recurrent theme concerning problematic coverage; the tendency of crime news to inflame public fears. As with the previously discussed theme, this was recurrent but not a majority view; only four respondents spoke of the

inflammatory consequences of crime reporting. However, these respondents acknowledged that crime news painted a distorted picture of crime by creating a perception that crime was more common than it really is. One deputy chief stated,

I've noticed with the print media, everything we send out, they'll put it in the police briefs or that kind of stuff. It does create a perception problem that is above and beyond what the true problem is and it creates an image that is not fair.

Important to note in this quote is this respondent's tacit acknowledgement that factual accuracy does not necessarily translate into thematic accuracy; while this respondent doesn't accuse the media of making up crimes, he still claims that their reporting leads the public to a false impression of crime rates.

One respondent also mentioned that crime news seldom addresses the social causes of crime. While discussing news coverage of domestic violence, she stated,

What makes men think they can hit women or women think they can hit men, because we don't report about the females that assault men and that happens a lot. But nobody's really talking about what is it that makes individuals feel that they can victimize other people.

Although this was not a recurrent theme, its salience springs from the fact that this observation arose from only one respondent. Furthermore, the importance of the preceding three themes, the lack of context in crime news, emphasis on innocent victims, and the generally distorted picture of crime painted by crime news, springs from the rarity of these themes rather than from their abundance. These themes represent some of the most important criticisms of crime news in that they have wide-ranging implications for public perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system. However, the fact that most respondents did not acknowledge these problems bodes

poorly for hopes of improving news coverage; if principal actors involved in the production of crime news don't understand its most vital shortcomings, significantly improving it, seems unlikely in the future.

Racial Issues with Coverage

Because much research has pointed out the racialized nature of crime coverage, I felt it was necessary to probe respondents about their opinions concerning racial issues with crime news (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Leishman & Mason, 2003; Gans, 2004). This avenue of inquiry yielded limited discussion from most respondents. Many respondents felt there were few if any racial issues. However, a few key themes did emerge from these data. Some respondents felt that crime news was racialized in that minorities were over-represented as offenders; two also voiced their objection to what they felt was disproportionate attention given to middle class, white, and/or female missing persons. These two themes were the only recurring racial criticisms shadowing scholarly research.

Two respondents believed that crime news paid greater attention to minorities, especially black males. One former news director and PIO stated,

I don't think it's a balance. I don't see as many whites being placed in the news media as blacks. I don't see that. A person may say, "well they're not arresting that many." Well, yes they are. When you go look in our prisons, yeah there are a lot of African Americans but there are a lot of other races in the prison system as well. So, I don't think it's balanced reporting.

Another media respondent added a specific example of what she felt was biased reporting,

Um, absolutely I think that minorities are disproportionately represented in the media. I can think of one instance in particular just to give you, there was this guy and he was a

black man, there was this [sic] two, you had two [college] students, white females, and they were running this huge ecstasy ring. Now, granted, he had this hair that was like whoa, it was like way out there, Mr. Crazy Hair. But there were three of them, two of them being white and whose picture made it onto the Star News website, the front page? Mr. Crazy Hair.

These two quotes point out two separate dimensions of distorted coverage identified by Entman & Rojecki (2000); (1) minorities are often over-represented as offenders in crime news and (2) stories about minority offenders are often more negative than those about whites, frequently featuring stigmatic images such as mug shots.

Another theme that emerged relating to racial issues was respondents' views that missing persons stories disproportionately featured middle-class, white, and/or female victims while missing minority children or women were largely invisible in the news, especially on a national scale. One news reporter stated,

I will say this, I, everybody knows this when it comes to, you know, like a missing person, I think this is sad, if it's a blonde, white girl, if it's a white girl in general, you're going to hear about it on the media. If it's you know, (talking in a more hushed tone), [a minority] it just doesn't happen as much when it comes to the media broadcasting it or printing it. I don't know why, I have never understood it. I think that's one thing I have an issue with. I don't care what race you are, if the person is missing, we need to get it out but you will hear more about a missing white blonde than a missing African American.

Another respondent, a former PIO and news director, who also happened to be African American, stated,

I have a problem waking up believing that white females are the only ones who are missing. So yes, I think there's some discrimination. I think there is certainly an oversight on the media's part and it's unfair. It's unfair that they do not give those other cases the support that they should give.

These opinions are in line with contentions made by Wood (2005), in her discussion of memorial legislation; essentially, Wood contends that the media pay a disproportionate amount of attention to white, middle-class, female crime victims. However, as with themes discussed in the previous section, the significance of these findings is not that some respondents acknowledged these problems but that most respondents did not. Acknowledgement of these issues was extremely rare. Instead, opinions that media paid too much attention to, or exaggerated, racial issues or that there are no such issues with crime coverage, were more common.

A common theme that arose was respondents' view that racial issues were often exaggerated or overemphasized by the media, especially during incidents relating to police misconduct. Law enforcement respondents frequently expressed their frustration with what they saw as media efforts to create stories of racial profiling or more general discrimination in their agencies. These respondents seemed extremely sensitive to accusations of racial prejudice. Several law enforcement respondents became confused when asked about racial issues with coverage, seemingly thinking I was asking about their perceptions of the use of racial profiling in law enforcement. Law enforcement respondents also felt that the media sometimes played up the racial nature of crime victimization, insinuating that some incidents were hate crimes when they were not. One North Carolina Sheriff stated,

Yeah, something might be a crime that really wasn't racially motivated but if there's a way that somebody says I think that some media might try to play that up more than

others just to get that sensationalism. And you know, I'm not gonna, cause I have zero tolerance for it, period. Not accepted, I would fire somebody for it. But I do think that, in just my little short term, I've had media kind of asking, insinuating or coming around saying 'what do you think of that, was it racial, was it this, was it that?' and how can you know what somebody is thinking? You know, so, uh, yeah, I think if you if it's gonna sell to make news, it's big news.

Law enforcement respondents weren't the only respondents who felt that race was overplayed at times in media. One television reporter stated,

Obviously if a police officer shoots somebody, I don't care what the victim did, law enforcement is going to be questioned by the community about why they did that and why they didn't take other measures to keep the suspect from getting shot. When an African American gets shot though, we bring up race again, people go nuts. It's just the history with African Americans and this country. We had riots here before I came. I think it was like six months before I came here. Some African American male from the bad part of town, I forget his name, was shot and killed by police officers and there were riots here. You wouldn't normally see anything like that if it was a white male shot. Race has everything to do with your perspective on whether a police shooting was justified or not.

Discussions of racial issues being overemphasized were often couched in discussions about suspect descriptions. The same respondent added,

You know, we've had issues with giving out if there's a suspect in the case people have complained to us about giving out the race. I can't deny it but most of the time it's going to be an African American male. I'm not going to say all of the time, but a lot of the

times. We've had issues with viewers, we even had issues with one of our anchors who was saying to use, "why do you have to give the race?" Well, police are looking for him, we need to tell people what he looks like.

Respondents discussing this issue generally felt that giving out a suspect's race was justified if he/she was being pursued by police. While there is some validity to such contentions, respondents' tendencies to discuss what they saw as the exaggeration of racial issues, rather than issues such as disproportionate representation, is indicative of some racial insensitivity on the part of these respondents.

While many respondents felt that racial issues were exaggerated in crime news, a few respondents plainly said they were not aware of any racial issues with crime news. One law enforcement respondent stated he perceived no racial issues with crime news,

I don't see any disparity in the way that any individual is covered in by virtue of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, or, you know, ethnical background, I don't see any disparity.

Personally, I think that if someone is charged, they treat everybody fairly upon trying to publicize the incident the best they can so the general public is aware of it. Do I see sometimes that they bring up the fact that someone may be from a particular racial background? I see it, I've seen it brought out on TV. I don't think it's a problem, I mean in terms of coverage wide. I don't think that would be an issue. At least I haven't seen it.

While it may seem this respondent flatly denies racial issues with coverage, it is important to note that he qualifies that statement, adding that it is his *perception*. Many respondents felt this way; that although they didn't see any glaring issues, that they might be insensitive to such issues. One newspaper editor stated,

We only try, I can't say we never fall for something that you know, we never, you never thought about, but... and some of that can come back. I'm a white guy so I'm not going to be sensitive to every minority issue, so it helps if we have other people to bounce ideas off of, so [we can ask], "what do you think about this picture, what do you think about this description?"

This caveat indicates some sensitivity on the part of these respondents; however it is important to note that if actors involved in the production of crime news are not aware of racial issues in such news, they are at least reflexive about coverage. One reporter plainly stated that he was not reflective about racial pitfalls with crime news,

I don't really think about it. Which sounds really shallow and insensitive, but, I sort of, feel like it's my job to focus on what people do and, uh, I don't know that it's, I don't think a minority offender would be treated any differently or are portrayed any differently than anyone else.

This insensitivity to racial issues in crime coverage is not as problematic when looking at law enforcement respondents; law enforcement respondents seemed to try their best to be sensitive to racial issues in their own agencies, but it is not one of their primary responsibilities to reflect upon racial issues in news production. However, for media respondents, whose responsibility it is to reflect upon such issues, such insensitivity is far more problematic. This lack of reflexivity opens the door for racially insensitive coverage, which can lead the public to form inaccurate and biased impressions of the connections between race and crime (Entman & Rojecki, 2000).

