Location, Location, Location:
Urban & Suburban Crime on Local TV News

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ABSTRACT

Even though crime has fallen in the United States in the past six years, public opinion polls indicate that crime and public safety are the over-riding concerns of citizens in communities. These polls tell us that a significant majority of our citizens get most of their information from local television news and, in general, they believe what they are being shown and told. In short, these newscasts play a pre-eminent role in the social construction of reality and, by extension, in forming the cognitive maps that citizens use to understand their communities. This paper examines how the press, particularly local television news, portrays the urban–suburban dimensions of crime in two major television markets in the U.S. Findings show that local newscasts in the markets differed significantly along the urban--suburban dimension of crime coverage. But they were consistent in the message that the city was a dangerous place. This paper suggests how this type of message in turn influences the shape of public policy responses.

Introduction

At the nexus between the media, democracy and public policy there is growing concern about the media's capacity, and more importantly, its inclination, to serve as a responsible medium of political communication. That concern becomes critical as the scale of modern society does not allow more than a relatively small number of citizens to be physically present in the same place at the same time to engage the public sphere–"that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed" (Dahlgren, 1995, p.7). Public deliberation, essential for democracy, is increasingly "*mediated*, with professional communicators rather than ordinary citizens talking to each other and to the public through mass media of communication." (Page, 1996, p.1). By default, then, the media become the chief institutions of the public sphere, but they limit the interactions of citizens. The result is a news system that is "often too fragmentary and superficial in its focus on personalities and their power struggles to be of much use to citizens" (Bennett, 1996, p. xiii). It produces the politics of illusion in which we, as a public, assume that the news is somehow geared to the information needs of society (Bennett, 1996). Further, we regard the present media institutional arrangement as naturally ordained and not subject to challenge (McChesney, 1999; Sparrow, 1999). The link between the news and democracy, however, is fragile and the *mediated* public sphere produces a cognitive map that has profound effects on public policy. For example, political campaigns and elections are increasingly the province of media battles in which political communication is reduced to sound bites without context. The result is an election system that requires candidates to espouse positions at the political margins to be heard—positions that are incompatible with governance that must conducted from the political middle once the election is won. (Patterson, 1993; Kaniss, 1995).

According to various scholars, the media's attention to specific areas of public policy has produced significant consequences. For example, public policy regarding violence against women is imbued with the mythology of male supremacy that is sustained by the news frame (Meyers, 1997). Further, the treatment of environmental issues is often presented as one of

two struggles, "man against nature" or "jobs vs. the environment", effectively disallowing any other frame for the debate (LaMay & Dennis, 1991).

However, one of the most salient examples of the media's impact on public policy is found in the area of crime and criminal justice. The media's treatment of and its relationship to crime and justice policy has received prodigious attention (Surette, 1998; Dahlgren, 1988; Katz, 1987; Ericson, 1990; Barak, 1994 & 1995; Lesser, 1993; Pritchard, 1994; Klite, 1998; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). The portrait of random, violent crime and an overburdened criminal justice system that is communicated by the news media leads to an understanding of crime and justice that translates into public policies that often seek simple solutions to complex problems. For example, in the United States, the rehabilitative rationale for incarceration has been abandoned in favor of wholesale prison construction in which inmates are simply "warehoused". The result is increases in state budgets for prison construction that are many times higher than any other budgetary item, including education. All this for a correctional policy that fails (as measured by recidivism) almost two-thirds of the time.

Another policy choice on the opposite end of the criminal justice system from corrections is President Clinton's effort to "put 100,000 more police on the streets". The obvious metaphor, repeatedly illustrated by media reports, is "taking back the streets" from criminals. And make no mistake, the streets to which the President refers are **urban** streets.

For the most part, these policies are a response to a perception of crime that is largely urban and pre-eminently violent. But, how does the press, particularly local television news, portray the urban–suburban dimensions of crime? Among the large number of content studies of news, only a few have made comparisons across cities (Cohen, 1975; Graber, 1980; Lotz, 1991; Windhauser, Seiter and Winfree, 1990; Chermak, 1995). But none has examined the urban-suburban axis. In this paper, I compare the crime coverage by local television newscasts in two prominent television markets in the United States, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Is the conventional wisdom (Graber, 1980; Klite, 1997; Chermak, 1995) correct that suggests that the coverage is skewed toward an over-representation of violent crime? Do the newscasts make any distinction between suburban and urban crime? What might this

coverage mean for our visions of the city and the suburbs and for our corresponding policy responses?

