Comparing American and Canadian Local Television Crime Stories: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

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Headnote

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Dans leur bulletin de nouvelles, les stations de télévision locales présentent sans cesse des reportages sur la criminalité. Par ailleurs, les différences qui existeraient entre les reportages canadiens et américains sur le crime fait l'objet d'un débat animé. Le présent article a donc pour but d'étudier ces différences (ou similitudes). Or, les résultats de cette étude indiquent que les bulletins de nouvelles canadiens et américains n'affichent aucune différence quant à la typologie des crimes présentés. Cependant, une analyse multivariée révèle que les réseaux américains présentent un plus grand nombre de reportages sensationnalistes, de reportages en direct et de reportages concernant les armes à feu. D'autre part, un plus grand nombre de reportages d'envergure nationale et de reportages principaux sont diffusés au Canada. L'auteur contextualise ses résultats en appliquant le modèle de la propagande élaboré par Herman et Chomsky dans l'ouvrage intitulé Manufacturing Consent (1988). Ainsi, à l'échelle locale, les médias américains et canadiens créent leurs bulletins de nouvelles de façon sélective afin d'apaiser les propriétaires et les annonceurs et de véhiculer les attitudes traditionnelles envers la criminalité et la justice.

The cultural identity of many Canadians is structured through a perceived dissimilarity with Americans. Simply put, being a "Canadian" means not being an American. Some Canadians view the "land of opportunity" as a land of poverty, high crime rates, inadequate health care, terrorist threats, and poor race relations. Correspondingly, some media pundits suggest that the Canadian news media are more balanced and more intellectually evolved than U.S. outlets. It is argued that Americans are consumed by fear as a result of increased and prolonged media coverage of "dangerous" street crime. Notwithstanding the fact that the International Crime Victimization Survey (ICVS) reveals that Canadians report higher levels of fear than Americans (Roberts 2001), there has been no research examining the actual differences between presentations of crime on Canadian and U.S. local television newscasts. One purpose of this research, therefore, is to systematically determine the differences and similarities between Canadian and U.S. local television coverage of crime stories.

There is little argument that crime is a staple of news production. Although there are variations across media types and across communities with respect to the amount of coverage that crime receives (Chermak 1994; Liska and Baccaglini 1990), generally crime is regularly disclosed by all popular news media formats (Dominick 1978; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991; Graber 1980; Roshier 1973). Similarly, there is little debate about the portrayal of crime by popular news media outlets. The majority of research confirms that the news media over-represents violent offences and portrays crime in a very sensationalistic manner (Surette 1998). It is rare for stories to examine the causes of crime, the motive for a particular crime, or the effectiveness of the criminal justice system (Graber 1980). Crime stories are more likely to appear in the pre-arrest stage, while crime causation, motives, and outcomes of crime incidents are seldom examined (Dussuyer 1979; Fishman 1981; Graber 1980; Sherizen 1978; Gabor and Weimann 1987; Chermak 1994).

Similarly, crime reporting is criticized for ignoring the relationship between crime and broader social conditions. While news reports associate criminal violence with youth, maleness, and minority group membership, the news media ignore the historical view of how labour markets and related institutions shape employment opportunities and the size and composition of the pool of people vulnerable to arrest (Humphries 1981). Ultimately, the tendency to portray crime as perpetrated mainly by pathological individuals precludes alternative explanations (Humphries 1981). Consequently, crime portrayals are almost based exclusively on individual characteristics rather than on social conditions, and the causes of crime are perceived to be rooted in individual failings rather than social explanations. Deviant behaviour is viewed as an individual choice, while social, economic, or structural explanations are ignored or deemed irrelevant.

