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AN EXAMINATION OF NON-WHITE CRIME PORTRAYALS IN LOCAL BROADCAST
NEWS

by

Jeniece Nicole Jamison

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine trends in the coverage of crime stories in local broadcast television news. The data set is derived from WNCN's evening news broadcasts from January through February 2018. The station's broadcast was examined for the amount of crime stories that were aired in the newscast, types of crimes were committed, how they were described by the anchor, law enforcement and members of the community, and who committed them (the race of the criminal actors). Findings showed that while whites may have been underrepresented as criminal actors, non-whites' representation in crime stories were on par with their representation within the market area. Interviews from newsroom employees revealed newsrooms try to eliminate bias by hiring individuals from a variety of backgrounds, creating open dialogue concerning diversity in the newsroom, and considering the effects of crime on their communities before deciding to air a crime-related story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	Introduction	1
	Purpose of Study	3
	Significance of Study	3
2	Literature Review	4
	Framing and Race	4
	Stereotypes Reflect in News Coverage	7
	The Role of Media Gatekeepers	8
	Research Questions	10
3	Method	11
	Population Size	11
	Time Frame	12
	Content Analysis	12
	Statistical Analysis	13
	Interview	14
	Interview Procedures	15
	Interview Participants	15
	Interview Data Analysis	16
3	Results	17
	The Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville Market at a Glance	17
	Non-Whites as Criminal Actors in WNCN's Broadcasts	17
	Framing through Anchor Sentiment and Anchor Justification	18
	How Broadcasters Frame the News	19
	What Makes the Story Newsworthy	21
	Racial Bias in News Coverage	23
4	Discussion	27
	Limitations	30
	Future Directions	30
	Conclusion	31
5	References	32
	Appendix A: Code Book	39
	Appendix B: Interview Questions	40

Introduction

In 2000, researchers Dixon and Linz found that African-Americans and Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as criminals in local news programming than white criminal actors. More recently, Dixon and Williams (2015) found that African-Americans are less likely to be portrayed as criminal actors when it comes to primetime network news programming. The two authors conclude this change happened because the content of primetime network television shifted to focus on thematic issues than episodic instances of crime. Rather than focusing on individual instances, programming began examining the socioeconomic causes of crime. However, similar changes have not occurred at the local level.

Local broadcast media organizations tend to focus their coverage on crimes that involve African-American suspects rather than Caucasian suspects, although the majority of crimes committed in major American cities involve Caucasian suspects (Angster & Colleluori, 2015). Gillian, Iyengar, Simon, and Wright (1996) wrote that the typical news story on crime consists of two scripts: (1) crime is violent and (2) criminals are non-white. In their study, they found that violent crime accounted for 30% of all crimes committed in Los Angeles County, but was the focus of 78% of the news stories aired. Furthermore, African-Americans were overrepresented as perpetrators of crimes and as suspects in violent crime, but underrepresented as suspects in nonviolent crimes. Hispanics were underrepresented as both nonviolent and violent suspects. Coverage of non-white crime is more nonviolent. The study also found that white criminal actors are slightly less likely to commit nonviolent crimes.

The issue of misrepresentation of criminal actors in news content may be a reflection of a lack of diversity in newsrooms. There is an underrepresentation of minorities, especially among African-Americans, nationwide. An American Society of News Editors (2016) survey found that

17% of journalists in daily print newsrooms were minorities and 23% at online-only publications. Even fewer minorities hold leadership positions in the newsroom, with only 13% of all newsroom supervisors representing minorities. In television news, 80% of ABC's newsroom managers were white and 66% were men in 2012 (National Association of Black Journalists, 2012). Seventy-two percent of Media General's managers were men, and 95% were white. For Nexstar¹, 78% of its managers were male and 87% were white in 2012.² Some newspapers have considered the effects of underrepresentation on the product they produce (Gist, 1990), such as racial bias, failure to cover issues of significance to the community and impact on reader attitudes. In Gist's study, news coverage centered on negative or controversial issues involving minorities. When minorities were portrayed in a positive light, it was involving athletic achievement or entertainment stories.

Major media organizations tend to preserve the status quo in terms of societal norms (McQuail, 2010). In the book *Newswatch: How TV Decides the News*, A.V. Westin (1982) recalls a situation where black workers at CNN protested the network's content. He states that the network used b-roll of black people every time it aired a story on crime or poverty. While there was no resolution in this situation, social cognitive theory can help explain occurrences (Gist, 1990). Those in power—with their social ideologies and organizational routines—determine how beats are organized in news coverage and ultimately what is newsworthy (Van Dijk, 1991). Elite groups and institutions, particularly corporations and political institutions, are able to control access to the media and portrayal by the media (Van Dijk, 1991). According to

¹ Nexstar Media Group is the largest TV station operator in the country. It owns 170 television stations in 100 markets, 114 local websites and 202 local mobile applications. The company brings in \$2.3 billion in revenue and employs 9,000 individuals (Nexstar, 2017).

² Industry-wide data on the racial and gender makeup of those in leadership positions was available for the print news industry at the time of this writing. Industry-wide data on broadcast journalism was not available at the time of this writing, but data on individual companies were.

Van Dijk (1991), elite racism implies that various elites have a special set of racist ideologies and practices and their position allows them to disseminate those beliefs to the mass population. Furthermore, a social culturalist approach to communication theory could also provide support to these findings. It states that the media and the audience's experience with it are affected by the actions of society itself (McQuail, 2010). The messages delivered by the media are mirrors of society's realities, which are shaped by several socioeconomic factors.

Purpose of Study

This study built upon previous research on bias toward portraying non-whites as criminal actors more often in local television news. It focused on broadcast network news in the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville DMA (designated marketing area). This study focused on this area because I live in Raleigh and was able to watch newscasts taped on my DVR. Specifically, I examined the amount of crime stories where non-whites are considered suspects or convicted in a crime, in comparison to white suspects or convicted subjects.

The priorities of newsroom coverage are discussed, such as what types of crime stories are covered, why a particular crime story is covered and how much time is dedicated to reporting crime in a newscast. The study used both quantitative and qualitative data to address these issues. Possible newsroom bias from personal accounts of newsroom employees through in-depth interviews was considered. My own experiences as a Senior Producer in a newsroom in this DMA were thoughtfully considered.