The findings indicated that crime was the major public issue that occupied the newscasts, more than all other public issues combined. In fact, the presentation of crime was wildly unrelated to its actual occurrence in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Further, although the television stations in both markets covered the urban-suburban dimension of crime very differently, they all conveyed the message that the city was a dangerous and forbidding place.

Local TV News & Crime

Everyday 80 million viewers across the nation tune in to local television newscasts (McManus, 1994, pp.15-16). Over the past decade, the public's viewing habits have changed as busy schedules have forced viewers to seek news at their convenience. As a result, local news has expanded its hours of operation to offer more news at more times during the day, while the network news audience is dropping rapidly. In 1997 a majority of Americans said that they used local TV news as an information source "every day", more than any other news source (Newseum Survey on Attitudes Toward the Media, 1997). Further, sixty percent of the public indicated that they thought that local news was doing an "excellent or good" job, the highest rating among all news sources (Newseum Survey on Attitudes Toward the Media, 1997). These polls tell us that a significant majority of our citizens get most of their information from local television news and, in general, they believe what they are being shown and told. In short, these newscasts play a pre-eminent role in the social construction of reality and, by extension, in forming the cognitive maps that citizens use to understand their communities (Surette, 1998; Klite, 1998; Miller, 1998; Parenti, 1986; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979; Kaniss, 1991; Kaniss, 1995). The public not only indicated that local television news was their primary choice for information, they were specific about their interests. Two topics were the most prominent: "news from where you live" and crime (Newseum Survey on Attitudes Toward the Media, 1997).

Even though crime has fallen in the United States in the past six years, public opinion polls indicate that crime and public safety are the over-riding concerns of citizens in communities. Crime is a persistent feature of urban life in America and urban populations express more fear of crime than residents in any other type of community (Flanagan & Longmire, 1996). In May 1996, a plurality of twenty-five percent of Americans (more than for any other issue) thought that crime violence was the most important problem facing the country (United States Department of Justice, 1996, p. 128). Further, when asked about the problems toward which tax dollars should be spent, eighty-four percent of Americans (more than for any other problem) stated that it was "extremely important" to reduce violent crime (Executive Office of the President, 1996, pp. 22-25).

The negative aspects of the city are animated, most often, by the press around the issues of urban conflict and crime. Focusing on television news, Cottle (1993) suggests that the press offer "contested realities" regarding the inner city in which the nature of urban distress is explained by competing discourses. In its treatment of urban conflict, he concludes television news "failed to convey the lived conditions and the curtailed life chances daily confronted by those living in run-down areas and marginalized communities". He continues that this failure represents "a major social struggle over meaning: the struggle to define and publicly engage opposing points of view in relation to the problems and issues of urban distress" (Cottle, 1993, p. 1).

Burgess's (1985) study of the riots in two English cities in 1981 saw the inner city as providing a central role in the disorders. She points to the role of the media in constructing the inner city, symbolically, as a distant and deviant place. She observes that, "the newspapers fulfill an ideological role in which the myth is being perpetuated of *The Inner City* as an alien place, separated and isolated, located outside white, middle-class values and environments" (Burgess, 1985, p. 193). What is implied by her analysis and those of others is that the inner city stands apart from the other parts of metropolitan areas, namely suburbs.

Crime is fundamentally a local phenomenon and local media organizations place great emphasis on urban conflict, crime and justice (Cottle, 1993; Burgess, 1985; Graber, 1980;

Snyder, 1992). For local television news, there is no more salient issue than crime (Surette, 1984; Dominick, et. al.,1975; Chermak, 1994; Miller, 1998; Atwater, 1984; Atwater, 1986; Klite, et. al., 1997; Klite, et.al, 1998). It provides the viewer with an instant context for the story: good guys and bad guys, conflict, drama, tension. As a result, the familiar refrain echoes over and over: "All you have to do is watch the news and you will know how much crime there is". It is offered by citizens and policy makers alike as proof that crime is increasing and, further, that the institutions charged with its control are either not up to the task or need more resources to carry on the fight. The sentiment expressed is that the domestic defense is being violated, often by our youngest citizens, and something must be done.