While causes of crime are virtually ignored, a number of studies have revealed that crimes of violence are disproportionately presented in the media (Antunes and Hurley 1977; Graber 1980; Sherizen 1978; Gabor and Weimann 1987; Surette 1998). The more serious the crime, the greater the chance it will appear as a news story (Roshier 1973; Ditton and Duffy 1983; Doob 1985; Graber 1980; Sheley and Ashkins 1981; Sherizen 1978; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Smith 1984; Gabor and Weimann 1987; Randall, Lee-Sammons, and Hagner 1988). Essentially, crimes of violence may be perceived by news makers as more sensationalist, extraordinary, and dramatic, which increases their newsworthiness (Jerin and Fields 1994; Chermak 1994). For example, interviews with news makers reveal that so-called sensationalist crimes containing violence are deemed more newsworthy than regular criminal events (Chermak 1994; Grabosky and Wilson 1989).

There is little argument that media crime reporting does not correspond to the realities of official crime statistics (Garofalo 1981; Roshier 1973). Violent, relatively infrequent crimes such as homicide are emphasized, while property crimes, white-collar offences, and other non-violent crimes are under-reported (Graber 1980; Humphries 1981; Gabor and Weimann 1987; Randall et al. 1988; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Liska and Baccaglini 1990). In a study comparing television newscasts to newspapers in New Orleans, Sheley and Ashkins (1981: 499) report that 45% of the crimes presented in newspapers involved murder and robbery, compared to about 80% of the reports included in television newscasts. However, Chermak (1995) found that coverage of homicide in television and newspaper mediums is equal: approximately 25% of news space is devoted to murder.

Nevertheless, in cities with high murder rates, the news media focus on the sensational nature of the homicide (Chermak 1994,1995). Essentially, the newsworthiness of the homicide depends on the actors involved. Homicides that involve multiple victims are more likely to be deemed newsworthy and reported (Chermak 1995; Kumar 1993; Jerin and Fields 1994; Weiss and Chermak 1998; Sorenson, Peterson Manz, and Berk 1998), while homicide involving white (Entman 1992; Johnstone, Hawkins, and Michener 1994; Pritchard 1985) female, and young or elderly victims receive more attention (Pritchard and Hughes 1997; Sorenson et al. 1998).

Theoretical orientation

It has been well documented, then, that the news media provide inaccurate representations of crime and justice. However, broader questions emerge: Why do the news media perpetuate inaccuracies or myths about crime and justice? What is the purpose of transmitting erroneous or misleading crime information? Grabe (1999) argues that crime news is functional because it provides a means to negotiate society's morality by framing simple lines between good and evil. Social solidarity and integration are promoted by societal outrage in response to criminal violations of law and morality. Likewise, Katz (1987) maintains that crime news allows audience members to develop positions on moral questions of a general and personal nature. Conversely, the media may frame crime and crime control in ways that support institutions of power and authority (Fishman 1978; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts 1978; Gorelick 1989; Humphries 1981; Voumvakis and Ericson 1984). For example, based on a content analysis of crime articles in Time

magazine, Barlow, Barlow, and Chiricos (1995) argue that the media provide an inadequate and distorted picture of crime that is based primarily on the conditions of a capitalist political economy. In short, the media distorts the problem of crime in ways that support the interests of the capitalist class (Hall et al. 1978).

In addition, Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model may offer a cogent understanding of the production of crime news. The propaganda model contends that five filters interact and reinforce each other to determine "news": concentration of ownership/profit motive; advertising as primary income source; reliance on "official" sources; "flak" or negative criticism as a way of controlling the media; and anti-communism, which also acts as a structural control mechanism. Essentially, these filters construct news discourse and afford definitions of newsworthiness. In this sense, news making is equated with propaganda campaigns. However, there are no current studies that expand the propaganda model to the production of local television crime news. The second purpose of this research, therefore, is to apply the propaganda model by examining differences and similarities between Canadian and U.S. presentations of local crime news.

Method

The sample

Stratified sampling was employed to acquire 400 30-minute episodes from four markets (100 from each market). Stratified sampling ensured equal proportions of news broadcasts from the cities of Detroit, MI; Toronto, ON; Toledo, OH; and Kitchener, ON. Within each market, television stations may provide varying types and degrees of crime coverage. As a result, stations available to the researcher were taped in relatively equal proportions. Detroit has the most television channels available, including WDIV (29 episodes), WXYZ (28 episodes), WJBK (28 episodes), and WKDB (15 episodes). Toledo stations include WNWO (32 episodes), WTOL (34 episodes), and WTVG (34 episodes). Toronto stations include Global (48 episodes) and CityTV (52 episodes). Finally, Kitchener has only one station, CKCO (100 episodes).1 In addition, noon (45 episodes), evening (186 episodes), and nightly (169 episodes) news broadcasts were taped.