Significance of Study

Respected news organizations across the country strive to cover their subject matters objectively and without bias. This study aimed to identify any possible bias that still exists in newsrooms, examine causes for these biases, and point out ways that inconsistencies in news

coverage across races can be reduced or even eliminated. Understanding if bias exists in a newsroom is the first step to balanced coverage. Fair and objective news coverage is a cornerstone of democracy. That principle extends beyond our elected officials, and into each story that is on air, in print, or online.

Literature Review

This literature review will discuss previous scholarly work on the individuals who decide what news is and reasons why a particular event or issue is newsworthy. This section will also discuss how issues of race are covered in news. First, I will outline framing theories, how stories are framed in news programming and how race plays a role in how stories are framed for consumption in the news industry. Next, I will discuss previous work on stereotyping of subjects in news coverage, and provide examples on how it may have affected the outcomes of criminal cases that were highly publicized in the media. Gatekeepers are known as the decision-makers in the news industry. I will provide on the history of gatekeepers in media organizations, theories about gatekeeping and who they are.

Framing and Race

Framing refers to the way news stories are shaped and contextualized by journalists using a familiar frame of reference so that the audience can easily digest the information with which they are being presented (McQuail, 2010). Previous scholarship has shown that framing plays a major role in how audiences perceive information that is presented as an objective news story (de Vreese, 2005).

Framing is used across several storytelling platforms, from broadcast to the written word. Abraham and Appiah (2006) found that photographs alter how audiences view a story. In their experiment, they presented news stories in four ways: with no pictures, pictures with black and

white subjects, pictures with white subjects and pictures with black subjects. The researchers found that white participants perceived the black population as more affected by school vouchers when the story had a picture of a black subject (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). Therefore, photos can steer an audience to believe that one group of people is more affected by a particular policy than another. Abraham and Appiah (2006) stated that the mass media are primed for stereotyping because they extend throughout society and frequently serve as trendsetters and material for daily conversation.

According to Media Matters (2015), evidence of this effect was found in how local stations in New York City cover crimes. Outlets in the city (WCBS, WNBC, WABC and WNYW) covered stories involving African-American murder, theft and assault suspects disproportionately more than those committing the crimes, according to statistics from the New York Police Department (Angster & Colleluori, 2015). Similarly, a study of media organizations in Pittsburgh found that there was heavy coverage of African-American men and boys in crime-related stories (Angster & Colleluori, 2015). In Los Angeles, while 21% of those arrested in 1995 and 1996 were African-Americans, they represented about 37 % of the perpetrators depicted in local television news (Angster & Colleluori, 2015). Crimes committed by African-American perpetrators are usually perceived to be more episodic than a result of ongoing socioeconomic factors within a community (Holt & Major, 2010). Episodic frames are used to describe an incident as a smaller issue that is not a result of a wider societal occurrence (Iyengar, 1990). In contrast, when a story is framed in a thematic way, the news will consist of information bearing on general trends or public policy (Iyengar, 1990). The Jena Six controversy offers an example of how local newspapers framed a racially-charged news event in a thematic, rather than as a one-off episode (Holt & Major, 2010). A fight happened as racial tension was mounting

at Jena High School, and black students with criminal charges faced up to 100 years in prison without parole (Democracy Now, 2007). The victim in the case (who was white) sustained severe injuries (News One, 2011). A U.S. attorney found that the noose hung at the school and the beating of a white student were unrelated, but were likely symptoms of racial tension (CNNs, 2007). The students who hung the noose (who were also white) were suspended from school, but were not criminally charged (CNN, 2007). They were allowed back in school three days later, and parents were not notified about the noose-hanging incident. Mychal Bell was the only defendant to go to trial and received an 18-month sentence. Justin Barker, the victim, still lives in Jena. Perceived issues with the criminal justice system in Louisiana were noted in how African-American athletes that are accused of committing a crime are portrayed (Mastro, Blecha & Seate, 2011). Issues of using race to frame a story also extend beyond those experienced by the African-American community. In a study on the coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting suspect, Park, Holoday, and Zhang (2012) noted that the suspected shooter's race and immigration status were mentioned more often in newspaper stories than the Columbine shooting suspects, who were white. This indicates that similar studies can be done on the impact of race, framing and representation among several communities of color.

De Vreese (2005) referred to framing as a process. The process of framing occurs in three stages: (1) frame-building, (2) frame-setting, and (3) individual and societal consequences of framing. Frame-building refers to the factors that influence the structural qualities of news frames (editorial policies, news values and external values such as social movements). Frame-setting involves the interaction between media frames and the audience's prior knowledge and predispositions. According to de Vreese (2005), frames in news may affect learning, interpretation and evaluation of issues and events.

Stereotypes Reflected in News Coverage

Frames can also be used to reinforce stereotypes about groups of people in reporting. This may also reinforce patterns created by media gatekeepers. A survey of students in Los Angeles found that portrayals of African-Americans on network news affected perceptions of people who identify with that race, in terms of their income levels (Dixon, 2008). Many of those who responded viewed African-Americans as being poor and intimidating. Dixon also found that other factors, such as age, education and political views may also play a role in how audiences view African-Americans. He points out that the theory of selective exposure may have played a role in how audiences viewed African-Americans. People choose to consume content and interpret it through their own personal filters. In another study conducted by Dixon and Williams (2015), they found that prime time network newscasts and 24-hour cable channels were likely to portray Muslims as terrorists and Latinos were likely to be represented as illegal immigrants. Black homicide victims were also more likely to appear on cable than non-cable shows (Dixon & Williams, 2015). In another study, Dixon and Johnson (2008) found mainstream news outlets from communities with majority white populations are prone to over representing crime, while outlets that are black-owned and operated under represent crime. Instead, black publications decided to focus their efforts on community news and content concerning social issues. However, over time, mainstream outlets did begin to feature more diverse news from predominately black neighborhoods (Dixon & Johnson, 2008). The authors state that a multitude of issues were covered in mainstream news stories covering black neighborhoods, such as education, business and other human-interest stories.