Methodology

To examine the structure and elements of television news, it is necessary to look explicitly at its content. Thus, the basic methodology for this research was content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). It is a method that produces a systematic and objective description of information content. Content analysis has a long history of use in studies of both print and electronic media. It has been used extensively in the examination of local television news (Graber, 1980; Dominick, et. al.,1975; Chermak, 1994; Miller, 1998; Atwater, 1984; Atwater, 1986; Klite, et. al., 1997; Klite, et.al, 1998). In the instance of TV news studies, actual news broadcasts are used as the basis for the analysis. For this study, the unit of analysis was the individual news story.

Study Sites

The Nielsen Media Research Company defines a television market as a Designated Market Area (DMA), identifying 214 such DMA's across the country. Philadelphia and Baltimore were chosen as the research sites for several reasons. First, they represented very different television market sizes. According to Nielsen, the Philadelphia DMA ranks as the fourth largest in the country with almost 2.7 million households. Geographically, the Philadelphia DMA encompasses eighteen counties in southeastern Pennsylvania, northern Delaware and southern New Jersey. The Baltimore DMA is ranked 24th in size by Nielsen.

It consists of twelve counties around the Baltimore metropolitan area and has just under 1 million households. Although, the market sizes are different, they are not so dissimilar as to affect the news-gathering capacity in each market. That is, the stations in each market have relatively sufficient resources to gather information for broadcast that suited their news criteria. Second, the markets are close geographically. That reduced the possibility that a particular regional story would dominate one market and not the other, thereby skewing the results. Third, I had access to all of the broadcasts in each market due to the cable systems that were operating at the time. That was an important practical consideration.

Study Sample

The sample of newscasts for this project was developed from the off-air videotaping of the early evening newscasts (typically about 6 p.m.) of each of the stations that delivered a regularly scheduled newscast for a "constructed" week in Baltimore and Philadelphia. A "constructed" week consisted of newscasts of a particular day of the week gathered over an extended period. For example, the Monday broadcast of the first week was included in the sample. The Tuesday broadcast of the second week was part of the data, and so on until the broadcast week was "constructed". I limited the broadcast week to the Monday through Friday newscasts to eliminate the potential impact of week-end sporting events that might pre-empt news broadcasts. This procedure of "constructing" the week over a period of time greatly reduced the danger of a particular story dominating the data set, thereby biasing the sample.

The data base (55 newscasts) included every station that produced a regularly scheduled daily newscast in Philadelphia and three of the four stations in the Baltimore market for a constructed week in February and March 1996. In Philadelphia, the sample included: WNS, Channel 2, the Suburban Cablevision newscast directed toward New Castle County, Delaware; KYW, Channel 3 (NBC); WPVI, Channel 6 (ABC); WCAU, Channel 10, (CBS); WHYY, Channel 12, the Public Broadcasting System; WPHL, Channel 17, an independent station; Channel 23, the New Jersey Network's Public Broadcasting System; and WXTF, Channel 29, the Fox station. (Note: In September 1995, Channel 3 (KYW) and Channel 10 (WCAU) switched network affiliation. KYW became a CBS affiliate and WCAU went to the

NBC network.) The Baltimore stations included WBAL, Channel 11 (NBC); WJZ, Channel 13 (CBS); WBFF, Channel 45 (Fox) The ABC affiliate, WMAR, was not included due to a technical error with the videotaping equipment. The broadcasts in the sample were the major evening news shows for each station.

The unit of analysis was the individual story that was presented on the newscasts. The total number of stories broadcast in both markets for the constructed week was 847, excluding sports and weather. Sports and weather were not included in the mix of stories for examination because those segments were structural features of the newscast as a matter of policy.

The stations in both markets were very different in the size of audience that their newscasts captured. Channel 6, the Philadelphia ABC affiliate, has been the overwhelming ratings leader in the market for over a decade. In fact, its ratings lead over the NBC and CBS local affiliates is such that Channel 6's ratings for the daily 6 PM newscast (reaching an average of 588,000 households) exceed the *combined* ratings of its network affiliate competitors, plus Channels 12 and 2 (Nielsen Media Research, 1996). In Baltimore, the ratings differences among the stations were not as wide as they were in Philadelphia. The ratings leader, WJZ (the CBS affiliate) reached about 117,636 households during its 6:00 PM newscast. Its other network affiliate competitors at that hour reached just under 100,000 households (WBAL, the NBC affiliate) and just under 80,000 households (WMAR, the ABC affiliate). The Fox station (WBFF) was seen in about 70,000 households during its 10:00 PM broadcast (Source: Author's communication with Nielsen Media Research, October 23, 1998).