Content analysis was conducted on 400 episodes, which included 1,042 crime stories. A content analysis is a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases. The focus is primarily on any verbal, visual, or behavioural form of communication. In the current study, content consisted of both visual and verbal communication in relation to news stories that present criminal acts, criminals, victims, criminal justice agents, and issues. The focus of the current study is on quantitative content analysis: identifying, sampling, and counting specific manifest content (e.g., race, gender, type of crime) and classifying latent content into distinct categories.

Manifest coding is the coding of visible or surface content (Neuman 2003). In other words, quantitative content analyses involve coding the material in terms of predetermined and precisely defined characteristics. Latent coding or semantic analysis looks for the underlying, implicit meaning in the content of a text. Obviously, the meaning of words, phrases, or terminology is subjective; some latent or semantic analysis was therefore necessary. In order to provide reliability, the researcher set out strict rules for the interpretation and coding of content. In keeping with Berg's suggestion that "researchers should offer detailed excerpts from relevant statements that serve to document the researchers' interpretations" (2001: 243), subjective decisions required documented excerpts from the news story to provide justification and verification.

Variable construction and measurement

Manifest coding

A code sheet was developed to examine manifest and latent content. The several variables created within the code sheet enabled the researcher to examine story presentation statistically. The first section of the code sheet identifies the city, country, market, station, date, and time of the newscast. The second section examines the nature of each presentation, including type of crime(s), lead story, live story, reporting of weapon, local versus national story, length of story, reporter's race and gender, stage of crime, use of interviews, number of interviews, and reporting of motive.

Type of crime is the primary, secondary, and tertiary crime reported in the crime segment. The primary crime is determined by seriousness, based on the level of physical harm to the victim(s). Type of crime data are presented in Table 1.

Local or national story denotes the region or area in which the crime being presented occurred. Local stories document crimes that occurred in the local broadcast region. In Detroit, local stories include those originating from Detroit or the Michigan region; in Toledo, those originating from the Toledo and Ohio region; in Toronto, those originating from the Greater Toronto area; and in Kitchener, those from areas in south-western Ontario. For all markets, national stories are defined as those originating outside the market area.

Length of story was measured by timing the story from beginning to end with a stopwatch. It was coded in seconds because the majority of stories lasted less than one minute. Stage of crime was coded as prearrest, arrest, court, or disposition. The pre-arrest stage denotes stories not reporting an arrest. The arrest stage denotes stories in which an arrest had been made, but suspects had not

appeared in court. The court stage denotes stories in which the suspects or defendants had appeared in court (including preliminary or sentencing phase). The disposition stage denotes stories in which the suspect or defendant had served or was at that time serving his or her sentence for the crime.