Cultivation theory can also assist in the push of racial stereotypes into the news industry. It revolves around the concept that modern media have become a central piece in our everyday

lives to the point that it dominates our symbolic environment, distorting the actual realities that we live in (McQuail, 2010). Cultivation effects have little, if any, influence on those who watch violent or over sexualized television (McQuail, 2010). In a study by Grabe and Drew (2007), the research found that exposure to crime news supported positive views of the criminal justice system, but exposure to fictional crime dramas on television had the opposite effect. They also found that exposure to crime in newspapers creates a feeling of vulnerability among its readers to violent and property crimes (Grabe & Drew, 2007). The two present the possibility that the sensationalized nature of crime reporting in television news desensitizes viewers to the possibility of being a victim of crime (Grabe & Drew, 2007). The authors write that this could be because property and violent crimes that happen on a local level are usually summarized in newspaper crime columns, and television news underreports property crimes (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003).

Wykes (2001) wrote that a shift that linked racial issues and crime began to form in England in the late 1960s. She stated that in a speech that was projected to a mass audience, a conservative British politician, MP Enoch Powell, predicted that the surge of immigrants coming to Britain will bring “rivers of blood” (Wykes, 2001, p. 34). Despite the fact that immigration rates decreased in England in the years following that speech, the press depicted immigration in a negative light (Wykes, 2001). The news agenda in the United States began to shift in the 1970s, focusing on the threat of racial violence. In England, the reporting of mugging marked the introduction of a new racial stereotype, linking black people to the crime (Wykes, 2001).

The Role of Media Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are the decision makers in the newsroom (including or not limited to news directors, editors, producers, general managers and organization owners). Gatekeepers select

what will be aired or written about based on the perspectives that tend to reflect society's views at large; these perspectives put attention toward certain issues, and not others (McCoombs & Shaw, 1972). The perspectives of gatekeepers in the news industry has major consequences for the audience member because it frames how the audience thinks about an issue (McCoombs & Shaw, 1993). Agenda setting theory refers to not only the assertion that news coverage tells us what to think about (what topics are at the forefront of discourse in our culture), but how to think about it (McCoombs & Shaw, 1993). The concept is related to practices of agenda setting, which focuses on the notion that the media does not tell you what to think, but what to think about (McCoombs & Shaw, 1972). It has been defined as the process by which the relative importance of news events, issues or public figures are affected by the salience in reports, following the logic that the more attention is given to a topic, the more importance it should have with its audience (McQuail, 2010).

To be considered news, an event must include one or more of these characteristics: conflict, progress and/or disaster, consequence, eminence and/or prominence, novelty, timeliness and/or proximity, and sex (Applegate, 2007). Previous research has attempted to pinpoint why gatekeepers choose to run some stories and bury others. Abbot and Brassfield (1989) found that hyperlocal stories were more likely to pass the gatekeeping process to print or air on television. News releases from public relations professionals play a major role in what is published by a gatekeeper. Ninety percent of assignment editors in the Midwest said they used news releases in story development (Abbot & Brassfield, 1989). Television news gatekeepers prioritized stories that can provide strong visual elements (Abbot & Brassfield, 1989).

Scholars have explored the idea of gatekeeping in other professional fields, including the health sector (Groger, Mayberry & Straker, 1999). The authors found that gatekeeper bias

happens when access to information an individual has power over in a supervisor capacity, or otherwise, is not accessible because an individual made the decision to deny access (Groger et al., 1999).

Consultants could also play a role in how television news stories are presented and the overall presentation of the news broadcast. A consultant can be hired by newsroom leadership to perform the following duties (but are not limited to): analyzing and providing feedback on a newscast, training to staff members, implementation of a new strategy or initiative in a newsroom, and rating period planning strategies (The Broadcast Image Group, 2017). A consultant's duties can also be expanded to other newsroom work groups and functions, including web and mobile strategy, marketing, management, graphics and technical initiatives. During my experience in a newsroom, I have met with a consultant once. I sat down with other members of my work group, watched the first block of a show and listened to critiques from the consultant.

Research Questions

Based on the previous review, this study attempts to address the following four research questions:

RQ1: What is the frequency of non-whites portrayed as criminals in local television broadcast news compared to whites?

RQ2: How does local television broadcast news frame non-whites in crime stories?

RQ3: How, if at all, do local television broadcast newsroom employees make decisions about framing crime stories?

RQ4: How, if at all, do local television broadcast newsroom employees perceive racial bias existing in crime news coverage?

Method

To answer these questions, I conducted a quantitative analysis of news coverage involving non-whites as criminal actors and the number of minorities. I also utilized qualitative methods gain an in-depth understanding of newsroom culture and possible bias in crime coverage. I interviewed employees in broadcast newsrooms that conduct editorial work (reporters, producers and news directors) and reflected on my own experience as a television news producer in this same market.

Population Size

The population for this study includes all news coverage from WNCN, the CBS television station located in Raleigh, N.C. I chose WNCN because I could record its newscasts every evening, and I do not have any professional interest in that station. I currently work for Spectrum News in Raleigh, N.C. We also have a content exchange program with WTVD, the DMA's ABC station. I did not analyze WTVD's content to avoid possible bias or a conflict of interest. I believe it is important to eliminate as much bias as possible from this study.

Sampling Technique

This study's sample came from WNCN primetime crime news coverage airing from January 1, 2018 to February 2, 2018 (excluding the following dates: January 3, January 6, January 11, January 23, January 27 due to technology issues with the recording application). No data exists for January 17 because no crime stories were reported that day in the newscast). This sample was a convenience sample due to time restrictions and access to the sample.

Time Frame

Crime stories are usually leading stories for local affiliates, following the mantra of “If it bleeds, it leads,” (Schwartz, 2014) and crime is more likely to appear in other sections of the newscast as well in comparison to primetime network programs.³ This holds true unless there is a major policy story during the day (Dixon & Williams, 2015). Violence of all types fits within news values (Wykes, 2001). It offers a good story with elements such as struggle, drama, problem, danger, heroes, villains, good, evil and resolution (Wykes, 2001). Therefore, I watched these primetime newscasts from January 1 to February 2, 2018, Monday through Sunday. Newscasts aired at 5 p.m., 6 p.m. or 11 p.m. If a 5 p.m. newscast did not air that night, I would record the next time slot that a newscast aired. Special events affected when a newscast aired (NFL Playoffs, Grammy's, etc.). I recorded data from both one-hour newscasts and half-hour newscasts when a one-hour newscast did not air.