Crime in Philadelphia and Baltimore

Before we look at the news coverage of crime in Philadelphia and Baltimore, it is important to understand the prevalence of crime in both markets. In many ways, they are remarkably similar. The table below offers a comparison.

We see that the vast majority of crimes (over 80 percent) in both metropolitan areas were non-violent offenses (Table 1). In general, both core cities had more violent crime than their suburbs, but, again, non-violent crime comprised over three-fourths of crime in the cities. In the suburbs in both markets, non-violent crime accounted for almost nine out of ten offenses (87.3% and 89.5% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively).

Table 1: Crime in Baltimore & Philadelphia, 1996

	City	Suburbs	MSA*
Baltimore			
% Murder	0.4	0.1	0.2
% Other Violent	22.3	12.6	17.4
% Other Crime	77.3	87.3	82.4
Total	100	100	100
Philadelphia			
% Murder	0.4	0.1	0.2
% Other Violent	21.7	10.4	15.6
% Other Crime	77.9	89.5	84.2
Total	100	100	100

*MSA=Metropolitan Statistical Area
Source: *Crime in America's Top-Rated Cities: A Statistical Profile 1997-98, 2ⁿᵈ Ed.* (1997) Boca Raton,

The proportion of murder was virtually the same in both metropolitan areas, but there was a significant difference between the core cities and their suburbs. In general, crime in the suburbs was significantly less violent than crime in the city. Murder comprised less than one-half of one percent of crimes (.4 percent) in the cities, but only one-tenth of one-percent of crimes in the suburbs. In both markets, violent crime, other than murder, accounted for over one-fifth of crimes (22.3% and 21.7% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). That was

about twice as much as the same type of crime in their suburbs (12.6% and 10.4% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively).

When comparing these crime patterns to those for the nation, we found a very high degree of similarity. For the U.S., the distribution was as follows: murder, .1%; other violent crime, 12.3%, other crime, 87.6%. It is clear that murder was the most rare of crimes.

We can give these proportions of crime some context by examining rates for specific types of crime. In the period from 1977 through 1996 crime had generally risen in the core cities in both jurisdictions. However, that was not true for the suburbs. In Baltimore the total crime rate in the suburbs dropped from 5,726 (per 100,000 population) in 1977 to 5,023 in 1996, fluctuating by not more than ten percent in any year (Table 2). That decrease was also true for the suburbs of Philadelphia (4,034 in 1997 to 3,613 in 1996). In both jurisdictions, however, violent crime in the suburbs increased over the period. But, violent crime only accounted for just over one out of ten crimes in each jurisdiction (See Table 1). In both metropolitan areas the crime rates for murder in the city

Table 2: Rates* of selected crimes in Baltimore & Philadelphia, 1977 & 1996

	City		Suburbs	
	1977	*1996*	*1977*	*1996*
Baltimore				
Total crime	8369	12001	5726	5023
Property crime	6593	9278	4785	4384
Violent crime	1777	2723	491	639
Murder	21.3	45.8	3.6	3.7
Philadelphia				
Total crime	4040	6920	4034	3613
Property crime	3362	5391	3745	3234
Violent crime	678	1529	290	380
Murder	18.2	27.1	3.6	2.7

*Rate=rates per 100,000 population
Source: *Crime in America's Top-Rated Cities: A Statistical Profile 1997-98, 2nd Ed.* (Boca Raton, Florida: Universal Reference Publications), 1997.

were higher than those in the suburbs. In particular, the murder rate was about fifteen times higher in Baltimore's core city than in the surrounding suburbs (45.8 and 3.7, respectively). That difference in Philadelphia was about ten-fold (27.1 in the core city and 2.7 in the suburbs). In the suburbs for both jurisdictions over the period from 1977 through 1996, the murder rate in the suburbs either remained virtually the same (for Baltimore, 3.6 to 3.7, respectively) or dropped (for Philadelphia, 3.6 to 2.7, respectively). Again, we must understand that murder comprised a very small proportion of the crimes (less than one-tenth of one percent) of the crimes committed in each jurisdiction.

This profile of crime is highly instructive. From the portrait painted by the official statistics, crime in both Baltimore and Philadelphia was mostly non-violent and, more revealing for our study of local TV news, very rarely was a homicide. Let's see how that compares with the coverage of crime by local television news.