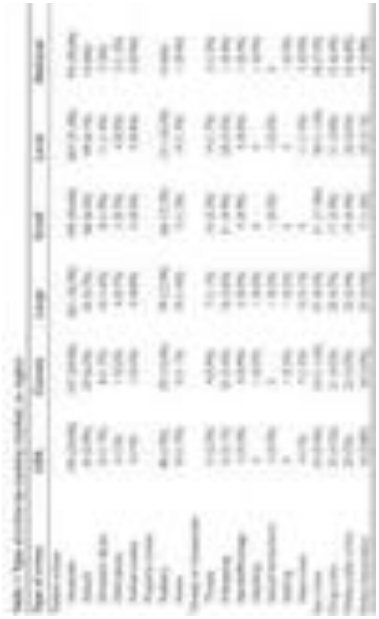

Table 1: Type of crime by country, market, or region

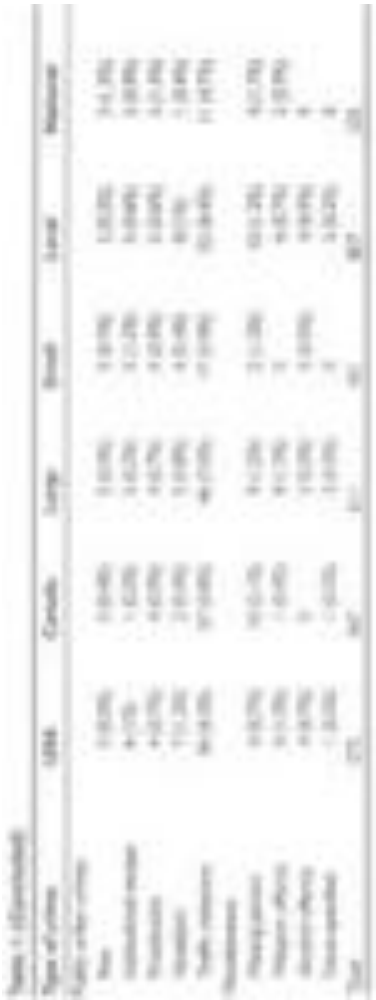

Table 1: Type of crime by country, market, or region

Latent coding

Reporting of motive

Reporting of motive required a subjective appraisal by the researcher; however, this appraisal was based on precise guidelines. The reporter/ anchor, interview subject, or police officer could provide a motive during the presentation. The motive could be implied or suggested; it did not have to be confirmed. In many instances, the motive was not really known but was reported as "possible" or linked to other activity, such as drugs or gangs. When motive was suggested or implied, the motive was documented on the code sheet to provide verification. For example, the anchor or news reporter might suggest that the "crime occurred because ..." or that "... is the probable cause for the crime." Interview subjects might speculate on the reason the incident occurred, while police officers might try to explain the crime.

Emotive presentation

Several variables were constructed to examine the emotive presentation of crime stories. Stories were examined with regard to their presentation of fear, presentation of sensationalism, and presentation of outrage or sympathy. Presentation of fear denotes stories in which the interview subject or reporter/anchor explicitly stated words or phrases that present fear. Adjectives in the stories were examined closely for such words and comments, for example, "the only thing to expect is the unexpected"; "be advised"; "be more cautious"; "you never know"; "act of random violence"; "gunmen at large"; "[crime] on the rise"; "[suspect] on the loose"; "on the run"; "[suspect] is on violent frenzy"; "is high risk to reoffend"; "fears are not calmed"; "can't sleep at night"; "[It's] creepy, you don't know who's out there"; "I'm scared, worried about kids"; "It's a scary thing, I'm shaken"; "It scares me, that's crazy";" scared, very scared, it's too close too home." Nevertheless, a limitation is the subjectivity involved in deciding the meaning or definition of words or quotes. Consequently, the coder recorded words and quotes onto the code sheet in order to be as consistent as possible and to provide the opportunity for validation.

Sensational stories involved famous persons, or individuals considered to be notable in the community: athletes, actors, politicians, entertainers, musicians, or other prominent community members. In addition, this category includes stories that appeared to be comical or humorous in some way, such as robberies that involve strange items (e.g., shrimp, eyeglasses, farm tractors, liquor, g-strings, pennies, kitchen sink, windows), or involved video of incident(s), dramatic arrests or takedowns, helicopter footage, victim(s) on stretcher(s) or being attended to by paramedics, as well as stories described as "bizarre," "wild," "unbelievable," or "high drama."