Gender Issues with Coverage

As with racial issues, many researchers have pointed out gender issues in crime news (Benedict, 1992; Chesney-Lind, 1997; Carmody, 1998; Stanko, 2001; Leishman & Mason, 2003;

Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). As with questions about racial issues, few respondents had much insight regarding gender issues. In fact, these questions yielded far less data than even questions about racial issues. The great majority of respondents did not acknowledge that there were any issues with the way crime news portrayed female offenders. The typical response to questions about gender was a somewhat wandering discourse, essentially claiming that there were so few female offenders that gender issues were nearly moot. Additionally, many respondents seemed somewhat bewildered by these questions, as if they had never thought about them. A North Carolina news director gave a response that typifies the views of most respondents,

My answer to these particular questions would always be no because if I saw a problem I would try and do it differently. We try and do as best we can. On the female offenders it's one thing to point out, since we cover mostly the crimes that affect people immediately you know, we don't see a lot of that, female offenders. I mean there are some, but there's not a lot.

There is some validity to this claim; female offenders make up a far smaller proportion of overall crime than males do and as such are featured far less in crime news (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004). However, such a view is also insensitive. Scholarly research has pointed out significant issues in the way female offenders are covered in the news (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 2004; Stanko, 2001). To claim there is no problem because females are rarely featured in the news again speaks to the problems of oversimplification in crime reporting.

However, when asked about female victims of crime, specifically domestic violence (DV) victims, some respondents did acknowledge that there were issues in how domestic violence was covered. Many media respondents felt that the news about domestic violence was

lacking. Some, however, qualified this view by adding that DV was not really news in that it was a family matter or that it was only really news when there was extreme violence. One television reporter stated,

Number one, it's a family issue. Two, it has no, you know, who cares? The public doesn't care if a husband and wife get into a verbal confrontation. But then again, if the husband pulls out a gun and shoots his wife, that's news.

It is perhaps true that it would be ridiculous for media to report on verbal arguments and other such trivial incidents. However, this response also exhibits extreme insensitivity to the intricacies of domestic violence as a social problem, ignoring broader issues such as rates of DV victimization and patterns of escalating violence. This type of simplistic reasoning was quite common during interviews. This tendency to deal with crimes as isolated incidents and lack of acknowledgement of broader issues will be further addressed later.

Similar to Stanko's (2001) contentions, some respondents did acknowledge, to a limited extent, the stereotype of the "helpless" female victim. A television reporter stated,

I think there's more, I would say there's more of an emphasis on female crime victims just because females, not all females, but females have the reputation of being kind of helpless when it comes to standing up for yourself, fighting back. You know, that's why guys should never hit a woman. That's an assault right there. I think there is more of an attention on if there's a female victim rather than a male victim.

It is important to note that while this respondent vaguely acknowledges the stereotype of the "helpless" female victim, he does not imply that it is inaccurate or problematic. He instead takes a neutral stance towards such a stereotype, seeming to believe that it is generally true. Only a

few respondents even remarked about issues regarding female victims and implications of helplessness. Furthermore, their ideas regarding such issues were vague and incomplete.

One respondent, however, did express a rather insightful opinion regarding DV coverage. Similar to Carmody's (1998) findings, she felt that DV coverage often facilitated victim blaming, failing to explain the intricacies of domestic victimization,

I think the way sometimes it's reported, people have a tendency to wonder why didn't she just leave. It's not that easy and so we don't necessarily report it as much as we should and really talk about the real stuff behind domestic violence.

Once again, the importance of this observation is not its occurrence but the lack of others like it. The inability of most respondents to acknowledge many pertinent issues relating to domestic violence speaks poorly for the possibility of producing accurate news that can effect an informed and sensitive populace.

Media Influence on the Criminal Justice System

A main focus of this study was the influence of news coverage on criminal justice policy. Respondents' discussions of this subject yielded substantial data. Most respondents felt that media had significant impact on justice policy while their opinions on the value of such influence varied widely. In line with their value of media's "watchdog" and public service roles, many respondents felt that media's influence on policy was positive. Often, respondents felt that media spread awareness of crimes, leading to policy shifts that effectively dealt with such problems. One respondent, who had worked in both law enforcement and media, gave a specific example in which she felt media had effected positive change,

Now, because that law, nobody was using that law, through news stories we were doing, the TV station was really picked up on it. And so we were able to get the health

department, because the health department is the one who can actually issue the warrant, it's actually a health department warrant, we were able to get them and force them to start using that health department warrant. So what we would do, in all the individuals we would arrest and pick up for prostitution, they were soliciting or it was they were purchasing sex... on all those arrests, we would submit those names to the health department every week. Health department would then check their records to see if any of them had HIV or any of those diseases. If they had, bam! So, you know, they're going to court, they're thinking they're going to get slapped on the wrist, because soliciting is a misdemeanor, look at, I mean you could die from going to bed with somebody, but soliciting is a misdemeanor in the state of North Carolina. And so, we were really able to clamp down and let folks know, you can't go out here and turn tricks on the street [if you have an STD].

This respondent is describing the implementation of a policy that severely penalized prostitutes who had sexually transmitted diseases, sentencing them to up to two years in prison. It is important to note this respondent's approval of such a get-tough approach. Such sentiments were common in interviews with both law enforcement and media respondents, perhaps more so with media respondents. Another important element of this passage is its illumination of one of Surette's (1996) three models for media influence. In this model, media coverage spreads public awareness, leading to policy change.

Respondents' remarks about media influence on policy most often related to situations they believed exhibited media influence that effected positive outcomes. However, more than a few respondents saw a different, negative side to media influence. One reporter voiced his disapproval for media influence on policy,

I remember I applied for a job, I looked at a job, I didn't apply for it but I was looking at a job on journalismjobs.com. I looked at an ad and they said "we want a reporter that is..." like they have these ads they want hardnosed reporters that aren't afraid to ask questions and that's normal, pretty usual. But then this one was like, and I took notice of it because it sort of seemed to be backwards of what I believe the process should be. It was like "we want a reporter that's so hardnosed that breaks stories that they end up setting the agenda for local government." It wasn't necessarily law enforcement. The idea was that local government would decide what they do based on trying to address the problems that were exposed in the newspaper.

Respondents' remarks about such media effects were often vague. Many respondents believed that media have significant influence on policy but struggled to find specific examples of this.

One police chief expressed these sentiments,

I don't have a real good example, but there's a lot of times that, in response to media coverage, legislators will come up with a law or propose a law that, really without consulting with the people who are responsible for enforcing it, who are responsible for trying it, who are responsible for punishing for it. And sometimes there are some financial impediments to that too. Like, you know, as an example, sex offender registration. They mandate that police departments monitor sex offenders but they don't give you any resources to be able to do that. So they add responsibilities to police departments and law enforcement, without providing additional resources to be able to accomplish what they are gonna do. I know that's the legislature that does that, but sometimes that's the media.

This passage also illustrates another recurring sentiment among law enforcement respondents. Several of them stated that in response to media pressure, legislators sometimes passed laws that were impossible to enforce with the resources allocated to law enforcement at the time. Two respondents specifically cited sex offender registration laws as examples.

As stated earlier, while conducting interviews, I strived to be particularly sensitive to examples of “crime control theater” (Griffin & Miller, 2008). Several respondents cited examples or made references to incidents that, while not exactly fitting Griffin & Miller’s definition (see p. 35), came very close. One deputy chief described such an incident,

And then what happens, what happens is the legislators are responsive to people that get upset at something, constantly reacting, media, you know when we have a news story out there about, last year, I think it was last summer, we had the woman that was seriously assaulted at [an intersection] behind the church. Did that drive what we did? You’re damn right it did, because the public was going to say, “Well what are you doing about it?” So, we made sure that while we have our ideas about what happened and all that, we understand the public perception. We’ve got to make sure we have strong reaction to what’s going on.

Later he expanded upon this,

Look at the laws, and I’ll tell you what one of the interesting things to do is if you ever get a chance to, watch the media coverage of certain events, then pull up the session tracking of the about bills that are introduced about subjects and look how many legislators run in to submit bills. Now they understand most of them will never be passed but they’re trying to appease a constituent group. “Oh yeah, I put in a bill on that, I can’t help it that those other jerks didn’t want it the way I wanted to.”

Another law enforcement respondent, a chief of university police, expressed similar views, adding that such incidents often yield ineffective responses,

And campuses, I think, all across the country now are having meetings about how to try to satisfy the media appetite, when in fact as it relates to a responsibility to keep the community informed and alerted to a potential threat. My responsibility is not to try to satisfy the media's interest. Our response is to try to contain an incident and prevent further loss of life or damage to property. But, [it adds to the] the pressures that are existing on law enforcement in general [and] the University, specifically. There seems to be a segment of the population that really expects law enforcement to focus on not responding to the incident, but focusing on getting information out to the public, and I really think that's counterproductive.

Though responses such as the above were more common in law enforcement, some media respondents did allude to the possibility of crime control theater (Griffin & Miller, 2008).

One news director stated,

And they know if we do an investigative report that people are getting out of speeding tickets, or that DWIs are not being convicted, and things like that. A politically ambitious politician or local or sheriff or so, I'm not saying in this case but, they certainly could see that there would be an opportunity to make a name for themselves if there is a public uproar about something by stepping in and correcting that situation.