Covering Crime in Philadelphia and Baltimore

Before examining the specific locations of crime stories in the newscasts, I wanted to understand the context in which crime stories were broadcast. The obvious question was what information was selected as news by the producers of the broadcasts. What were the topics of the 847 stories that were reported in the newscasts in both Philadelphia and Baltimore?

Which Stories Made the News?

An examination of the stories yielded eight categories of story topics: (1) crime; (2) public issues, all public issues other than crime such as environment, health, the economy, etc.; (3) human interest; (4) political campaigns; (5) consumer news; (6) fires/accidents; (7) international stories; and (8) promos for the news or the station.

The most important feature of the newscasts in both markets was that they were strikingly similar in the types and frequencies of the stories they broadcasted. Crime was the dominant story

Table 3: Crime stories accounted for most story topics and broadcast time.

	Philadelphia		Baltimore	
	% Stories	% Time	% Stories	% Time
Crime	32	29	31	30
Public Issues	25	25	20	24
Human Interest	21	19	18	20
Political Campaign	6	11	9	5
Consumer News	6	9	6	14
Fires/Accidents	5	3	5	2
International stories	3	2	6	3
Promos	2	2	5	2
Total	100	100	100	100

topic in both markets (Table 3). For both Philadelphia and Baltimore, crime was the topic of almost one-third of the stories reported on the newscasts.

When compared to the category of public issues, which included all other social issues, the dominance of crime was even more striking. The Philadelphia newscasts covered all of the remaining public issues in about one-quarter of their stories; in Baltimore, the proportion was about one-fifth of the stories. Human interest stories were the third most often presented story type. After that, there was a significant decrease in the proportions of the newscasts that were devoted to other story types. As a result, there was a clear demarcation between the story topics that received the most coverage (crime, public issues and human interest) and those story topics that received less coverage (election campaigns, consumer news, fires/accidents and international news). Judging by the selection process, crime was presented as the most newsworthy public issue facing the citizens of both television markets. That finding was consistent with research in other markets (Klite, 1998; Miller, 1998).

How Was Crime News Presented?

As we saw, crime was the single most prominent social issue on the newscasts. To understand that coverage more completely, the 265 crime stories (31% of all stories that were broadcasted) that occupied so much of the broadcasts were divided into five separate categories. One category included criminal justice policy and administration (legislation, management, etc). The remaining four categories were conceptually congruent with the criminal justice process, i.e., **Crime Event, Police, Courts** and **Corrections**. In this way, I could examine the stages of the criminal justice process as they were covered by the newscasts. In the *Crime Event* category, the story reported the occurrence of a crime. A story was placed in the *Police* category, when the action of the story was taken by the police, either an arrest was made, an investigation was being launched or continued, etc. In the *Courts* category, the action was being taken by the courts, typically a trial was being held, a plea was being taken, etc. In the *Corrections* category, action was being taken by correctional authorities, prisons, parole boards, etc.

There were similarities and substantial differences in the crime news categories that were presented in the newscasts of both markets. First, the similarities; in both markets, court stories comprised the plurality of crime news (Figure 1). In Philadelphia, the proportion of

court stories approached one-half (48%). Over one-third of the crime news were court stories in Baltimore (35%). The markets were also similar in the general pattern of crime and justice news coverage. Corrections and criminal justice policy received the least coverage in both markets. The fact that most crime stories focused on the courts was an important finding

Figure 1: Types of Crime Coverage in Baltimore and Philadelphia
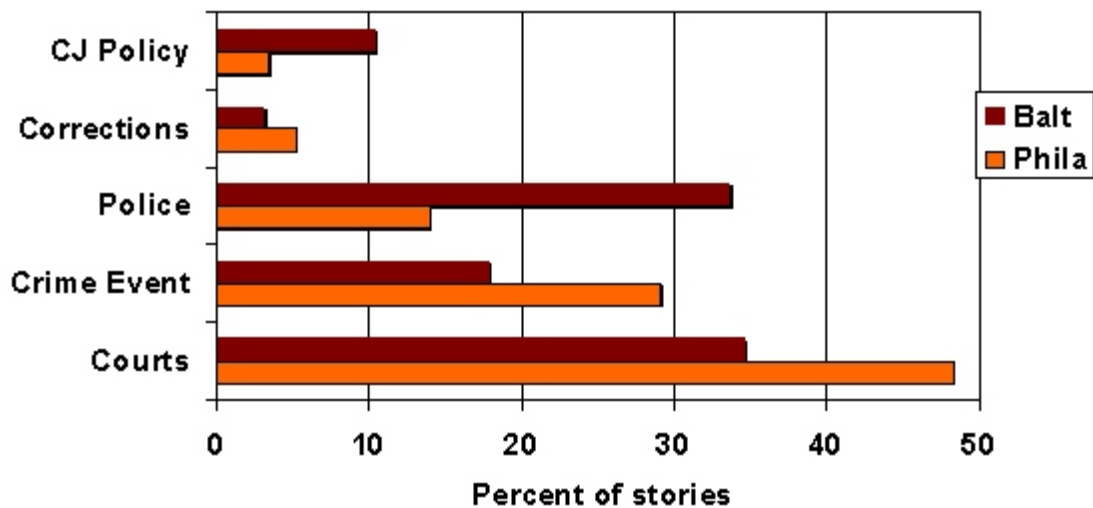
because we often think that the crime event itself would be the most prominent crime story for local TV news. Court stories, however, were the most numerous by far, particularly in Philadelphia.