Content Analysis

Every crime story in the newscast was relevant to this study. Stories involving suspects of all races charged or convicted of Part One crimes and Part Two crimes were selected and coded. Part One crimes are those included in this list: homicide, burglary, robbery, vehicle theft, aggravated assault, rape and larceny. Part Two crimes include the following: other assaults (simple), forgery and counterfeiting, fraud, embezzlement, stolen property (buying, stealing, possessing), counterfeiting, weapons (carrying, possessing), prostitution and commercialized vice, sex offenses, drug abuse violations, gambling, offenses against the family and children,

³ In local television news in Philadelphia, one study found that occurrences (crimes and trials, accidents, disasters and fires), were reported earlier in the show and allotted more time than major local governmental issues (Kaniss, 1991). Kaniss said this can be explained by several factors including: they are easy find to report, lend themselves to the visual medium of television and provide more opportunities for emotional sound.

driving under the influence, liquor laws, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, all other offenses of state or local laws, suspicion, curfew and loitering laws, and runaways.

RQ1 focuses on the variable of frequency, and the frequency of which non-whites are portrayed as criminal actors in these newscasts was compared to the frequencies of whites. Therefore, the unit of analysis in this study is each news story that portrays an individual as a criminal actor. Non-whites were defined as any individual who is identified as not being of Caucasian descent. This study follows Dixon and Williams' (2015) conceptual definition of a perpetrator in a crime story: "... the person(s) identified in the article as the alleged perpetrator of the crime (including person[s] apprehended as well as at large)" (p. 29). See Appendix A for the codebook used in this study.

To address how local television broadcast news frames non-whites in crime stories, the study examined the variables of sentiment and justification. Sentiment is conceptually defined as the use of an adjective, such as "good," to describe a noun (Nasukawa & Yi, 2003). In this case that noun would be the criminal actor portrayed in a story. Sentiment was measured as how non-whites are portrayed in terms of the positive, negative, or neutral light from three perspectives of anchors, community members, and law enforcement officials. When I was coding stories, I looked for the absence of emotionally charged adjectives in scripting to determine if the language used was neutral. Justification is conceptually defined in this study as any point in which a reason is given for the crime being reported was committed (Oxford, 2017).

Statistical Analysis

The frequency of non-whites portrayed as criminal actors in the newscast was translated into a percentage (i.e., if five stories feature non-whites as criminal actors out of the 10 stories in the newscast, then 50% percent was recorded as the findings of that sample). That same

percentage was recorded for all other criminal actors. A ratio of non-whites in the cities of Raleigh, Durham and Fayetteville were obtained through the US Census Bureau's website. The last census that was released as of the time of this study was 2010. If the percentage of non-whites who are being portrayed as criminal actors is significantly greater than the actual population of that group, then it can be concluded that the group is being overrepresented as criminal actors, and vice versa to indicate an underrepresentation. The number of non-whites being portrayed as criminal actors was also compared to the population of non-whites in the cities of Raleigh, Durham and Fayetteville. If those ratios are not similar, that can also constitute an overrepresentation or underrepresentation. Previous articles and studies have insinuated that a lack of African-American workers in media organizations can lead to bias (Gertz, 2013). For the sentiment variable, a chi-square test was used to compare positive, neutral and negative percent distribution. For the justification variable, another chi-square test was used to compare the yes and no categories distribution of the justification variable.

Interviews

In-depth interviewing allows a researcher to explore complex issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The news cycle itself is complex and talking to individuals tasked with producing local news can provide insights into how coverage decisions are made. Rubin and Rubin (2005) also state that interviews can be used to explore morally ambiguous choices or sensitive issues. Interviews can help to explain the reasoning behind why certain stories are aired that quantitative methods alone cannot. Therefore, interviewing can supplement what is found by observing broadcast news to create a well-rounded picture of what is found through research.

Interview Procedures

Interviews were conducted over the phone. The interview questions were open-ended and centered around their experiences as newsroom employees, what factors play into their decision to air a story and possible bias in the news industry. Some questions included procedures for determining what stories are assigned to reporters, which crime stories get ignored and which ones go on the air, and if the station was subjected to any legal action because of a crime story (see Appendix B for the interview protocol). The interviews lasted 9-42 minutes. Interview questions were worded to tap into the interviewee's professional knowledge and experience, according to Rubin and Rubin's (2005) recommendation.

Interview Participants

I interviewed four individuals who have experience in the news industry. The participants include two current Executive Producers (EP1 and EP2). One works at an affiliate station in the northeast, mainly working on the 10 p.m. and 11 p.m. shows (EP1) and the other is the weekend Executive Producer at a 24-hour cable news channel in the south (EP2). Other participants include a retired News Director (ND) whose last position before retirement was at a 24-hour cable news channel in the south, and two current Producers (PROD1 and PROD2) at affiliate stations in the south. The participants include two African-American women, an African-American man, a white man and a white woman. I asked questions about their experiences in the news industry, how newsrooms decide what to cover, and what makes a crime story worthy of runtime in a newsroom. I also asked questions about newsroom diversity practices and the best practices to ensure communities are covered carefully and fairly.

Recruitment

I used purposive sampling techniques in this study. Tongco (2007) describes purposive sampling as a non-probability sampling technique that is most effective when studying a cultural

domain with knowledgeable experts. Purposive sampling can be used for both qualitative and quantitative research. Informants were chosen based on their experience and expertise in broadcast news. I also utilized the snowball sampling technique to find informants in this study. Snowball sampling (or chain referral) is a method that yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who have characteristics that are relevant to the research (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In this case, that includes individuals that I work with now or have worked with in the past, or individuals that my academic advisors know of in the news industry.

I compiled all of the interview participants through references, professional connections and social media, Correspondence between the participants and myself were done over e-mail, text messages and social media channels to establish a date and time to conduct the interview. I then called each of them at the predetermined times, informed them about the study and assured them that they would all be anonymous. This study received exempt status from the University of Memphis Institutional Review Board.