This response is typical of media remarks surrounding this subject. Though some media respondents acknowledged the possibility of crime control theater, their grasp of it was vague and their attitude was generally that crime control theater was possible but they had never witnessed it.

Recognition of crime control theater, both in a vague and more concrete sense was not a majority view. More than a few respondents had some insights into this subject but most did not. Opinions constituted a continuum that ranged from belief that media had a substantial impact on policy to denial of such influence. One respondent exhibited such denial,

I think every department has a public information policy, I do not think that the media coverage influences the department's policies at all. I think that policies are in place to deal with the public as they should be. For the most part, I think those policies are followed. They need to be in place so there is one voice, or two voices, coming out of a police agency to speak on behalf of a police department.

It is important to note that this respondent is speaking to media's influence on law enforcement solely, not the entire criminal justice system. Still, it is unrealistic to believe that media coverage never affects law enforcement policies and operations. Such a denial is indicative of insensitivity to the immense power of news and media. While such insensitivity was the exception in this study, few respondents exhibited an acute sensitivity to media influence on policy. This lack of sensitivity to media influence is troubling when it is manifest in the principal agents responsible for news production (law enforcement and media personnel). As Surette (1992) points out and I noted earlier, media effects are complex and difficult to understand. However, media effects on policy should be of paramount concern to both media and law enforcement. When the products of an individual's labor have the power to change an important social institution such as the justice system, such an individual wields great power and thus has great responsibility to society.

Explanations and Rationales Behind Coverage

While all respondents identified some issues with crime news, such acknowledgements were usually qualified by some sort of rationale or explanation. Not surprisingly, such explanations were wide-ranging, attributing problems to a variety of factors, ranging from personality traits of reporters to the structural nature of the news business.

Often, respondents acknowledged problems in coverage but claimed that such problems were isolated springing from a few “bad apple” stations or individuals. A few media respondents claimed that issues such as sensationalism were the products of a few unscrupulous stations. One television reporter stated,

Some, you know, there are stations around the country who have a reputation for, I don't want to say yellow journalism, but sensationalizing crime. They will do that, a lot of viewers don't like it, but a lot of viewers do.

Though replicated by a couple other comments, this was not a majority view among media respondents. However, this theme was far more common among law enforcement respondents. Many felt that sensational and distorted coverage was often the product of “bad apple” reporters. One deputy chief stated,

I have found that sometimes there is a reporter who is particularly engaging in, you know, some sort of type of relentless questioning, pursuing something that they have been looking into which may or may not be factual, it may be frivolous, but again... [you have to] maintain your composure, be professional with them and provide them with the information that you are able to give out.

Another respondent, one that worked in both media and law enforcement, voiced a similar view, adding emphasis on reporters' personalities,

But I also think it affects our opinions and a lot of times in some of the news stories, the reporter's personal opinions do come through. We have to, you know, news folks have to be careful about it. And I don't know if I even answered your question, I don't know if that answered it, but I do know it really has a lot to do with the personality, the morals of the reporter, how they report the crime.

Another theme that dealt with reporter traits was voiced quite often. Though many media respondents said this trend is decreasing, traditionally in print journalism, beginning reporters are often given the crime "beat" for their first assignment. Many respondents, especially law enforcement, felt that reporters' youth or inexperience contributed to inaccurate coverage. One reporter stated, "But yeah, I think numerous mistakes are made early on with young reporters because they simply don't understand the procedure."

While some respondents felt that reporters' personalities contributed to problematic coverage, many also felt the personalities of news directors and editors contributed, often more so than reporters, to such coverage. One deputy chief stated, "There has been some pretty crappy reporting that I've seen over time but sometimes I don't blame it so much on the reporters as much as I do on the editors." A media respondent echoed this opinion,

And it depends on the personality of the person who's working the desk. If they are a compassionate person, if they're well balanced, if they believe that the citizens of this city have a right to hear it all, and those are what we call producers and assignment editors, they're going to try and make sure that their newscast is filled with a variety of information. But if they're more concerned with just getting the grey and gory details out there because they believe that's what sells and gets people to tune in, those are the types

of stories you have. So it really has a lot to do with the personality of the people on the staff that you have on your desk.

Such contentions are obviously logical. Individuals' personalities are bound to be manifest in their labor. However, to claim that reporters' and editors' personalities are the major factor contributing to problematic news coverage ignores the broader trends of distortion in crime news. Distorted coverage occurs so widely that it cannot be explained by personality traits alone. There simply can't be that many "bad apple" reporters and/or editors/directors. While no respondent claimed that reporters' or news directors' personalities were solely responsible for issues in coverage, the constant recurrence of these two themes shows a heavy emphasis on individual responsibility, one that is not surprising given the individualistic nature of American society.

Many respondents were quick to identify individual factors that contributed to problematic coverage. Still, many respondents, mostly media, also claimed structural factors were to blame for issues in coverage. Two respondents said that media outlets' business and advertising interests could affect coverage. One news director stated,

But I also realize that our television station makes money on contracting with local advertisers and national advertisers, and that stories that we do could affect them in a positive or negative manner. My goal daily is to protect the folks, the 40 some people I have in the news room, from ever having to deal with that or understand that. Their job is to go out and get the information and to be as honest and truthful as possible in their presentation. If a business or a community leader has done something, we just have to have the facts, and we can't sugar coat it or we can't suppress it because of the other side of it and their potential business interest in our television station. My job is to deflect that

for them and then also to turn around and talk to the business end of this and hear their concerns and tell them what we are doing and keep them in the loop so they are not blindsided with the fact that we might go on the evening news with the fact that a major advertiser was arrested and charged with something I don't know. So I'm kind of the go-between and it's a daily struggle for me in terms of making sure I am riding both sides of the fence.

Another respondent, a former news director, expressed a similar view,

I think it affects the types of things they report because once again, the bottom line is about the mighty dollar. Of course some of them would argue it's not. And for the most part I believe our local stations do a pretty good job with what they have to report. I don't know if you've looked at this but TV reporters in this community do not make a lot of money. Managers at McDonald's or Hardee's make more than TV reporters. It may look glamorous and glitzy, but in this market, they don't make much money. And so, I think they do a good job with what they have, however I do believe that sales, ads and a lot of things do affect what they cover, what they don't cover and the time to interview they can spend on a specific story.

It is important to note that both respondents who expressed this theme were news directors (one was formerly a news director). No reporters acknowledged advertising or business interests as affecting coverage. In fact, reporters seemed to dismiss such effects. One print reporter stated,

So I think that's a business question in a broader sense. That affects me but I think that the old idea of you know there's the business model newspapers and that may have some effect. But the old, you know well this person buys some advertising so give them well it that doesn't happen. It's not an issue at all.

This respondent later stated,

Well, in my job, I don't really. To be more specific to that question do I ever have the publisher or advertisers coming to me and saying do this, do that? The answer to that is absolutely no, doesn't happen. But in general I can't say it doesn't happen in the industry, but it doesn't happen to me.

While this reporter acknowledged that such effects may occur, his generally dismissive view was replicated by other reporters. Though it may be true that this respondent never sees business influence interfering with his job, it is all but inevitable that media's business orientation will inhibit reporters' ability to serve the public as they claim they do. Because of this, reporters must be sensitive to the dimensions of such limitations. To fail to recognize that allows for insidious manipulation of the news, which, as some scholars have asserted, is pervasive in the media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Chomsky, 2002).

While few respondents identified business interests as affecting coverage, many respondents claimed that journalistic industry practices and trends affected coverage quite a bit. As some scholars have pointed out, media conglomeration has resulted in decreasing budgets for newsrooms (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003; Gans, 2004). Many respondents were sensitive to this, claiming they were supplied with decreasing resources and increasing expectations. One print reporter pointed out, "We have like what eight reporters covering a town of a hundred thousand people and that's not unusual." Another respondent added,

I definitely, you know what I see, you know the former news directors at both TV stations, both of them are dealing with a staff that is like a fourth of what they had. I'm also seeing more crime news on TV. I think as payroll shrinks, crime news is going to increase because everything's, like you said everything's, their mug shots are provided,

the [PIOs at the police and sheriff's department] provide all the information, a monkey could write it. If there are few resources and you still have to fill those minutes, because I used to work in TV too, I definitely I think there's going to be an increase. Also, because the paper has to account for clicks on websites, which is why the web, [the local newspaper] now, you have to keep doing another page, another page because they are increasing their clicks. If a hundred million people are going to click on dead mom in the freezer, you're going to put their smarter people on it. You're going to pull, you know, people that would normally be covering county government, I definitely see it.

In line with Gans' (2004) assertions, this respondent's view that crime news is used as filler by resource-strapped outlets was replicated by several respondents. Also important to note in this passage is this respondent's emphasis on the changes the Internet is bringing. Many respondents echoed this idea; they felt that the Internet was not only providing an additional conduit through which reporters could disseminate information but also was increasing expectations of timeliness for news stories.