Presentation of outrage or sympathy denotes crime stories whose words, comments, or video conveyed the message of outrage toward the crime or sympathy toward the victim. Presentation of outrage or sympathy was measured through explicit comments made by interview subjects or news anchor/reporters and by video displaying emotional responses such as crying, yelling, or visual dejection (slumping over, hands on head, head buried in hands, etc.). Although the audience may feel sympathy for any person who is victimized, only stories with a clear example of sympathy were considered here, for instance, statements such as "[crime occurred in an] area filled with small children, it's sickening"; "it is a tragedy"; "[victim] didn't deserve this"; "sad for victim and family"; "didn't deserve"; "it breaks my heart"; and words employed such as "devastated," "sickening," "upsetting," "dismayed," "grief-stricken," "emotional," "hurt," "mourned," "upset," "overwhelmed," "shaken," "troubling," and "shocked." Sympathy can also be portrayed by coverage of a funeral (memorial) or a visible display of crying or anguish by relatives, friends, and community members. Outrage includes the use of the words "brutal," "disturbing," "horrifying," "cold-blooded," "savage," "angry," "deplorable," "heinous," and "gruesome." Outrage was presented in public protests against the crime or suspect(s), including yelling, fists raised in the air, or screaming at the offender or suspect. For stories that presented outrage or sympathy, the specific reason was documented on the code sheet to provide verification.

Pro-active police response

Finally, police response was coded as pro-active or non-pro-active. Stories of pro-active response involved the police actively seeking the suspect, as verified through adjectives describing work by the police; information about a reward; a police chase; video footage showing an active search; SWAT team activity; or the police actively seeking the public's help in solving the crime.

Analytic induction

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to conduct binomial logistic regression analysis. Binomial (or binary) logistic regression is a form of regression employed when the dependent variable is a dichotomy and the independent variable is of any type (ordinal, interval, or nominal). Logistic regression can be used to predict a dependent variable on the basis of independents. Moreover, it enables researchers to determine what percentage of variance in the dependent variable is explained by the independents; to rank the importance of independents; to assess interaction effects; and to understand the impact of covariate control variables. Logistic regression applies maximum likelihood estimation after transforming the dependent into a logit variable (the natural log of the odds of the dependent occurring or not) to estimate the probability of a certain event occurring (Tabachnick and Fidell 1996). In other words, this process enables the researcher to determine predictors of the dependent (outcome) variable.

In the current study the dependent or outcome variable is the country of newscast. The independent or predictor variables include manifest variables (market size, lead story, live story, length of story, interview, stage of crime, reporting of firearm) and latent variables (reporting of motive, pro-active police response, and presentation of fear, outrage or sympathy, or sensationalism). In essence, the strategy is to determine whether story characteristics or the latent variables predict a Canadian or U.S. crime story. Finally, the results will be discussed in the context of the propaganda model.

Results

Table 2 provides a descriptive overview of the differences between Canadian and U.S. crime stories in terms of story characteristics (manifest and latent) and types of crimes reported.

Interestingly, no differences were found between countries in terms of the types of crime reported. The assumption was that crime coverage would reflect differential rates of violent crime in Canada and the United States. In fact, although violent victimization is much lower in Canada, Canadian news makers still value the "newsworthiness" of violent crime and produce stories that reflect this reality. With regard to the selection of violent crime, there is no doubt that American news makers have more options; however, Canadian news makers match U.S. broadcasts in two ways. First, local Canadian broadcasts are more likely to include violent crime stories that originate outside their market or region ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 8.93$, $p < 0.01$); in this study, for instance, 66% of homicide stories in Canada were local, compared to 80% of homicide stories in the U.S. markets. Second, the Canadian broadcasts were more likely to include extended coverage of crime stories ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 15.14$, $p < 0.01$). For example, 50% of the U.S. homicide stories covered the pre-arrest stage, compared to 40% of Canadian homicide stories. At the arrest stage, 25% of homicide stories were American, while 19% were Canadian. At the court stage, 22% of homicide stories were American and 31% Canadian. Finally, at the disposition stage, 3% of stories were American compared to 11% that were Canadian.

Table 2: Descriptive characteristics of Canadian and U.S. local broadcast crime stories

Although there were no differences in the type(s) of crimes reported, there were some differences in the story characteristics. First, Canadian stories were longer than U.S. ones ($t = 1.85$, $p < 0.05$). Second, Canadian broadcasts were less likely to include live crime stories ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 33.28$, $p < 0.01$). Third, Canadian stories were less likely to report the use of a firearm ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 19.67$, $p < 0.01$). Fourth, Canadian stories were less likely to report local crimes ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 10.44$, $p < 0.01$). Fifth, compared to U.S. stories, Canadian stories increased their representation of later stages of justice ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 22.97$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, Canadian stories were more likely to present the police as pro-active ($\chi^{sup\ 2^} = 23.47$, $p < 0.01$).