Interview Data Analysis

Interviews were not audio-recorded but extensive notes were taken for the duration of each interview. These notes were then coded using an inductive process Research questions guided the analysis and data were coded through constant comparative coding to determine overarching patterns, concepts, and themes in participant responses to newsroom activities and culture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These themes are later described in the Discussion section.

Results

The Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville Market at a Glance

The city of Raleigh's population is 458,880 people (US Census, 2017). Fifty-eight percent of the city's population is white, while 29% of the population is black or African-American. Nine point five percent of Raleigh residents identify as another minority (City of Raleigh, 2016). 267,857 people live in the city of Durham (City of Durham, 2010). Half of Durham's population is white, while 37.2% of the city identifies as black or African-American. Nine point sixty four percent of Durham's population identifies as another minority (City of Durham, 2016). More than 204,000 people live in Fayetteville. Forty five percent of the city's residents are white, while 42% identify as black or African-American. More than 12% of the city identifies as another minority or as being multi-racial (US Census Bureau, 2016).

Table 1. The Raleigh-Fayetteville-Durham Market

City	Total population	White	African-American	Other non-white minorities
Raleigh	458,880	58%	29%	9%
Durham	267,837	50%	37.2	9.64%
Fayetteville	204,759	45%	42%	12%

Non-Whites as Criminal Actors in WNCN’s Broadcasts

In this study, 148 crime stories were recorded. Out of those stories recorded, 105 portrayed Part One crimes and 43 portrayed Part Two crimes. African-Americans were portrayed as suspects or convicted of criminal actions in 37.8% of all the crime stories recorded (56). Other minorities were portrayed as criminal actors (suspects or convicted of criminal actions) in 12.1% of those stories (12). Whites were portrayed as criminal actors in 29% (43) of all crime stories reported. Thirty-seven of the crime stories in this study did not identify the criminal actor or give a suspect description.

The highest number of crime stories recorded in one newscast was 15 (February 1) and the lowest was zero (January 17). A crime story led the newscast five times. Crime stories were aired within the first five minutes of a newscast 28 times. The shortest time allotted for a crime story was 10 seconds, and the longest was two minutes and 24 seconds. The median crime story length was 24 seconds and the mode was 16 seconds (nine times). Many of the crime stories focused on crimes involving a single criminal actor (53.3%). The most criminals portrayed in one story was 20 (a drug-ring bust in Edgecombe County) (CBS North Carolina, 2018).

Although white criminal actors are underrepresented in news coverage, African-Americans and other non-white criminal actors' representation was on par with their statistical presence in the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville area. While 45% to more than half of these cities populations are white, they represent 29% of the crimes reported. Blacks and African-Americans represent between 29 and 42% of these cities populations and constituted for 37% of all criminal actors portrayed. Other minorities accounted for between 9 and 12% of the area's population, and 12% of criminal actors in the stories recorded.

Framing Through Anchor Sentiment and Anchor Justification

The anchor sentiment was examined by conducting a chi-square goodness of fit test in SPSS (0=n/a, 1=negative, 2=neutral, 3=positive). The anchor justification was also examined using a chi-square goodness of fit test (0=n/a, 1=yes, 2=no). For the anchor sentiment, a chi-square test in SPSS found that Chi-square (df = 2) = 214.554, $p < .05$. This shows that there is a significant difference among the anchor sentiment categories. The largest percentage of anchor sentiment in the study was neutral 89.9%, followed by negative 9.5%, then positive .7%. See Table 2 below for details.

Table 2. Anchor Sentiment Statistical Significance

	Frequency	Percent
Negative	14	9.5%
Neutral	133	89.9%
Positive	1	.7%

For the anchor justification, a chi-square test in SPSS found that Chi-square (df = 1) = 140.108, $p < .05$. This shows that there is a significant difference among the anchor justification categories. The largest percentage of anchor justification was no (98.6%), followed by yes (1.4%). See Table 2 below for details.

Table 3. Anchor Justification Statistical Significance

	Frequency	Percent
Yes	2	1.4%
No	146	98.6%

There wasn't enough data to run statistic tests among the following variables: community sentiment, law enforcement sentiment, community justification, law enforcement justification.

How Broadcasters Frame the News

Anchors presented the story using neutral language in 89.8% of the crimes reported. Negative language was used less than one percent of the time, and there was positive language used to describe a crime once. Members of the community that were interviewed for a crime story used negative language in 17.5% of all crime stories. Positive and neutral language was used less than one percent of the time each. Members of the community were not interviewed in 111 of the crime stories reported. Negative language was used by law enforcement to describe a crime seven times (less than one percent). Law enforcement used neutral language in a crime

story six times. Law enforcement never used positive language in a crime story in this sample. Interviews from law enforcement were not used in 135 of the crime stories in this sample.

Crimes were justified twice by the anchor. The rest of the crimes in the stories analyzed in this study were not justified by the anchor. Crimes were justified three times by members of the community, while they were not in 35 other stories in this sample. Crimes were never justified by law enforcement, and 14 stories featured a law enforcement officer not justifying the crime on camera.

Anchors, producers and others who write scripts used mostly neutral language when describing a crime. Most of the scripts stuck to facts around the five W's (who, what, when, where, why) and how the crime happened. Negative language was only used to describe high-profile crimes, such as recent school shootings stories surrounding the sentencing of disgraced USA gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar (Levenson, 2018). Many of these crime stories were short stories using only graphics or video from the scene. In some instances of violent crime, interviews from police or people who live or were near the crime scene when the crime took place were interviewed on camera. Instances where crimes were expounded upon (one to two-minute packages of the story were produced) were of crimes that were unusual or featured a government official. Some of those packages includes the following cases: a cult that kept children as workers in fish markets leading to the arrest of 20 people, a pattern of catalytic converters being stolen from Ford and Honda vehicles, the indictment of the Wake County Register of Deeds for embezzling money, and a robbery at a dorm room on NC Central University's campus. Crimes that were deemed to be episodic (such as shootings and other violent crime) were not given as much screen time as others that were portrayed as being thematic.