The effect of time constraints was a constantly recurring theme. Virtually everyone knows that journalists value timeliness. The reporter rushing to meet deadline with a great "scoop" is a pervasive image in popular culture. However, these respondents repeatedly emphasized how they did not have time to produce crime stories that addressed issues to an adequate degree. One reported stated, "But yeah, that's a huge issue of ours. Deadline is everything in this business, it just, you know, there's nothing more frustrating than having something come down minutes before we go live on our broadcast." Though he believed this was a unique view, another reporter expressed a similar view that was echoed by more than one respondent,

I have a different opinion than most people on this. I think it's a, I think the biggest problem is the time constraints. I mean if you had more time you could get more.

There's a natural time constraint of a daily paper that you have to get things done by a certain time.

Even law enforcement respondents were sensitive to the time constraints put upon reporters. One chief stated,

You know, and what's behind it, they don't have time. People need instant information, (snapping fingers). They just want to put somebody's face on the news saying this is the twenty third homicide in [this city] this year and you know that's it.

Though many respondents believed time constraints truly inhibited their ability to produce quality crime news, one respondent felt that this emphasis on time constraints was a poor excuse used to justify bad reporting,

We throw anything up on the news just to say we have a story and we don't give the time to the story that we need. A lot of people say we don't have the time. Yes we do. We have the time and if you're a smart enough reporter, you know the kind of questions to ask so you can get that information.

Though this was not echoed by any other respondents, this particular respondent seemed to have a great deal of insight into the media industry and was far from reticent in addressing issues that other respondents seemed to gloss over. Obviously, time constraints are an issue for news personnel. However, the extent to which such constraints truly affect coverage or are unavoidable is an issue that is left unanswered by this study.

Many respondents admitted that the nature of the media industry inhibited their ability to report crime. However, two factors illuminate the inconsistencies and inadequacies of many

respondents' views. As mentioned earlier, many media respondents continually described their job as one whose primary role was to serve the public. Such claims were often put forth when discussing what respondents believed to be positive functions of the media. However, when discussing problematic issues, the same respondents were quick to point out that media were essentially a business and had to keep profits in mind. Second, related to respondents' reliance on profit-driven ideology, though respondents identified some of the dimensions through which business interests affected coverage, few found this overtly problematic. Instead, respondents often took the acritical attitude that such problems were a result of "the nature of the beast." One print reporter expressed his views on such issues,

I hate to say this but I think as a local reporter a lot of that stuff is over my head. I mean I've talked to enough people who are sort of doing what you're doing. Studying media and look at the wider issues, I really don't. I kind of have my head down in what's going on in my community.

This view that such problems are inevitable indicates respondents' acceptance of and submission to capitalist ideology that undermine news' ability to inform the public. If such respondents truly believe their primary role is to serve the public, instead of accepting the status quo, they should seek to be agents of change.

In addition to rationalizing problematic coverage as the inevitable consequence of industry trends, many respondents also implicated viewers as a major factor driving distortions in coverage, specifically media's emphasis on violent crime. Many respondents admitted that news focuses on particularly grisly crimes. However, these admissions were commonly qualified with the claim that viewer preferences drove such coverage. One reporter stated,

I mean I'm sure you've heard the expression if it bleeds it leads, crime news is our, as bad as it usually is a homicide or a fire, I mean the circumstances are bad, but that's what our viewers want. They want, they want crime coverage.

This view was quite common; almost all media respondents referenced how viewers drive coverage. Respondents often explained this by citing viewer ratings; they explained that time and again, unusual, grisly stories had the highest ratings. While this may be true, media respondents seemed to reify ratings, believing they were the ultimate measure of viewer interests. However, ratings only measure viewers' preferences of one media product over others. Since media products are so homogenized currently, ratings fail to account for the possibility that viewers would prefer news content that is fundamentally different from the status quo (Chomsky, 2002; Ganz, 2004). Furthermore, several respondents claimed that a preference for violence and gore was the nature of current American culture. This acritical view seemingly ignores the immense socializing effect of media, and thus, their pervasive influence in creating such a culture.

Views Concerning Analytical/Critical Coverage

In addition to their views of problematic coverage, I asked respondents about ways to improve coverage. Respondents broached the topic of analytical coverage quite a bit. Views on analytical and critical reporting varied widely. Some respondents felt that critical and analytical coverage was lacking and sorely needed. On the other hand, some respondents felt that such coverage was not their responsibility. Respondents who felt that critical coverage was needed often couched their discussions of this need in remarks about the tendency for some media to act as mere relay stations for law enforcement. One print reporter expressed such a view,

The way the relationship works now is we essentially get press releases from the Sheriff's Department and the [municipal police department] and other agencies as well. And I can definitely speak most knowledgeably about those. So a lot of times we get this information, as reporters, and I mean just in general, it doesn't matter what media and you just kind of run what you get from them, without asking a lot of questions about the information that's sent.

Another print reporter voiced his opinion that critical coverage was lacking,

Can I say I've done that every time? I've probably have been dually persuaded or influenced to not be as critical as I need to be before, and that bothers me. And it bothers me that others have not been as critical as they need to be. So, overall I think we could do our jobs better.

This view was recurrent but not unanimous among respondents. While most media respondents felt there was a need for increased critical coverage, some respondents took the opposite view.

One television reporter stated,

I mean here I think we do everything just right. I mean I've sure you've heard the expression if it bleeds it leads, crime news is our, as bad as it usually is a homicide or a fire, I mean the circumstances are bad but that's what our viewers want. They want, they want crime coverage. That and severe weather are the two story genres that our viewers are interested in. I wouldn't say we are critical, at all.

Such an acritical view was shadowed by a North Carolina Sheriff, describing how he felt media personnel need only relay information provided by PIO's, "He gives them, he sends them information and... all they really have to do is take it, cut it and paste it." While such a view was not replicated across all law enforcement respondents, most of them felt similarly.

As some research has illuminated, one dimension to media's acritical nature is their tendency to show law enforcement in an overly positive light (Leishman & Mason, 2003). However, few respondents acknowledged such a tendency. Neither law enforcement nor media respondents felt that crime news portrayed law enforcement in an inappropriately positive light. In fact, they usually emphasized conflict between media and law enforcement that ensues because of reporting on police scandals. In fact, this preoccupation with police scandals serves as a distraction for media, inhibiting their ability to report on the shortcomings of our justice system, especially the unrealistic burden put upon law enforcement to catch all criminals and prevent crime. A few respondents did reference media's overly positive portrayal of law enforcement. A news director stated,

Yeah, I think they're usually the good guys who make the arrest. I think it goes back to the fact that staffs are short, there's lots to fill and by and large law enforcement pretty much determines for us what we cover. So if [the PIO] at the sheriff's office is like "we're going to have this big press conference about this drug bust," media show up, they get to be the heroes. That shapes the coverage.

While this respondent is aware of the tendency for news to portray law enforcement in a positive light, it is also important to note that she does not acknowledge some of the consequences of such a positive portrayal, specifically the fact that such a positive portrayal builds unreasonable expectations for law enforcement (Leishman & Mason, 2003). Essentially, media respondents' attitudes concerning crime news' positive portrayal of law enforcement tended to be superficial. Instead of recognizing that crime news does indeed portray police as more successful than they really are, many respondents denied this, instead choosing to focus on their supposed vigilance toward police misconduct. Even the one respondent who did acknowledge the positive portrayal

of law enforcement failed to understand its true implications. Instead of acknowledging how this established unfairly high expectations of law enforcement, this respondent focused on how it made police look like the “good guys.”

Summary of Findings

These findings provide a significantly illuminating yet incomplete picture of the issues and trends contributing to the production of crime news. Several themes emerged relating to the relationship between law enforcement and media personnel. Respondents confirmed that this relationship is vital for the functioning of both law enforcement agencies and news outlets. Such a relationship is mutually beneficial, symbiotic in that law enforcement is able to disseminate information to the public through the news and news outlets are supplied with ample material for their products (Gans, 2004). Despite the generally symbiotic state of this relationship, this homeostasis is disrupted sporadically by conflicts, usually springing from disputes over the release of information or reporting of police misconduct. However, both groups of respondents feel that their interactions have become increasingly cooperative over the past decade or so. One of the major forces that has driven this increasing cooperation is the proliferation of the PIO. PIO's are often able to skillfully navigate interactions that pose significant opportunities for conflict. While most respondents felt PIO's were a generally positive thing, some respondents pointed out that there is another side to PIO's. Reliance on PIO's can lead to a situation where media become mere relay stations for law enforcement, eliminating reporter discretion and analysis. Additionally, the use of PIO's is one part of a general effort on the part of law enforcement to better manage their image. This image management, while likely essential for law enforcement agencies, can possibly skew coverage towards the law enforcement point of view.

This study found that assessments of crime coverage as a whole were generally positive. Respondents felt that coverage was mostly accurate and fair, however, not without some limiting issues. Respondents believed news adequately performed two functions for the public; spreading awareness of crime problems and illuminating public officials' corruption and/or misconduct. Furthermore many respondents acknowledged that media were one of the only sources of crime information for the public.

Despite their general approval of crime news, respondents found differences between print and televised crime news. Essentially, respondents felt that print news did a better job of covering crime than television, being both more in-depth and analytical. However, most respondents claimed the fundamental differences between the two media caused this. Television journalists work through a terser medium that provides them less time and space in which to convey news.