The multivariate analysis performed to enhance this study is presented in Table 3. Specifically, logistic regression was employed to determine which story characteristics are more likely to predict a crime story's country of origin (Canada or United States). Three models are included in this analysis. The first includes all crime stories (n = 1,042). The second includes stories that involve the police, examining specifically whether the police are portrayed as pro-active or non-pro-active (n = 717). The third includes only homicide stories (n = 350).

Odds ratios (Exp. B) above 1.00 indicate a positive relationship, which predicts that a crime story is Canadian. Model 1 reveals that lead story, stage of crime story, and story length are positively related to country of broadcast. Lead stories, stories that are reported in the later stages of criminal justice, and lengthier stories are more likely to be a Canadian crime story. Conversely, odds ratios (Exp. B) below 1.00 indicate a negative relationship, which predicts that the story is American. The results suggest that story length, live story, local story, report of firearm, and

presentation of sensationalism are negatively related to country of broadcast. Live stories, shorter stories, and local stories are more likely to be U.S. crime stories. Stories that report firearm(s) and present sensationalism are also more likely to be American crime stories.

Model 2 reveals similar results, except that the stage of crime is no longer statistically significant, while portraying the police in a proactive manner is positively related to country of broadcast: pro-active police stories are more likely to be included in a Canadian crime story. Model 3 reveals that motive presentation and stage of crime are positively related to country of broadcast. Homicide stories that provide a motive and stories addressing the later stages of the criminal justice process are more likely to be Canadian. Conversely, live story, local story, and report of firearm(s) are negatively related to country of broadcast. Such homicide stories are more likely to be American.

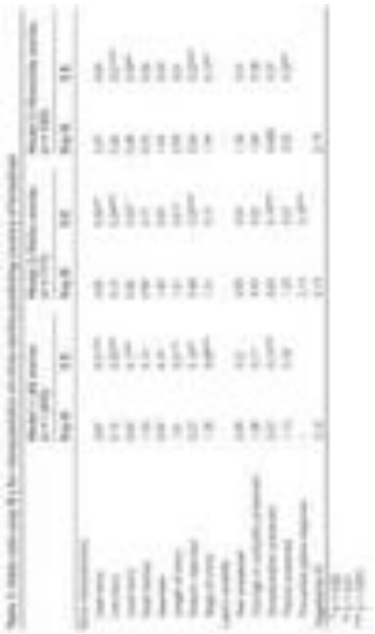

Table 3: Odds ratio (exp B.) for characteristics of crime stories predicting country of broadcast.

Discussion

The findings provide an interesting empirical reflection of the differences and similarities between U.S. and Canadian local television newscasts. Notably, there are relatively few differences in the types of crimes that are reported; however, sensational crime stories are more likely to be American. There are two plausible reasons for this finding. First, American news producers may have access to a wider variety of crime stories and, from these stories, select those that have a more sensational slant. second, American news makers may create sensational stories in an attempt to attract viewers. In other words, American news makers may adopt techniques and strategies that encourage sensationalistic coverage of relatively routine stories. In all likelihood, some combination of these explanations probably determines the difference in sensationalistic coverage between American and Canadian newscasts.

Nevertheless, a larger question emerges from this study: Why are there relatively few differences between Canadian and American newscasts? It is quite possible that Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (1988) can provide valuable insight regarding the similarities between American and Canadian news broadcasts. Although the propaganda model has primarily been applied to political and international news reporting at national levels, many of its essential concepts can be applied powerfully to crime news at the local news level.