There are several possible explanations for the relatively extensive coverage of court proceedings in the newscasts. First, from a production standpoint, the court stories were easier to cover. The action of the story (testimony, verdict, etc.) occurred at the courthouse, a familiar location to the station's news staff, where the news director knew that a story was available. That was important because the news director had scarce resources with which to produce the newscast and their efficient use was a primary consideration. The most expensive of those resources was the news crew consisting of a reporter and a camera operator. Therefore, dispatching a news crew had to be done with the calculation that it would deliver

a story that could be used on the newscast, otherwise scarce resources would be wasted. Sending the news crew to the courthouse virtually guaranteed that a useable story would result.

Second, the court story most probably was in reference to a crime that had already been the topic (the crime event) of a story on a previous broadcast by the station. Therefore, no new information about the crime needed to be developed for the story; it was already on "file" with the station and it was easily accessed for the court story, thereby saving additional resources. Third, and most important, court stories offer court news as miniseries–the media trial-- in which the media co-opt the criminal justice system as a source of high drama and entertainment (Surette, 1998).

Location...Location...Location

The local stations in Baltimore and Philadelphia constructed their newscasts to portray crime and justice stories in ways that they thought would capture viewers. The stories had a particular character--mostly murder, mostly presented in the beginning of the show, mostly individual suspects and victims, etc. There was, however, another factor in the coverage–the location of the crime that was the topic of the story. The conventional wisdom has held that crime has been portrayed predominantly in the media as an urban dilemma (Burgess,1985; Cottle, 1994; Chermak, 1995). Was the local news coverage of crime in Baltimore and Philadelphia consistent with that representation? What were the locations of the crimes that were reported in the stories? Core city? Suburbs? Other places?

In order to examine the location characteristics of the coverage in both TV markets, I limited the analysis to two of the five categories of crime stories that were identified–the crime event and police categories. This decision was made to avoid any locational bias. By definition, the criminal justice policy category did not refer to a specific crime and therefore, they were not included in the location analysis. Further, the court and corrections stories,

were "located" where the courthouse or the prison happened to be. The location in these stories did not reflect the "place" where the crime took place. Therefore, if these stories had been included in the location analysis, the results would have biased heavily toward the places where these institutions (courts and/or prisons) were located. My interest was the "place" where the crime occurred and that was only identifiable through an examination of the stories that focused on the crime event or actions (investigation, arrest, etc.) by the police. Given this definition, there were 122 such stories for 1996; 73 stories in the Philadelphia market and 49 stories in the Baltimore market.

Like all of the Nielsen-designated DMA's, the Baltimore and Philadelphia television markets consist of all of the counties in which the home market stations receive a preponderance of viewing. In each of the DMA's Nielsen identifies the core city and the core county. In the Baltimore and Philadelphia markets, obviously, the core cities were Baltimore and Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, the core city and the core county (Philadelphia) were contiguous. Baltimore County (the core county) was larger than Baltimore City.

"Place"

In order to understand where the crimes reported in the newscasts had occurred, I coded the smallest geographic unit or "place" that was identified in the news story for which I could make comparisons between both markets. That was due to the fact that the stories in Philadelphia and Baltimore were reported with different geographic specificity. In the Philadelphia DMA (particularly in the core city), crime event and police stories often identified the location of the crime with a specific address, a block (i.e., the 1800 block of North Broad Street) or a neighborhood that coincided with one of the City of Philadelphia's Planning Districts. Stories in the Baltimore market, however, were most often not that specific. Crime event and/or police stories in the core city were frequently identified as having occurred in a general geographic part of the city whose boundaries were not precisely and consistently defined by the stations. As a result, the smallest geographic unit that I used in this analysis was the town. In some stories, the county was the smallest geographic unit that was identified as the location of the crime.