Respondents' opinions on sensationalism varied greatly. Media respondents tended to believe that the term was overused and a mischaracterization of aggressive reporting. However, many respondents did acknowledge sensationalism but often qualified this acknowledgement by claiming sensationalism was extremely limited.

Opinions regarding infotainment were split. Many respondents had positive impressions of infotainment. However such positive opinions often came from an acritical business perspective or a law-and-order perspective holding that crime is out of control and ever-greater public awareness was needed. More than a few respondents also had negative opinions about infotainment, echoing some scholarly criticisms of infotainment, believing it was sensational, inflamed public fears, and poorly conveyed the reality of crime (Surette, 2003; Carmody, 1998).

Despite their initially positive assessments of coverage, most respondents identified some serious shortcomings of crime news. Many respondents felt that crime news over-emphasized violence, ignored white-collar crime, or inflamed public fear of crime by exaggerating victimization of innocent individuals. One, but *only* one, respondent acknowledged that crime news ignored the social causes of crime. Furthermore, respondents generally agreed that crime news was front-end loaded but ignored the implications this had for the public's understanding of the consequences of our criminal justice system (Surette, 1992). When it came to racial and gender issues, respondents exhibited significant insensitivity. Though some respondents echoed some of the criticisms posed by Mendelberg (1997), Carmody (1998), Entman and Rojecki (2000), Leishman and Mason (2003), Chesney-Lind and Shelden (2004) and others, the overwhelming majority of respondents were insensitive to issues of gender, race and class. Furthermore, many respondents felt that racial issues were exaggerated in the media.

When asked about media's influence on the criminal justice system, respondents exhibited more awareness than when discussing issues of race and gender in crime news. Almost all respondents identified some sort of media influence on the criminal justice system. Many respondents identified positive examples of media's influence on policy. Often, such remarks were couched in approving discussions of get-tough measures. Some, though few, respondents acknowledged the negative ways in which media can influence policy. Law enforcement respondents especially were cognizant of crime control theater (Griffin & Miller, 2008).

When respondents acknowledged issues with media coverage, they often qualified such recognition with one of several explanations or rationales. Many respondents were willing to blame problematic coverage on personal traits of reporters and/or news directors. Many

respondents identified ways in which business interests and practices affected coverage negatively. However, respondents generally took an acritical view of such issues. As stated earlier, such a view is problematic in that it allows for insidious manipulation of media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Chomsky, 2002). Finally, many respondents expressed their opinion that viewer preferences largely drove coverage, ignoring the homogeneity of media and lack of viewer choices.

When respondents were asked about their opinions regarding ways in which coverage could be improved, they often brought up analytical or critical coverage. Opinions on this varied widely, however, from the view that such coverage was sorely needed to belief that this was not the function of reporters. Furthermore, discussions of analytical coverage often tied into respondents' discussions of the positive or negative portrayal of law enforcement. Respondents generally felt that reporters were critical of law enforcement by being vigilant in regards to misconduct. However, such a view fails to account for some the intricacies and consequences of media's positive portrayal of law enforcement.

As stated several times in preceding sections, the significance of findings relating to respondents' acknowledgement of distortions of news, media's influence on policy and other related issues lies not in recognition of such issues by a few respondents but in the overall rarity of it. Generally, respondents' grasp of issues relating to crime news was lacking significantly. Few respondents were sensitive to a large proportion of such issues. Furthermore, some respondents acknowledged almost no issues illuminated by research. That stated, I feel compelled to qualify such remarks. I make these contentions not to criticize respondents; they are not social scientists. They do not scour academic journals for research about crime news. However the lack of awareness and insensitivity illuminated in this study is still problematic

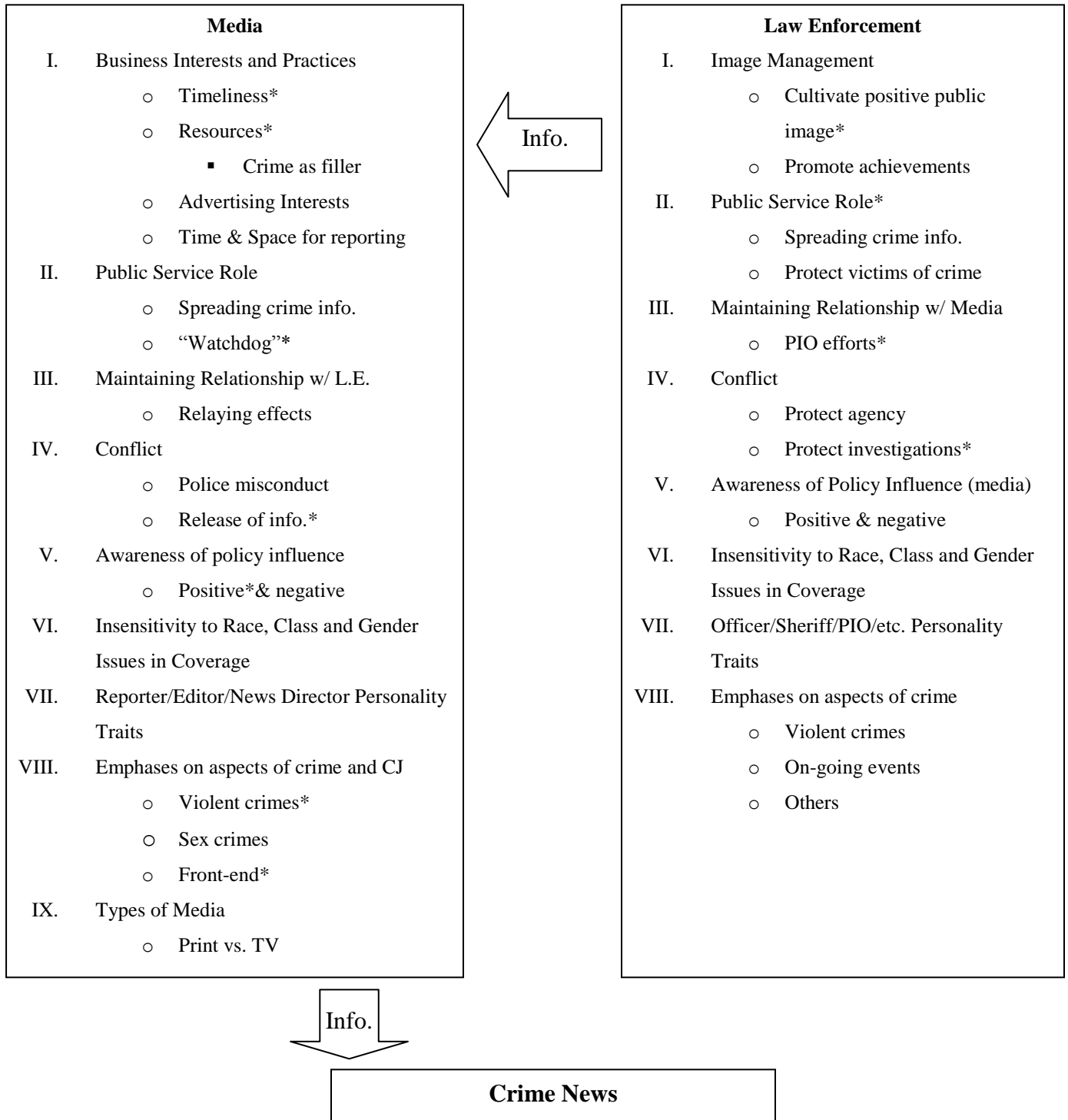
because it is reflective of hegemonic insensitivity which precludes the possibility of producing quality crime news that appropriately informs the public about crime and the criminal justice system.

In summary, these findings provide a glimpse of the processes and issues that feed into news production and, in concert with a social constructionist perspective, the constructed reality of crime in the United States (Best, 1990; Surette, 1992). This glimpse supplied by these findings does not however, constitute grounded theory or a coherent framework. However, as the conclusions section will illuminate, these findings lead toward a grounded theory that can reveal significant forces that contribute to media's role in constructing crime reality for our society.

CONCLUSION

Through analysis of these data, examining each theme and how it related to others, I constructed a framework for illustrating the issues, practices, and trends that influence how media and law enforcement use crime information to produce news. Looking at such themes as lenses and filters through which information passes in the production of crime news gives us some understanding of how these factors affect crime news. Each factor acts to strain, reflect, magnify, and/or minimize crime information, thus shaping coverage. While all factors are not working together continuously from either a law enforcement or media perspective, each acts intermittently, at times singularly and at times in concert with other factors. Figure 1 illustrates the framework I constructed illuminating each factor and which group each affects.

Figure 1- Lenses and Filters Affecting News Production



This chart is non-hierarchical; while some factors are emphasized by an asterisk as respondents agreed these were particularly salient themes, I could not ascertain a valid ranked order from these data. However, issues that I felt paralleled each other were under corresponding roman numerals (e.g. business interests and image management). Though the chart is non-hierarchical, it does illustrate the flow of information in news production, from law enforcement to media personnel and ultimately into crime news.

Roman numeral one under the media side of figure one is business interests. As described in the findings section, business interests affect coverage in several ways including the need for timeliness in news, decreasing resources faced by journalists, time and space constraints for media products, and advertising interests. The need for timeliness and decreasing resources were emphasized by respondents as the most salient issues related to business interests. Parallel to business interests in the media are law enforcement's image management efforts. While law enforcement agencies do not have business interests, in that they do not pursue profit, image management is similar to business interests in that most law enforcement respondents saw their public image and relationship with the community as vital to their overall success. Additionally, as research has pointed out, law enforcement agencies are increasingly taking a corporate public relations approach (Leishman & Mason, 2003).