What Makes the Story Newsworthy

In the EP1, EP2 and PROD1's newsroom, story assignments were based on timeliness and what managers thought were important stories. Assignment editors work to find stories that fit these criteria to assign to reporters. Reporters, producers, assignment editors and newsroom managers also pitch story ideas during a morning meeting and decide what to cover that day as a group. The ND also stated that there was a similar process to deciding who covers what and when. EP2 said the goal for the news team is to both cover stories that are having an impact on the community, and stories that people may not be paying attention to, but the news organization believes needs more attention.

EP1 said crime that is worth reporting does not happen often in their market. If the EP's organization learns that it is part of a larger issue in the community, then they may decide to have a reporter cover the issue. The EP stated her organization tries to steer away from covering what they deem to be regular arrests, and focus on uncommon crime stories or crimes involving people in power. For the ND, EP2 and PROD2 crimes stories that carried more weight were those that involved children as victims. PROD2 said crimes involving children or families were more likely to be a lead story. The ND stated that adults may or may not have played a role in being included in the story, but children are seen as innocent. In the PROD1's newsroom, crimes with emotional weight were also more likely to make the newscast. The PROD1 said their organization tries to report crimes that "hit close to home" or affect a lot of people. When it comes to incidents such as property crimes or consumer crimes, the PROD's newsroom covers it when it develops into a pattern.

The ND said crime played a major role in their newscast in his previous work as an Executive Producer, but it did not when that individual became a News Director. The ND said in

his newsroom, the philosophy was based around the notion that unless the story could be expanded upon so it had relevance to the majority of the audience, then it would be a short story or not reported on at all.

EP1 said crime stories do not tend to lead the newscast at their station, but there are some instances where a crime story will lead the newscast (e.g., if there was a shooting involving a young victim moments before the newscast started). EP1 said it rarely led the newscast while they were in the News Director role. For the ND, crimes that happen in a heavily populated area or involves a large number of victims or children were more likely to lead the newscast than other crimes. The PROD1 said crimes stories lead their newscast often, and crimes involving police officers, children and sex crimes were more likely to be a lead story. PROD2 added that crime stories do not lead the newscast every day, but they do frequently. In EP2's newsroom, the standards of covering crime changed over the six years they have been employed in their news station. EP2 said crime often leads the newscast in his newsroom, but their newsroom implemented a non-standard threshold that crimes had to reach before being deemed before being aired (management had to determine if the location of the crime, people involved, amount of people hurt made it significant). Now, with new management in recent months, those standards are loosening up. But, EP2 found that crime was the leading story in other newsrooms they have worked in (those newsrooms were also in the south).

If incorrect information is stated or written in a crime story, an organization may be susceptible to legal action, such as being sued for libel or slander. EP1 said that has never happened at their station, and they have corporate attorneys available to look over stories if need be. EP2 could not recall an instance where legal action was involved either, but did not mention the use of corporate attorneys to check story copy. The ND said his organization was sued over a

crime story, and that legal action led to the implementation of a new policy for mug shots. If a mug shot was going to be used in a story, it had to be approved by a manager (an Executive Producer or higher). There is also a policy for the use of descriptive elements of criminal suspects in stories. If the only description available does not make the suspect stand out, then it would not be used. Some distinguishing characteristic, such as a visible tattoo or piercing, may warrant the use of a description in a story.

Racial Bias in News Coverage

EP1 said they never saw racial bias in story selection in the newsroom or in terms of the treatment of employees, but categorized any shortcomings and faults as a product of ignorance on the part of individuals in editorial positions. EP1 recalled one story in which a 14-year-old girl was found murdered in an abandoned home. She had to catch a school bus, but was kidnapped and murdered. Some of the EP1's colleagues suggested investigating the mother for letting her child take the city bus to school. EP1 argued that should not be the focus of the story because taking the city bus to school is normal for children in urban areas, and the coverage should focus on the search for the suspect. The PROD1 said there was bias in story selection when they first arrived at their current employer (which could not be proven), but the culture has since changed. The PROD1 said these biases were more overt in the newsroom of their previous employer, stating that the newsroom, which was located in an urban area, would tend to cover crimes involving black suspects more heavily. However, when it came to crimes in the suburbs, the station was not as quick to go to the area and investigate. The PROD1 said the police department would make it tougher to gain access to information concerning crime in the suburban areas, but there was no special effort on the newsroom's end to gain more information. PROD2 said these biases also existed newsrooms she has worked in, both based on skin color

and financial status, but those biases went both ways. She recalled bias persisting in the newsroom of a previous employer against people who did not have a formal education. EP2 said he never witnessed bias when it came to story selection on days they were working, and said his newsroom has done a solid job at taking everything into account when trying to decide if a story should be published. PROD2 echoed those sentiments, saying having a discussion to make sure the news team is covering every story from every angle to not introduce any kind of bias is important to the organization's coverage.

The ND said one instance of racial and class bias that stood out during their time in the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville DMA involved the Duke lacrosse case, in which several members of the lacrosse team were accused of sexual violence against a dancer at a house party (Cohan, 2016). Days after the story broke, the area's newspaper, *The News & Observer*, published a photo of the lacrosse team. The ND said the paper was indicting the team for the alleged actions of the few without due process. The ND said the paper may have been indicting them because they were white males from seemingly privileged backgrounds. EP2 said he never noticed intentional bias from other news outlets in the area, but there is a possibility that coverage may have been "sloppy" at some points. PROD2 said she is aware of the biases that exist in the news industry overall, and at other stations and markets. So there is a conscious effort to make sure they don't show up in their newsroom's coverage.

PROD1 did bring up another type of bias when it comes story selection and coverage in the newsroom: advertiser bias. PROD1 described an instance in which a black woman bought a defective product from a business that refused to give a refund. The station could not fully cover the story because the owner of the business was an advertiser with the station, which also led to

an effort to discredit the customer. PROD2 also stated that gender bias still exists against employees in newsrooms.