My examination revealed six types of places: **(1)** the core city; **(2)** a city in the DMA other than the core city; **(3)** the region, a location outside of the DMA but within surrounding states; **(4)** a county in the DMA other than the core county; **(5)** the core county and **(6)** national, a story in which the location of the crime was outside of the DMA and the region.

Urban or Suburban?

The stations in Philadelphia and Baltimore were very different in the location that served as the "place" for the crime event and police stories. The most striking dissimilarity was the fact that stations in the Philadelphia market focused on urban (as defined by core city) crime while Baltimore stations concentrated on suburban (as defined by outside of the core city) crime (Figure 2). In fact, Philadelphia's urban stories (60%) were twice as frequent as

**Figure 2: Location of Crime Coverage in Baltimore and Philadelphia**
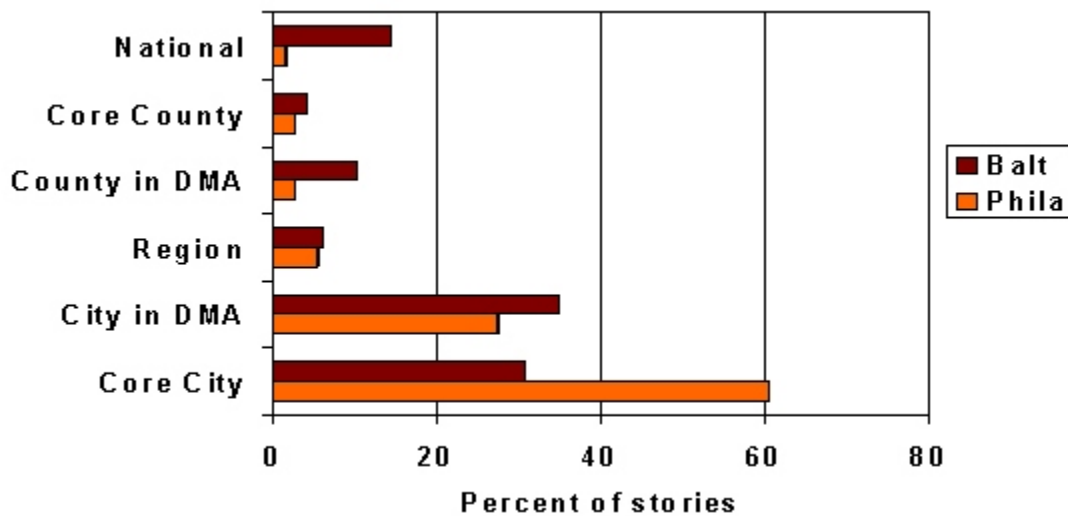
those stories in Baltimore (31%). When the crime stories were not situated in the core cities, Philadelphia stations located just over a quarter (27%) of the stories in other cities within the DMA. Over one-third (35%) of the Baltimore stories were located in other cities within the DMA. Therefore, the Baltimore stations covered more crime stories in smaller cities and towns outside of Baltimore than they covered in Baltimore.

The coverage of regional crime was a small part of the broadcasts (6% in both markets). Baltimore covered more crime stories that were "placed" in a county in the DMA that was not the core county (10% and 3% for Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). Another difference between the markets was their treatment of crimes in the nation. In Baltimore a significant proportion of the stories was devoted to crimes that happened far from the DMA (14%). In Philadelphia, crimes that occurred far from the DMA occupied the smallest percentage of stories (1%). Baltimore's relatively high percentage of "national" crime stories was due to the choice of the "national" story for the newscast. When the anchor began with "in national news", more often than not the choice was a crime story.