Further down this chart, responsibility to the public is ascribed to both media and law enforcement. Both believed serving the public was an integral part of their job. While both groups see disseminating crime information as part of their responsibility to the public, their roles are also different in some ways. First, media see it as their job to serve as watchdogs, monitoring for misconduct and corruption in law enforcement, which, as mentioned earlier,

brings the two groups into conflict. Second, law enforcement is far more concerned with protecting the public and victims of crime while disseminating crime information.

Next, numeral three cites media's need to maintain a relationship with law enforcement, set parallel to law enforcement's need to maintain a relationship with media. On the media side it is important to note that if this relationship becomes too symbiotic, media run the danger of becoming relay stations for law enforcement. On the law enforcement side, PIO efforts can filter information and possibly skew crime news to a law enforcement perspective.

Numeral four references how conflict between the two groups affects coverage. Once again, the influences on each side are distinct. From a media perspective, conflict occurs because media believe it is their responsibility to expose police misconduct and secure the timely release of information. Such conflict can result in a decreased informational flow from law enforcement to media. From a law enforcement perspective, conflict occurs because they believe they must protect their agencies to some degree and most importantly, protect the integrity of criminal investigations.

Next we see that both groups' insensitivity to such issues as gender, race, and class act as lenses that shape coverage. As mentioned earlier, insensitivity to such issues precludes the possibility of resolving areas of problematic coverage that pertain to them. This effect seems to occur for both law enforcement and media.

Further along, figure one cites awareness of media's possible influence on policy as affecting coverage. However, it is important that, at least for media, their ideas on such influence tended to focus on the positive influence media can have on policy. While law enforcement respondents were more aware of negative influence, they did not emphasize such effects, so I didn't emphasize it in figure one.

Numeral seven cites how the personalities of actors on both sides affect coverage. On the media side, reporters, news directors, producers, and editors all affect the way in which crime is covered. Also on this side, it is important to note that youth and inexperience in crime reporters can feed into crime coverage. On the law enforcement side, police administrators, supervisors, PIOs, and officers may influence coverage. While the influence of personality traits is obvious, it's also important to note that personality traits will not only affect the nature of individual actors' influence but the degree to which individual actors will affect coverage.

Finally, figure one cites how emphases on certain aspects of the justice system affect coverage. On the media end, this is one if not the most important lenses shaping coverage. Media's emphasis, due to news values, on certain types of crime and aspects of the criminal justice system includes, but is not limited to, media's tendency to pay disproportionate attention to sex crimes, violent crimes, unusual crimes, and law enforcement activities (Jensen & Geber, 1998; Reiner, Livingstone & Allen, 2003; Surette, 2003). As explained earlier, such emphases distort the way in which the public and officials understand crime rates, criminal justice policies, etc. Obviously law enforcement will emphasize certain aspects of crime also. Law enforcement agents are bound to emphasize particularly violent or harmful crimes and those that constitute ongoing events (e.g. hostage or kidnapping situations).

While figure one cites no additional factors influencing law enforcement's role, one other factor significantly affects media's role in crime news production. Differences across types of media affect coverage; television news will inevitably be different than print. As respondents pointed out, print is often more detailed and analytical than TV news. Although respondents in this study acknowledged the differences between the media, it is important to qualify this; several respondents also pointed out that newspapers are in decline. Scholarly research confirms

this; newspaper circulation has been declining since the 1960s, especially among youth. Furthermore the increasing popularity of cable news stations and the Internet have increased rates of readership decline (Raeymaeckers, 2004; Raeymaeckers, 2002). This is problematic in that as TV news obtains a greater share of the news market, this simpler, less analytical brand of news will become an increasingly dominant force in constructing crime reality for the public.

Figure one provides a substantial, yet incomplete, illustration of factors that affect how both media and law enforcement contribute to the production of crime news. This framework illustrates how each factor is manifest for each group as well as how some factors in one group have counterparts in the opposite group. This provides an analytical foundation with which to examine crime news and illuminate the construction of crime reality. Furthermore, this framework coupled with further analysis revealed an additional layer of themes that yielded another, more significant set of conclusions.

Hegemonic Criminal Justice Attitudes, Episodic Thought, and Their Impacts

As I constructed the above framework and analyzed each theme across cases, I reached another level of conclusion that reveals a more telling mechanism affecting the production of crime news. As stated earlier, during interviews and analysis two unanticipated themes emerged from the data. Through analysis, I confirmed that these two themes were present across all cases. Each factor mentioned in the above framework was present intermittently but hegemonic criminal justice attitudes and episodic thinking were constant. Though their intensities and forms varied, both themes emerged in the transcripts of every interview at some point. Furthermore, these themes often emerged during remarks that indicated respondents' insensitivity to issues

with crime coverage. I will discuss how these themes affect crime coverage and its production later, but first it is necessary to explain each of these themes.

Many respondents displayed hegemonic attitudes toward criminal justice during these interviews. I describe these attitudes as hegemonic in that they are themes, constantly arising in crime news and claims-making, that reinforce and perpetuate the existing order of criminal justice (Thompson et al., 2000; Reiner, Livingstone & Allen, 2003; Surette, 2003). Following with a constructionist perspective, if such ideas are pervasively expressed by media, they will be widely held in society, dominating discourses surrounding crime (Surette, 1996). Such attitudes were usually conservative or acritical, sometimes both.

One theme that emerged frequently was respondents' views that crime was out of control. Both law enforcement and media respondents expressed such views with virtually equal frequency. One media respondent described a particularly heinous crime that she felt was far from rare,

She had a daughter and she gave her daughter over for sex in exchange for drugs and they ended up killing her daughter. You know, she was a drug addict, that kind of thing. Well it made headline news, everybody was like "this is horrible." Well it is horrible, but that's not news. It's not uncommon for someone who is strung out on crack or heroin, to take their kid, swap them for sex to some pervert, to get high. It happens. And so, it just amazes me how these things have been going on in our communities for years but nobody's investigating, nobody's exposing them. Law enforcement have to deal with it on a daily basis.

Such an alarmist view of crime was common, respondents frequently remarked how violent and grisly crimes were common, running rampant in American society. While claim that crime is

“out of control” is so value-laden that it is beyond empirical proof or disproof, it is important in that it represents an over-estimation of crime to some extent. One cannot truly say whether or not crime is out of control, but it is apparent that drug addicts selling their children for a fix is not common. Such an over-estimation of violent crime will inevitably inhibit an individual’s ability to critically analyze news coverage; if an individual over-estimates such crimes, they will not be able to realize the disproportionate representation of such crimes in the news.

Another hegemonic criminal justice attitude that was frequently expressed was the view that our current justice system was not punitive enough, that swifter and more severe punishment was needed in our justice system to effectively combat crime. Both groups of respondents expressed such a view but it was more common in media respondents. One former news director stated,

And it would expose sentencing and what we do in our state a lot because a lot of these cases, they’re hit on the wrists and allowed to walk out the back of the courtroom. You never hear anymore about it. I think if people found out that people are being arrested for the drugs, for the violations, for the domestic violence cases who are slapped on the back of the wrist, they would have a tendency to be a little bit more angry with the system itself and the system would be exposed.

This quote illustrates more a frustration with what the respondent viewed as inefficiency and inappropriate leniency, but this respondent also exhibited approval for get-tough measures such as severe sentencing guidelines. Again such a view will inevitably limit an individual’s ability to critically assess crime coverage. Without a doubt, individuals who exhibit approval of severe sentencing guidelines and other get-tough measures will not identify the overwhelming approval

of get-tough measures in the news and lack of attention paid to alternative measures as problematic.

Several respondents also expressed the view that adding more law enforcement officers was the best way to combat crime. This view was less common than the aforementioned two but was still recurrent. One television reporter stated, “There’s always going to be crime, I don’t know how you can improve it. I think the only ways to improve are to hire more officers, get better technology in order to solve cases.” Obviously, there may be some validity to such a claim, having more police officers could very likely reduce crime. However, the significance of such a view is not in that it is wrong or right but that holding such a view will inhibit an individual’s ability to critically analyze the portrayal of law enforcement in the news.

Finally, the most frequently expressed hegemonic criminal justice view, the most commonly occurring theme overall, in this study was respondents’ vision of white-collar crime as purely economic and/or less serious than street crime. Not a single respondent acknowledged the existence of corporate violence. Instead, respondents discussed white-collar crime in terms of embezzlement, tax fraud, and other types of theft. One reporter illustrated such a view plainly,

Well I mean, white- collar crime is not, nobody’s going to lose their life. I mean, I don’t know... unless you commit suicide. I don’t even know if I’d put that into the crime area. You know we’ve heard about it this past year and a half, you know people committing suicide. Some of Madoff’s victims may have committed suicide. Don’t quote me on that I’m not sure if that was the case but I’m pretty sure I heard about that. There’s actual physical [harm] with street crime, not all the time but, physical. Alright, here’s the

difference, there's physical and emotional harm with street crime but there's emotional harm with white-collar crimes.

