

Crime and Local Television News

*DRAMATIC, BREAKING,
AND LIVE FROM THE SCENE*



JEREMY H. LIPSCHULTZ • MICHAEL L. HILT

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Dramatic, Breaking, and Live
From the Scene

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University of Nebraska at Omaha



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The authors have written numerous scholarly articles in refereed publications such as *Journalism Quarterly*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *Education Gerontology*, *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, *Journal of Radio Studies*, and *Communications and the Law*.

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Foreword

Voyeuristic. Sensational. Pandering. For years, critics have used that kind of loaded language to describe the way television news covers crime. The criticism is driven in part by the disturbing images that often accompany crime stories on TV: body bags, blood-stained pavement, weeping relatives. But it's also based on the sheer quantity of the coverage, which tends to distort the frequency and significance of crime in local communities.

There is no question that crime stories dominate local television newscasts. Studies show that crime is the most frequently covered topic on local television and the most likely to be the lead story. That held true throughout the 1990s, despite the fact that the national rate of violent crime was declining. During that decade, for the first time, network newscasts reflected the same trend. The Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington found that from 1990 to 1995, the number of crime stories on the three network evening news programs tripled—even without counting stories related to the O.J. Simpson case.

Television news also tends to connect crime and race in a way that does not reflect reality. Studies document that Blacks and other people of color are over represented as criminals on television and under represented as victims. Stories about crimes involving a Black perpetrator and a White victim get disproportionate coverage on television, compared to the actual occurrence of such crimes.

Social scientists say repeated exposure to this kind of coverage can leave viewers feeling numb or unreasonably paranoid about their chances of becoming a victim of crime, especially given the downward trend in crime statistics. "People should feel safer," Robert Lifton, professor of psychology at John Jay

College in New York, told the Los Angeles Times in 1999. "But you really wouldn't know it from the news."

How did television news get so out of step with reality and what can be done about it? In *Crime and Local Television News*, Jeremy Lipschultz and Michael Hilt examine those questions and offer some proposals for reform. Their book distills decades of research about television news, and adds intriguing new findings based on surveys and content analysis, among them the importance of dramatic pictures of local origin in determining what gets on the air.

Television has always been driven by the need for pictures, and because crime stories are fairly visual stories, they are among the easiest for television journalists to produce. Never mind that the video is often predictable: flashing lights, yellow police tape, bystanders at the crime scene. At least there are pictures to be had. Crime stories also are prime candidates for live reporting, especially on the late evening newscasts when a crime story often is the closest thing to breaking news, something many stations now routinely promise their viewers.

The authors review other factors that impel local television to cover more crime than other types of stories. Local newsrooms tend to be staffed largely by young, highly mobile reporters and producers who lack the expertise required to cover important but complicated issues in a community they have lived in for only a year or two. Crime, alternatively, is a story even a new arrival can handle without much background knowledge, and one that can easily be told in the short amount of time usually allotted to any story in a television newscast.

Some critics link the emphasis on crime coverage to an almost desperate scramble for ratings by local stations beset by increased competition from cable channels. In the late 1980s, WSVN-TV in Miami became the poster child for building ratings success through tabloid news coverage. Lurid murders, shootings, stabbings and rapes often filled two-thirds of the news hole each night in a newscast *Newsweek* dubbed "Crime Time Live." As the violence quotient increased, the station's ratings did too. But by the mid-1990s, the formula had worn thin. Ratings dropped, and the station's emphasis shifted. A recent study found that WSVN-TV aired the least crime at 6 p.m. of any Miami station.

Research by NewsLab and others suggests that news managers are misguided if they believe they are responding to viewers' interests when they devote so much time to covering crime. In a national survey of self-described light television watchers conducted in 2000, almost a third said a major reason they did not watch more local TV news is that it covers too much crime—the biggest single reason given aside from issues of time and scheduling. Almost 60% said they would watch even less often if their local stations covered more crime.

Some stations have tried to reform their crime coverage, most notably KVUE-TV in Austin, TX, which in 1996, established a series of criteria that a crime story would have to meet before it could go on the air. Is the situation an immediate threat to public safety? Is it a threat to children? Do viewers need to take action? Does the crime have a significant impact on the community? And

does the story suggest a crime prevention effort? This sensible screening process has yet to be widely adopted by other stations. In a more recent reform effort, Stephen Brill, publisher of the now-defunct media magazine *Brill's Content* proposed a code of conduct for reporters interviewing victims of crime. There was no rush to sign on.

Some journalists complain that efforts like these are tantamount to censorship. But advocates say they have not gone soft on crime. "We're not trying to deny the ugliness in the world; that's not what this is about," Kathy McFeaters, then executive producer at KVUE, told *Columbia Journalism Review* in 1996. "However, we have a responsibility not to give that ugliness more play than it deserves."

Even the most vocal critics would not urge television news to stop covering crime. After all, crime may be unpleasant but it is news. The real issue is *how* it's covered. As the authors of this volume make clear, television needs to do a better job providing viewers with context in stories about individual crimes, noting the rate of particular criminal acts and the risk factors associated with these crimes. Reporters should explore the causes and consequences of crime as vigorously as they do the actual commission of crimes. Their stories should include information about prevention efforts, as well. Beyond that, newsrooms should consider what stories they are missing—stories of greater importance to the communities they serve—when they concentrate so heavily on covering violent crime.