As described above (see "Theoretical orientation"), the propaganda model consists of five filters that determine what constitutes news. The first filter is concentration of ownership or the profit motive: Herman and Chomsky (1988) suggest that owners of large media conglomerates are unwilling to criticize the "free market" system and that news production is essentially framed to maintain the status quo. In local crime news production, owners and news makers maintain an illusion of relevance: the audience is inundated with images of violence and street crime, while white-collar crime, corporate crime, environmental crime, medical malpractice, and unsafe work conditions are rarely presented.

In this study, only 52 of 1,042 crime stories report white-collar crimes. Many of these crimes are framed not as "crimes" but as consumer frauds. Arguably, street crime is deemed more important or newsworthy than white-collar crime. Media owners and news makers contend that news production is based primarily on audience demands and that audience members expect to see street crime. Granted, street crime is important to consumers of crime news; however, street and violent crime stories are generally cursory, suggesting that news makers are not really very interested in providing audiences with informative analysis of the so-called street crime problem.

The second filter is advertising as the primary source of income. There is little doubt that both Canadian and American local television stations rely heavily on advertising dollars. Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that advertisers have tremendous impact on news content decisions. News makers are aware that stories that fall outside the boundaries of acceptable journalism may alienate advertisers. Similarly, producing sensational (non-critical) stories will endear news makers to advertisers, who seek access to consumers. Consequently, under the auspices of professionalism, news makers make advertising-driven choices (consciously or unconsciously) about the content of local news.

The ultimate responsibility of news makers is not to provide informative, fair, or balanced coverage but to provide ratings for advertisers or potential advertisers. In terms of the presentation of crime and justice, it can be argued that market forces affect news makers' conception of newsworthiness. As a result, both Canadian and American media owners and advertisers may engage in a symbiotic, implicit relationship to produce and create crime news. To put it simply, producing crime news is more about maintaining audiences and selling products than about enlightening viewers.

The third filter is reliance on "official" sources. Herman and Chomsky (1988) suggest that news makers engage in a symbiotic relationship with official sources of information because of financial necessity and reciprocity of interest. At the local level, many police agencies have public information officers who use the media to inform the public; at the same time, beat reporters regularly use the police as a primary source of crime news. For all intents and purposes, the "law and order" philosophy is transmitted in local television

crime stories. However, "police propaganda" may be a more suitable term for the media's maintenance of "law and order" values. In the guise of informing the public, the purpose of the news media is to grab viewers' attention, not to educate them. It is within this framework that "police propaganda," or the "law and order" model for crime reporting, is featured.

In this study, the majority of crime stories used official sources, primarily the police. Interestingly, Canadian crime stories were more likely than U.S. ones to use the police (31% vs. 24%) and politicians (8% vs. 2%) as interview subjects. Crime discourse is a relatively easy political platform to espouse: crime is bad, the government must be tough on crime, and citizens must be protected. The fact that much of the political "talk" about crime is based on rhetoric and not reality is inconsequential to both the news media and politicians. Stories are tightly bound into the "good versus evil" model, with little room for context, explanation, or debate.

The fourth filter is "flak," described as negative responses to the media by interest groups or citizenry. Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that business interests regularly unite to form "flak" organizations. In crime news, the popularity of the "law and order" approach among viewers may encourage a lack of innovative coverage of crime and justice. Arguably, a more realistic analysis of crime and justice will lead to "flak" directed at news makers. The public has been inundated with traditional reports of criminality, and many Americans and Canadians hold conservative ideas about crime and justice (Doob and Roberts 1988; Baron and Hartnagel 1996; Sprott and Doob 1997; Roberts 2001; Flanagan and Longmire 1996).

Although it is quite possible that audience members might benefit from a unique and informative perspective on crime and justice, ultimately, both audience members and news makers are likely to reject any ideology that falls outside the boundaries of "law and order." There are several reasons for this rejection. First, "police propaganda" has been sufficiently effective that the public truly believes the "official" version of crime and justice. The parade of interview subjects (police, community members, etc.) who espouse traditional views of criminality and justice has created a style of reporting that is immutable. Second, critical analysis of crime and justice requires more time, energy, and resources. News makers have deadlines and depend on the police as an easy and reliable source of crime news. Stories that provide informed analysis are rarely produced. Although a handful of stories studied do offer informative or critical analysis of the "crime problem," the majority are reported in the usual manner, with the usual suspects.