Essentially, such a view precludes the possibility that an individual will be able to comprehend the extent to which media ignore white-collar crime. It is no secret that white-collar crime is less apparent in the news than street crime (most respondents did acknowledge this) (Leishman & Mason, 2003). However, media's characterization of white-collar crime as less harmful than street crime is far more problematic than the reduced attention paid to economic white-collar crime (Slingerland, Copes & Sloan, 2006; Reiman, 1995). Such views closely relate Reiman's (1995) contentions surrounding the "Typical Crime model." If society measures the most serious crimes in terms of physical harm and loss of life, white-collar crime is far more harmful than street crime. However media and, it seems, law enforcement don't recognize this fact. Furthermore, if those involved in the production of crime news don't realize the true harm caused by white-collar crime, crime news will obviously reflect such a lack of awareness, fail to account for class based inequities in the justice system, and almost completely ignore a pervasive social problem. This view, the other previously mentioned hegemonic attitudes, and others left out, collectively constitute an ideology about crime. Therefore, I will refer to these themes collectively as hegemonic crime ideology from here on.

While hegemonic crime ideology was frequently expressed during interviews, progressive views towards criminal justice were rare. Many respondents made remarks about reforming the criminal justice system. However, they almost always felt the system should be reformed in a conservative direction, adding more officers and increasing deterrent sentencing. Still, a few respondents did make remarks that showed their belief that the system should be reformed in a progressive direction. One deputy chief stated,

We do deal with shootings, like we should, assaults, like they should but sometimes I think our priorities are misplaced. Instead of taking the greater thing out there, and addressing it, but we've got to come up with alternatives. I understand I can't incarcerate everybody that burglarizes but... we've got to get more into the use of alternative methods of addressing it. As an example, you know, satellite tracking, the ankle bracelets, you know things like that to where we tie them into so we can know where they are. I think there's a lack of honesty about what's the true crime problem in our country. The true crime problem is property crime, and you know, it's not as sensational, and uh, when you get to traffic, more people get killed on our highways, double the number of people get killed on our highways every year than get killed in murders. Yet, there's no seriousness to it.

He continued,

Looking at property crime, looking at drugs out there, we can't lock them all up, I mean, it's impossible. We're always going to say lock 'em up. Cities are going to say lock 'em up. Are you gonna spend the, you know, do I really want a country full of prisons? I don't. I think it's an embarrassment, this country, the number of people we have in jail. It really is.

Such a view, that we need to fundamentally change our efforts to combat crime, stands in stark contrast to the view that we can punish, patrol and spend crime away. In the end, the respondents that expressed progressive views were more sensitive to problems in crime coverage.

Like hegemonic views of criminal justice, episodic thought was exhibited to some extent by all respondents. Episodic thought is a concept that I developed as I analyzed these data. It is

inspired by Surette's (1996) contention that crime news is episodic in nature. Essentially, crime news treats each crime as an isolated incident, failing to relate it to broader trends and social context. While conducting interviews, I noticed that many respondents tended to think about crime in such a manner. Such a theme is difficult to wholly illustrate through quotes; it emerged more from my overall impression of respondents' interviews rather than isolated passages. However, there are several sub-themes that illustrate episodic thinking to some extent.

Some respondents asserted that if news followed singular cases through all stages of the criminal justice system, it would address the major issues with crime coverage. One print reporter stated how he felt some cases that were extensively reported upon gave a realistic picture of crime,

Like if you're looking at those breaking news stories no they are giving people in the community a picture of the process that started. I think that is the first step. I definitely think that there are times when, if you put together what I do and what [another reporter] does, we don't get it with all the stories but I think there are certain stories like major cases, we really do. Like a shooting will happen or something, someone will be killed, there will be a first breaking news story that says this is what happened. Then the next day I'll go and talk to the family of the victim, talk to them talk about what happened. Then say a suspect hasn't been arrested, I'll go talk to a detective. It might be, it could be several months down the line before he realizes "you know what I'm stuck, there's benefit for me to talk to the newspaper." There are definitely cases where it does provide a really good picture, and then there are cases where it doesn't.

In some ways, this is true; following cases through the various stages of the criminal justice system would illuminate the consequences of the system to some extent and would give citizens

more information about crime and criminal justice. However, this is not the panacea that many respondents seemed to think it is. Analysis of singular cases will never be able to illuminate broad trends and the social context of crime.

Another sub-theme that illuminates episodic thinking is the view, expressed by some respondents, that explanations of singular events is the same thing as explaining crime as a social problem. When asked about his views on how news explained crime as a social problem, one chief stated,

I really, I've got to tell you I haven't seen a lot of coverage on that. To me personally, I think they look at the event happening, with the exception of shootings, and perhaps serial rapists or things like that I don't think they really look into the background or the mindset or the *mens rea* [criminal intent] if you will, what was going through that offender, that led him up, unless it's a high profile case, I don't think they do that.

While this respondent most likely understands that psychological factors don't explain the broader phenomena of social problems, his remarks show a tendency to refer to individual level factors in explaining crime. As with the previously mentioned theme, this ignores, or at least downplays, sociological factors that contribute to crime.

Many respondents also tended to emphasize the value of factual accuracy while ignoring the possibility that news, while factually accurate, could be thematically misleading (Surette, 2003). When asked if they felt media produced a distorted portrayal of crime, many media respondents responded that they produced stories according to the facts, so they couldn't be producing an inaccurate portrayal of crime. One news director stated,

Well, crime news is based on reality so we're not making this stuff up. We'll report that there are, I think one year we had 263 armed robberies in [this city] which was, I forget

the increase but I think it was like a 60% increase from one year to the next. We looked at what was behind that. We reported most of those armed robberies in our paper and then we went back and got the records and analyzed where they were. So, I don't think we were, I don't think we overemphasize everything. We try to make it as realistic as, we try to relate to real life.

This quote does illustrate some analysis on the part of journalists, going beyond the facts of singular incidents. However, this analysis focused on local, community level influences, ignoring wider structural factors that contribute to crime. Stories that go beyond crimes as singular incidents indeed do a better job of contextualizing crime, but they may remain, like incident-level crime stories, thematically misleading while being factually accurate.

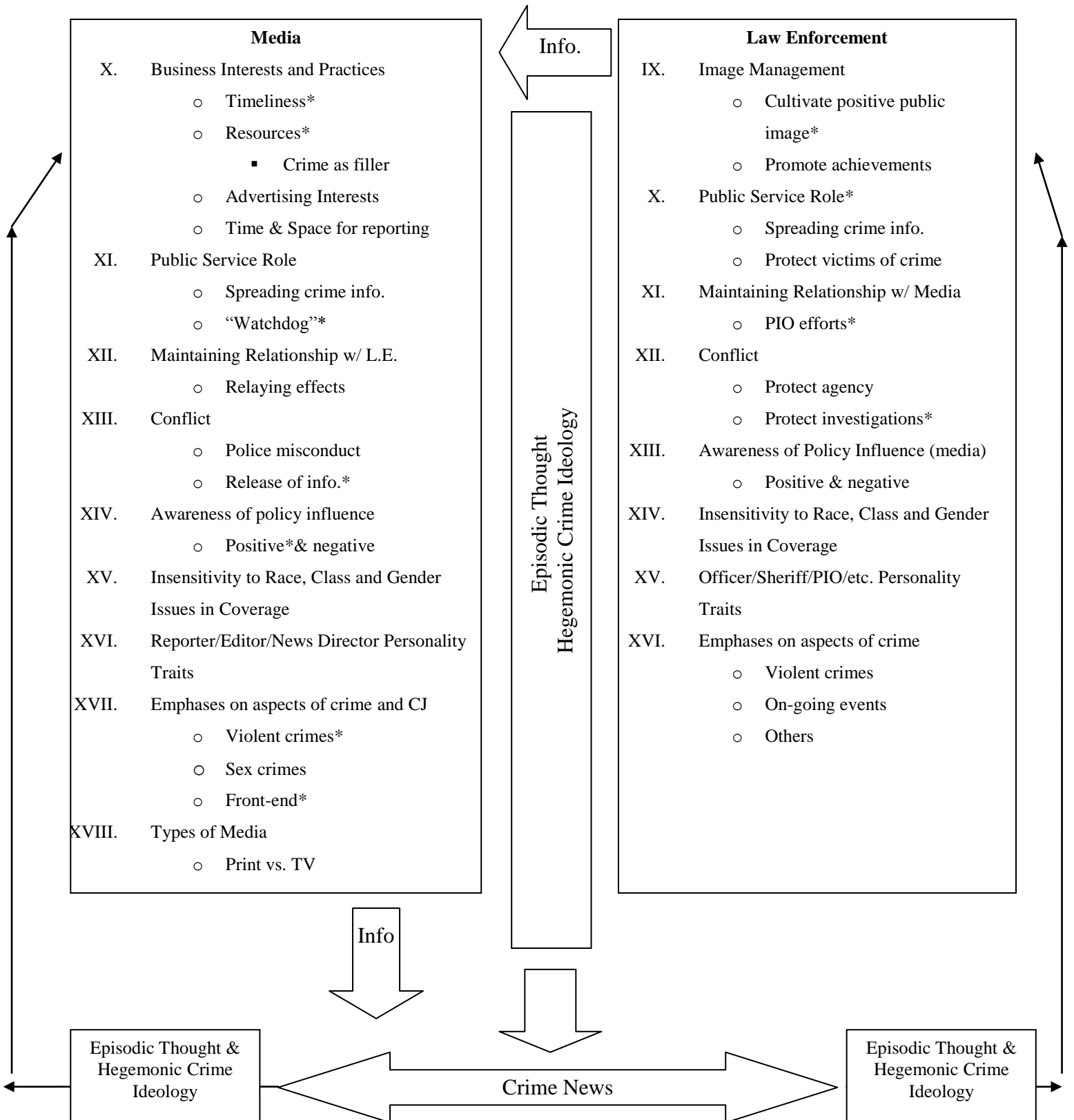
Furthermore, when asked similar questions, many law enforcement respondents replied that they felt the depiction of crime in the news was accurate since reporters generally “got their facts straight.” While this emphasis on facts over themes is different in some ways from the two previously mentioned themes, it is similar in that it emphasizes the micro while downplaying the macro aspects of something, whether that be crime or news.