Indeed, it is long past time for television news to reexamine its coverage of crime. For years, television journalists have privately bemoaned their newsrooms' emphasis on sensational crime stories, but acted as if their hands were tied by inexorable market forces. Today, the tide may be turning. Newscasts have actually been losing viewers and are sticking to an outdated "if it bleeds, it leads" philosophy. And some stations like KGUN-TV in Tucson, AZ, that have changed their approach and de-emphasized crime have seen ratings gains.

Television news is a notoriously risk-averse business, one that favors imitation over innovation. Change comes slowly when it comes at all. By examining the reasons behind crime-intensive coverage on the local news, by assessing its effects and considering alternatives, this book gives news managers a strong incentive to choose a different path.

—Deborah Potter
NewsLab

Preface

The challenge of this book was to bring together the theory and practice of local television news. The industry experienced dynamic change since the 1970s, and mass communication theory is a useful framework for understanding the evolution.

As you read this book, several major themes are emphasized. Beyond the conceptualization of crime, the book considers local television news from a variety of perspectives. Initially, the literature and our anecdotal observation of local television news led us to focus on John McManus's idea of market-driven journalism. Although marketing remains important in the understanding of local television news today, we found other factors that were equally significant.

The need to be dramatic and visual, the emphasis on breaking news coverage, and the desire to be live from the scene may not be completely understood through the lens of marketing. Our survey data and the systematic examination of local newscasts from across the country suggested that local news, and specifically crime news, is also driven by news values and organization structure. News people appear to select stories they truly believe will be interesting to audience members, and they do this within a newsroom structure of decision makers. News consultants may help set a tone for that process, but it does not appear that they dictate an overall emphasis on crime.

Perhaps more telling is the day-to-day lack of interest in national news and public affairs coverage. It appears that except for unusual events—such as the September 2001 terrorism attack of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—national and international news tends to be avoided. The need to be local

and timely influences the decision to emphasize crime news. This is especially true in the late evening news broadcast when story choices are limited and government stories are hours old.

The introductory chapter explains the nature of local television news and the appeal of crime stories. In it, we highlight the major themes of the book. Next, chapter 2 focuses on mass communication theory and its application to crime coverage. Chapter 3 looks at how local television stations often use crime news as a ratings builder. The structure of television news organizations is also considered. This chapter features original survey research data and content analyses of local television news broadcasts.

Chapter 4 examines legal issues in local television news. Crime coverage raises concerns about the First Amendment, access to crime scenes, and coverage of the courts. Ethical issues are discussed in chapter 5. Legal and ethical problems are addressed in the sixth chapter, which focuses on prisons and capital punishment. Chapter 7 is a case study of how one state dealt with three intensely covered executions during the 1990s.

Crime reporting and its relation with minorities and the elderly are highlighted in chapters 8 and 9. These are emerging issues in the research on local television news. As the average age of Americans goes up, local television news may be increasingly important in elevating fear of crime in society.

The book concludes with a chapter looking ahead. The future of local television news is clouded by social and technological change. Chapter 10 offers some proposals for reforming local television news and its coverage of crime.

The interdisciplinary study of local television news draws the reader to such areas as criminal justice, gerontology, and sociology. Much work needs to be done in the field of mass communication to fully integrate these concerns. Mass communication research in the future must be studied from a wide range of theoretical perspectives. At the same time, other fields have much to learn. In some cases, other disciplines have been more receptive to the integration of ideas.

The authors believe this book is useful to students studying to be broadcast journalists. If the industry is to change, its future employees will need to better understand social issues. Likewise, students of mass communication, media and society, public opinion, communication theory and research, and public relations and media management, would gain a better understanding of local television news by reading this book. Outside the field of journalism and mass communication, those interested in crime, race, aging, technology, law, and ethics also would find the case of local television news to be an instructive application.

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—Jeremy H. Lipschultz
—Michael L. Hilt
Omaha, Nebraska
December 2001

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1

Introduction to Local Television News

"What do they get, the viewers who watch at 11 p.m.? They get local (news) 'with extreme prejudice,' to quote the old CIA term for authority to wipe out enemies. They get what Max Frankel of The New York Times calls 'body bags at 11 o'clock, normally 30 minutes of hell and blather, ads and promos, local television's most profitable and most disheartening use of the air.'"

—Robert MacNeil,
former PBS news anchor (1996, p. 7)

"Every day the particulars of television news—the news stories—are different, but the tone and feel of the newscast remains the same."

—Matthew R. Kerbel,
former producer and professor (2000, p. 130)

Viewers of local television newscasts across the country are regularly exposed to crime news stories. In this book, crime coverage is studied with an interest in how live reporting appeals to the desire to be dramatic and timely. For about 3 decades, crime stories within local TV newscasts have been nearly as common as weather and sports. Although marketing is a factor in the format of local TV news, it is also clear that news values and organizational structure drive a news culture that favors an emphasis on crime coverage.

Television in general, and local TV news in particular, are a part of everyday life. According to a recent Roper survey, 56% of Americans consider television to be their primary source for news (Roper Center, 1999b). Respondents who said they got most of their news about national and international issues from television identified three dominant sources: cable, local, and network TV news. Surprisingly, 39% said they turned to local TV news for national and in-