EP1 and 2, ND and PROD 1 and 2 stated that newsrooms must bring as many perspectives to the table as possible when it comes to determining who covers what and why a story should be covered. The EP said editorial meetings in her newsroom are open to everyone, and it is done with the understanding that everyone will be respectful of everyone else's opinion. The PROD also stated that their newsroom has producers that reflect the target viewer, saying that prevents their journalists from being tone deaf when covering certain stories and gives them the knowledge to ask certain questions. The PROD1 also said their on-air talent represents their viewers as well, and having a representative staff is leading to conversations behind the scenes that were not happening before.

EP1 acknowledged there are times where her organization may unintentionally bring a biased perspective into their coverage. Responses from viewers on social media could also help point out possible unintentional bias in news coverage. EP1 said social media helps news organizations become more transparent with its viewers and readers, and lets them know that their voices matter too. EP1 also said that getting feedback via social media lets their viewers know that they are human and journalists, and the notion that journalists can be fully unbiased is incorrect. The ND said part of this is also bringing players to the table who were not previously part of the discussion outside of the past 10 years, such as LGBT+ communities. EP2 also suggested bringing more diversity to the organization's on-air talent roster would help it diversify its coverage. He pointed in particular to getting more Hispanic representation in on-air roles overall, and an African-American presence in the anchor chair.

EP2 gave an antidote about how diversity in the newsroom led to programming that affected the community in an unexpected way. An anchor that was new to the station, who was an African-American man, asked EP2 where he got his haircut, and the two ended up having the same barber. The barber would discuss doing a barbershop talk segment with EP2 in a joking way. The idea jumped off to a special called “Through My Eyes.” It was centered on putting discussions that are had among African-American men that the rest of the community may not see or know about on television. The special also included segments at a youth program in Greensboro and with Charlotte’s police chief. The programming was timely because it came in the aftermath of high-profile deaths of African-American boys and men (Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Mike Brown). EP2 said while the special did not win any awards, he got an email from a viewer that was a middle-aged white woman, saying she would not have known how these men felt had she not watched the special, and that it should be aired across the country. For EP2, that was validation as to why diversity matters in the newsroom.

The ND suggested that organizations create a “quality circle” that would consist of a group of employees from across the newsroom that meet regularly to review coverage, policies and speak openly and honestly about if there are things the newsroom can improve upon.

EP2 described strategies he currently has in place that could help diversity the newsroom and help improve its coverage in the long run. EP2 is also the station’s internship coordinator. He interviews potential candidates for the station’s internship program, hires them and guides them through their experience at the station. EP2 looks at the internship program as a pipeline for future talent and a job process, and he is a firm believer in giving people opportunities, especially those from communities that may have been overlooked.

Discussion

The findings support the notion that crime coverage in television news is steering away from being categorized as black and non-white (Dixon & Williams, 2015). These findings concern trends in crime coverage in the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville area and are not indicative of national trends. As of December 29, 2017, there had been 26 homicides in the city of Raleigh, an increase from 2015 and 2016's murder rates (Strong, 2017). Homicides dropped by 50% to 21 in 2017 (Davis, 2018). There were at least 35 homicides in Cumberland County (the county that includes the city of Fayetteville) in 2017 (Fayetteville Observer, 2018). Previous studies showed that local broadcast news was more likely to portray African-Americans as criminal actors than their white counterparts (Dixon & Linz, 2000). On a national level, this does not tend to be true (Dixon & Williams, 2015), and that viewpoint of news may be trickling down to gatekeepers on the local broadcast level of the journalism profession. Underrepresentation of whites as criminal actors and non-whites being on par with their representation in the populations of the cities in this study could be an effect of this shifting philosophy. But, according to ND and PROD1, some biases are still persistent in some news coverage. PROD1 stated that one station she worked for had a tendency to over represent crimes in urban areas, and under represent in majority white, suburban areas.

EP1's statements about social media being part of the discussion may also effect what is broadcasted. As EP1 said, social media provides instant feedback from the viewer. According to Diakopoulos and Naaman (2011), the quality of online news comments is important that want to provide a valuable exchange of community ideas and maintain credibility within the community. News organizations may be more conscious of what stories their communities are interested in based on the feedback they get on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. But, EP2 offered a counter to those sentiments about social media. EP2 stated social media is a great

tool; however, it is not always accurate. While news organizations are in the business of accuracy, social media users can post anything.

Newsroom employees said they are actively working to bring stakeholders from across as many socio-economic backgrounds as possible to create equity in the newsroom and serve their communities as fairly as possible. These practices would reflect McCoombs and Shaw's (1972) concept of gatekeeping. If stakeholders from across the spectrum were brought together, the stories aired in broadcasts would reflect society at large. But as the PROD1 stated, employees in a newsroom cannot be afraid to speak up when they see biased coverage. Local newsrooms are also refocusing their crime coverage, changing the agenda that was previously set by news organizations. According to agenda setting theory (McCoombs & Shaw, 1993), local broadcast news wants to change the way the audience thinks about crime. Now, leadership is considering the wide-ranging effects of crime and giving more screen time to thematic crime stories instead of reaching for low-hanging fruit. Based on Applegate's (2007) guidance as to what makes a story newsworthy, the standards overall have not changed. While urgency remains a seller for WNCN's newscast (crime stories that are breaking before the newscast goes to air may lead a show), others believe that only crimes that have an unusual aspect to them or involve people in power. WNCN's newscast also allocated substantial time to major national crime stories. Stories involving school shootings in Texas and Kentucky, as well as the Larry Nassar case, featured sound bites that took up a substantial amount of real estate in the newscast.

There is still a lack of voices from members of the community and law enforcement in crime stories. More than 100 of the stories in this sample did not feature sound from members of the community, and 135 stories did not feature sound from law enforcement. While there are logistical challenges to getting these perspectives for a story in a short period of time, and some

newsrooms may not deem it necessary for many of its episodic crime stories, newsrooms should search for more opportunities to include sound from law enforcement and members of the community. Reiner (2007) found that the police and criminal justice system control much of the information crime reporters rely on, and crime reporters tend to develop a relationship with law enforcement in which both sides need each other. That leads to the police becoming “primary definers” of crime news (Reiner, 2007, p. 404). Pollack and Allern (2014) state that “news is a representation of authority, and police sources represent the most authorized versions of reality” (p. 36). Therefore, statements from law enforcement could bring more legitimacy to a news report, and put the individual crime in perspective when framing it as either an episodic crime or a crime that is a result of community ills. As the EP said, it is important to listen to the viewers. Bringing their perspectives on crime in their communities may be one way to do so.