I don't contend that respondents refuse to accept or are incapable of comprehending the converse of episodic thought. Had I taken a more engaged approach to interviewing, pointing out the inadequacies of some of their arguments, I believe these respondents would have quickly amended many of their responses. However, I employed an exploratory approach, seeking to influence respondents' responses as little as possible. I believe this was necessary to investigate how these respondents naturally thought about these issues, essentially to stay true to the spirit of my research questions. Such an approach has revealed respondents' natural tendencies of thought. Therefore, I am merely pointing to their tendency toward episodic thought, not some

ingrained ignorance or stupidity, as an integral influence on the production of crime news. Such a tendency, while understandable, especially for those in the news business and law enforcement, is problematic in that it ignores the macro elements of crime. This tendency on the part of agents involved in crime news production will inevitably translate into an episodic nature for crime news.

When first considering these two themes for their face value, they seem far from revealing. It is not surprising that personal traits, tendencies, and beliefs of those involved in crime news production bleed into crime news. However, when considering the deeper implications from a social constructionist perspective, such a revelation is far more significant. Accepting the constructionist contention that media have monopolistic control on constructing crime reality (Surette, 2003), it becomes apparent that these two themes are self-perpetuating. Relating to production of news, they form a feedback loop which is illustrated by figure 2.

Figure 2 -Feedback Loop- Episodic Thought and Hegemonic Criminal Justice Ideology



Essentially, episodic thought and hegemonic crime ideology are present across all cases in both groups, limiting law enforcement and media agents' ability to critically assess problems with crime news. Therefore, they increase the episodic nature of crime news and its support for hegemonic crime ideology. In turn, such crime news influences media and law enforcement agents' personal, constructed reality concerning crime. One might point out that in their occupations, law enforcement and media have significant personal experience upon which they can draw to construct their own realities of crime (Best, 1990; Surette, 1996). However, interviews revealed that crime news greatly influenced how these respondents thought about crime. Therefore, law enforcement and media agents' constructed reality, highly influenced by episodic crime news that emphasizes hegemonic crime ideology, will increase the likelihood that such agents will emphasize episodic themes and hegemonic ideology while producing crime news, pushing them through the filters outlined by Figure one. Ultimately, this perpetuates a cycle of production that results in problematic crime coverage. Essentially what this means is that episodic thought and hegemonic crime ideology run a feedback loop, going from the agents of crime news production, into the production process, seeping into actual crime news, and then ultimately back into the agents of crime news production, through the constructive influence of media, to reinforce themselves. Finally, it is important to note that this cycle results in crime news that directly and indirectly perpetuates a criminal justice system that often employs misguided and ineffective policies.

This conclusion is obviously incomplete in that it only takes into account two groups associated with the production of crime news; law enforcement and media personnel. Interest groups, defense attorneys, prosecutors, and other claims-makers are not accounted for. However, it is important to note that because of the front-end loaded nature of crime news and

media's dependence on law enforcement for the majority of their information about crime (Surette, 2003), these findings illuminate a significant portion of the news production process and the social construction of crime. Still, in order to truly outline the social construction process, further research must address the role played by the above-mentioned parties as well as personal experience and vicarious reality relayed through interpersonal communication (other sources of information informing individuals' constructed reality).

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING COVERAGE

The conclusions outlined above describe a cyclical production process that seemingly leaves no room for intervention, but respondents did identify two possibilities for ameliorating coverage issues. First, both media and law enforcement respondents generally agreed that some sort of additional training for crime reporters could improve coverage. These suggestions usually referred to the need to provide training that illuminated the intricacies of the justice system. While such training would be valuable, I believe some criminological education could further improve coverage. If reporters were trained to take into account sociological considerations when assessing crimes, coverage might be less episodic and more critical.

Second, media respondents felt that the use of academic sources could greatly improve coverage. Though they felt there was rarely time or space to include information from academic sources, news personnel claimed that, when it was possible, the use of such sources greatly improved the analysis provided by crime coverage. As with the training suggested above, academic sources could ameliorate the episodic nature of crime news with its unreflective reliance on hegemonic ideology. However, though most respondents identified time and space as the key factors in preventing the use of academic sources, one respondent insightfully pointed out that academics' tendency toward verbosity and their reluctance to make firm claims also

limited their use as sources. This respondent stated that academics seldom expressed their ideas in simple language. Instead, he said, academics often give complicated, tentative responses that are not easily comprehensible to a mass audience. Furthermore, academics' tendencies to make qualified and complex claims rather than firm contentions can make social sciences appear to be uselessly relativistic. This criticism turns over scholarly criticisms of news to reveal an uncomfortable truth, academics' own complicity in the production of such distorted coverage. The need for public criminology is strikingly apparent in relation to crime news. If academics are to disseminate their knowledge of crime and put it to actual use, media must play an integral part. However, many academics' reluctance to take a firm, public stance on issues inhibits such action. I contend that it is essential for academics to step out from behind a curtain of epistemological relativism and methodological disputes to clearly articulate their ideas in a concise manner that is understandable to the masses. Then and only then will academic research effect true reform rather than merely throw stones of criticism at media while they reinforce ideology and perpetuate ill-conceived policies. This is obviously far from an innovative idea; many criminologists now do their best to engage the public and use criminological knowledge to improve the criminal justice system. However, academics must make greater efforts to communicate with media and the public more effectively. Further research can illuminate new paths through which academics can disseminate scientific knowledge to the public. However, perhaps most importantly, we need a public criminology language that is simpler, more definite, and comprehensible to the public.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Law Enforcement

1. How would you characterize your relationship with the media?

-Do you have direct contact with media personnel?

-In what capacity do you interact with media personnel?

-How often do you interact with media personnel?

-Is your relationship symbiotic, conflictual, or both?

-Do you feel media wisely use information disseminated by law enforcement agencies?

2. Do you feel news coverage of crime conveys an accurate representation of crime?

- Are any crimes unfairly ignored? -Are any crimes overemphasized?

-Do you feel the aggregate of media coverage forms a realistic image of crime as a social problem?

3. What is your ideal for the media's role in relation to crime?

-What would you change about current coverage?

-What would you change about media information gathering practices?

-What, if any, additional training should media personnel obtain in relation to crime coverage?

4. What are your views on the relationship between crime coverage and public perception?

-Do you feel media do a good job of informing the public about crime?

-Do you feel the public's view of crime is significantly shaped by media coverage?

-Do you feel media coverage skews public perception in an unrealistic direction?

5. Do you feel media coverage ever has a significant impact on your policy choices?

-If so, some examples?

- Do you feel media influences policy directly, indirectly, or both?
- Do you ever respond to particular issues as a direct result of media coverage?
- Do you feel media influence ever spurs ineffective policy shifts?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for Media Personnel

1. What is the nature and extent of your relationship with law enforcement personnel?

-Do you have direct contact with LE personnel?

-In what capacity do you interact with LE personnel?

-How often do you interact with them?

-Is your relationship with them symbiotic, conflictual, or both?

-Do you feel law enforcement gives you all the information you need?

2. Do you feel news coverage of crime conveys an accurate representation of crime?

- Are any crimes unfairly ignored?

-Are any crimes overemphasized?

-Do you feel the aggregate of media coverage forms a realistic image of crime as a social problem?

3. What is your ideal for the media's role in relation to crime?

-What would you change about current coverage?

-What would you change about media information gathering practices?

-What, if any, additional training should media personnel obtain in relation to crime coverage?

4. What are your views on the relationship between crime coverage and public perception?

-Do you feel media do a good job of informing the public about crime?

-Do you feel the public's view of crime is significantly shaped by media coverage?

-Do you feel media coverage directs public perceptions in any particular direction?

5. Do you feel media coverage ever has a significant impact on criminal justice policy choices?

-If so, some examples?

-Do you feel media influences policy directly, indirectly, or both?

-Do you feel law enforcement ever responds as a direct result of media coverage?

-Do you feel media influence ever spurs ineffective policy shifts?

6. Do you feel news values and selectivity inhibit the media's ability to accurately inform the public?

-Are there any changes you would make to news practices/values?

-Do you feel it is possible to significantly improve the way media cover crime?

-Do you feel it is necessary?