The final filter in the propaganda model is anti-communism (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Obviously, this aspect of Manufacturing Consent is out of date, as the Cold War has ended; supporters of the propaganda model might suggest, however, that this filter is best understood as the dramatization of evil or as the customary Western identification of an "enemy" or an "evil" threat. To put it simply, viewpoints that rival Western hegemony are labelled in a one-dimensional fashion to draw the line between "good" and "evil" or between "right" and "wrong."

In local crime coverage, these lines are best exemplified by discussions that combine individual blame (personal pathology) with structural blame (e.g., anti-immigrant bias and anti-inner-city bias) to explain crime. For instance, presentations of motive neglect the underlying societal factors that create and sustain criminal behaviour and gloss over psychological explanations by claiming that the criminal is "crazy" or mentally unstable. Explanations support the status quo, the belief that crime is determined by self-serving or hateful actions by "criminals" who engage in poor decision making. The assumption is that violence is inevitable and that the nature or complexion of society has little or nothing to do with crime. It is not society that creates, supports, or maintains violent behaviour; rather, violent behaviour is a pathological derivative of individual actions. In essence, newscasts condemn violent crime, yet give audiences little information about why it occurs, how it can be prevented, and its consequences for victims.

Motive construction is based in generalities, not specifics; in other words, specific crimes are ascribed to general motives. For example, the beating death of a teen is attributed to "gang violence"; an incident in which a young man is beaten and dragged from a car is attributed to "road rage." The majority of stories in which motives are given are based in clichés, with which the audience can readily identify. Yet not all motives are based in personal pathology or individual evil; some are based in stereotypical constructions of structural forces that purportedly cause criminality. For example, anti-immigrant bias is readily apparent in Canadian newscasts: basically, the crime problem in Toronto is associated with an "ethnic element." There are numerous examples of stories in which cultural or ethnic differences become the focus of the story, rather than the crime itself.

In addition, the presentation of motives is based on the "worthiness" of the victim(s). Some victims are considered more newsworthy and, as a result, receive more coverage and more sympathy. In the construction of crime news there is an imaginary boundary that demarcates inner-city from suburban residents. For instance, Toronto's CityTV uses the slogans "now to the streets," "to the mean streets," and "on the street tonight." These statements imply that crime is interrelated with the "streets." Obviously, violence does occur in the urban environment; however, similar incidents that occur in suburban or rural areas are not framed with such a negative connotation. Crime reports that originate from the suburbs are framed as isolated incidents, "unexpected" or "unusual." Essentially, victims of "street" crimes are minimized, while victims of "suburban" crimes are glorified. Instead of tackling inner-city crime in an honest fashion, news stories deflect the issues into areas that audience members can readily understand (gang violence, drugs, community structure, etc.). Inner-city violence is portrayed as deriving from the community structure rather than as a consequence of poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunities, lack of education, lack of gun control, or inadequate health care.

Conclusions

This study found few statistical differences between U.S. and Canadian local news stations' coverage of crime. The distinctions that did appear may reflect different "realities" that news makers experience: namely, that American news producers have more choices in their local market, while Canadian news producers mitigate their "lack of choice" by covering stories over a longer period and selecting stories from outside their market. However, this does not mean that Canadian crime coverage is either superior or more balanced.

Essentially, the differences between Canadian and U.S. coverage of crime are nominal. The major difference is that sensational stories are less likely to be Canadian. Nevertheless, qualitative analysis indicates that both Canadian and U.S. news makers engage in similar reporting techniques in an attempt to produce crime stories that attract viewers, appease media owners and advertisers, and generally maintain the status quo.

Footnote
Note

1. Stations were chosen based on availability to the researcher. Only stations that are available on Cogeco Cable in Windsor, ON, were selected for analysis. In addition, only stations with evening and nightly news were selected for analysis. During the taping period, the Detroit CBS affiliate (WWJ) did not have an evening or nightly news program.

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