The one day that no crime stories were in the newscast was the day a snowstorm hit eastern North Carolina. That brings in one news judgment trope that severe weather dominates all other stories. Severe weather (snowstorms, hurricanes, lightning strikes, etc.) has the widest ranging effects and can cause damage that costs local governments a substantial amount of money to clean up. It also affects the operations of school systems, local businesses and governments. In my experience as a News Producer, my newsroom chose to go all weather, all the time in these situations. We would either broadcast an entire show on these weather conditions, or our meteorologist would go into non-stop weather segments that would last for almost 30 minutes.

Overall, the attitude toward crime coverage may be changing in local news. Newsrooms are spending more time covering thematic stories rather than crime stories that are easy and have shock value. The participants in this study indicated that their coverage focuses on the stories

that effect the most people or the crimes that involve children or people in positions of power. Crime stories only led WNCN's newscast five times, and was in the first five minutes of the newscast 28 times. The median crime story length was 24 seconds. Episodic crime stories are taking up less real estate in the newscast than before. Minorities, specifically blacks and African-Americans were less likely to appear as criminal suspects in news stories, and newsrooms are more conscious about weeding out possible bias in the newsroom and their newscasts by bringing as many diverse voices to the table as possible. Nevertheless, whites may still be underrepresented as criminal actors. It is important to ensure there is equity when it comes to the portrayal of criminal actors in news stories relative to the communities they cover.

Limitations

This study relies on a convenience sample based on the amount of time allotted by a degree program. It was also reliant on DVR programming and not a live broadcast as the news was airing. There were instances in which the DVR did not record a show despite the DVR being programmed to do so via my cable provider's mobile application.

The participants in this study were not directly connected to the channel that was analyzed in this study. Therefore, direct connections could not be drawn between the quantitative and qualitative data. However, the interviews offered a broad look at the broadcast news industry in general, although another limitation of the study was not reaching saturation with the interview data due to difficulty finding participants in the study time frame.

Future Directions

Future studies on this issue should include a longer data collection period. This sample was a convenience sample and did not consider the differences in crime reporting across dayparts. Often, different shows have different Producers, Executive Producers and Anchors.

Therefore, crime may be prioritized for one group of editorial employees and not the other. Future studies could cross-compare different day parts at the same station. Other studies could also conduct a cross-region comparison to see if crime stories are seen as more important in other areas of the country compared to others. Cross comparisons could also be done between different stations in the same market. More interviews should also be collected to bring as many perspectives on the news gathering process and prioritizing crime stories in the newscast.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the state of crime reporting in broadcast news. Previous studies showed that non-whites were more likely to be portrayed as criminal actors in broadcast news. A more recent study showed that was not the case for national network news broadcasts. This study found that non-whites were not more likely to be portrayed as criminal actors in WNCN's evening news broadcast, but whites were underrepresented as criminal actors. Newsroom employees in editorial positions were also less likely to air crime stories unless they are timely or have a wider impact in the community.

These results suggest that the conversation around how important crime is in news coverage and which crimes deserve more attention may be changing. Future, more extensive studies, could find that crime is no longer perceived as non-white and violent, changing the narrative surrounding the news industry.

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Appendix A: Code Book

1. Date of the news story: mm/dd/yyyy
2. Starting time of the news story: _____
3. Length of the news story: mm:ss
4. Number of criminals in the crime news story: _____
5. Trait of the primary criminal actor: a. African-American b. White c. Other Minority
6. Crime type: a. P1 b. P2
7. Sentiment from the anchor's perspective: a. Positive b. Neutral c. Negative
8. Sentiment from the community's perspective: a. Positive b. Neutral c. Negative
9. Sentiment from the law enforcement's perspective: a. Positive b. Neutral c. Negative
10. Justification from the anchor's perspective: a. Yes b. No
11. Justification from the community's perspective: a. Yes b. No
12. Justification from the law enforcement's perspective: a. Yes b. No

Appendix B: Interview Questions

An Examination of Non-White Crime Portrayals in Local Broadcast News

Name of Participant:

Title:

Date of Interview:

Time Started:

Time Stopped:

Pre Brief:

- _____ Thank the informant for participating
- _____ Introduce the study
- _____ Ask interviewee to sign confidentiality agreement
- _____ Reconfirm audiotape permission

1. Who is your employer?
 - a. How long have you been working in that organization?
 - b. What position do you currently hold with that employer?
2. Have you held any past positions with your current employer?
 - a. What past positions have you held with your current employer?
3. How long have you been working in television news?
4. How long have you been working in the news industry?
5. What positions have you held in the news industry, outside of your current employer?
6. Who determines story assignments in your newsroom?
 - a. Do you pitch story ideas in your newsroom?
 - b. Is there a daily editorial meeting in your current newsroom?
 - c. If so, what is the structure of those daily meetings?
7. What types of crimes does your newsroom report?
 - a. Does any information about the suspect unrelated to the criminal act play a role in the decision to air a crime story?
8. How frequently would you say your newscast consists of crime stories?
9. How often do you find your organization leading a newscast with crime stories?
 - a. Are certain types of crimes more likely to be a lead story?
10. Has your organization been subjected to any legal action after airing a crime story?
 - a. If so, are you able to provide an example?

11. Have you ever experienced bias in the newsroom in story selection on the basis of ethnicity, race, color, class or education level?
12. Have you ever experienced discrimination in the workplace on the basis of ethnicity, race, color, class or education level?
13. Do you believe bias on the basis of ethnicity, race, color, class or education level exists in news coverage by your station?
14. Do you believe bias on the basis of ethnicity, race, color, class or education level exists in news coverage in the Raleigh-Durham-Fayetteville area?
15. Have you ever witnessed such bias from previous employers?
16. What steps does your newsroom take to eliminate bias in its coverage?
 - a. How effective do you think this is?
 - b. What would you do to improve it?

Closing:

Are there any questions that I did not ask that you think might be important to my research?

Thanks for agreeing to this interview.