The reporting of the crime event and the police stories across the various geographic locations in Figure 2 offered crucial information about the coverage in both TV markets. But, I also wanted to clarify the coverage of the locations of these stories in the most basic geographic terms–coverage *inside* of the core city and *outside* of the core city. In other words, I combined all of the stories that fell into the location categories that were designated as outside of the core city and compared that to those stories whose location was inside the core city. The results of that aggregation showed us that the Baltimore and Philadelphia

Figure 3: Coverage of Urban and Suburban Crime in Baltimore and Philadelphia
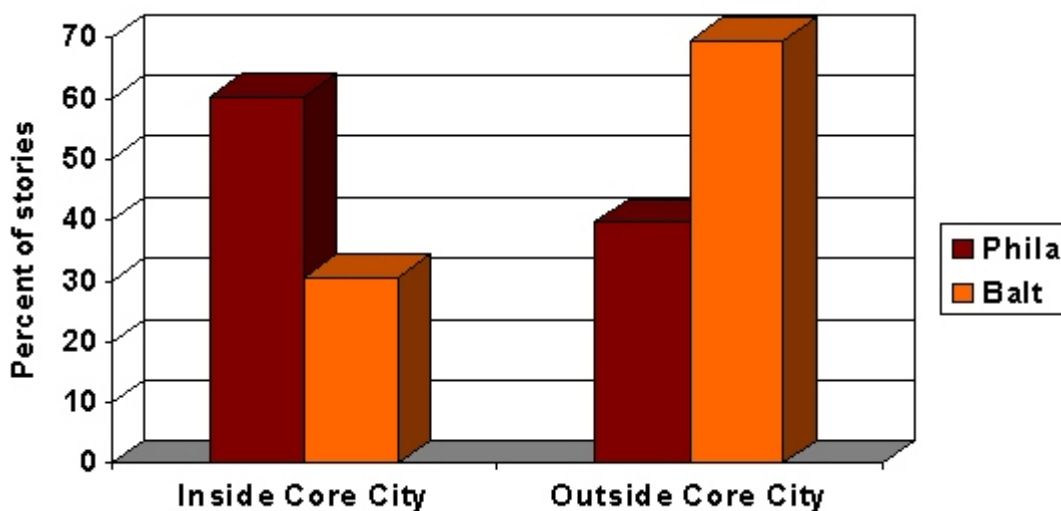
television markets were almost reverse images of each other regarding the locations of the crimes that were reported in the newscasts' stories (Figure 3). In Philadelphia, stories of crimes within the core city exceeded by one-third those that were reported from outside of the core city (60% and 40%, respectively). The distribution was almost the exact opposite for the Baltimore stations where almost seven out of ten crime stories (69%) were located outside of the core city as compared to about three out of ten (31%) reported from inside the core city.

As these locational differences emerged, I looked further into the broadcasts. Was there something in the stories that might help us understand the coverage? The analysis revealed a motif in the Baltimore newscasts that might help to explain the more extensive coverage of crimes outside of the core city. In virtually all of these stories a recurrent theme was emphasized–the spread of crime and danger from the core city into the suburbs.

Stories with this theme had several very important characteristics in common that gave them special prominence in the newscast. First, they most frequently lead the newscasts, thereby indicating, by implication, that they were the most important story of the day and the public needed to pay attention. The implicit message in this placement said that the danger was imminent.

Second, they were broadcast using the two most elaborate presentation modes, the package and live location report (In addition to these modes, our examination yielded three other types of approaches: Voice-over by anchor; Anchor read without voice-over; and Question/Answer.). In the *package* presentation mode, a news crew (a reporter and camera operator) went to the scene of the story, shot video, produced the video for broadcast and the reporter wrote the narrative for the video voice-over. The package mode was used in precisely the same proportion of crime stories in both markets (28%). As we might expect, the package mode required more time and resources to prepare than other presentation techniques. That was reflected in the length of time such stories occupied in the broadcasts. That is, the investment of resources to produce the story was reflected in its duration on the newscast. In Baltimore these package crime stories lasted a median of just under two minutes

(119 seconds); for Philadelphia the median was just over two minutes (131 seconds). ***Live location reports***, in which the reporter and the camera operator broadcast their story from a remote location, were used rarely for crime stories in both markets (6% and 7% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). However, when they were used, the stories ran for a substantial period (median time of 95 seconds in Baltimore and two minutes in Philadelphia).

Third, these stories were much longer than other crime stories (between five and seven times longer than the median of twenty-five seconds). This characteristic also added to the message that these were very important events to which the public should pay attention.

Fourth, neighborhood residents were ***always*** used as sources and they were interviewed for their reactions to the crime (eleven types of sources appeared in the crime stories: officials from criminal justice agencies, i.e., police, courts, corrections; officials from government agencies other than criminal justice institutions; confidential informants; expert informants; the victim(s); the suspect(s); victim's family members; suspect's family members; eyewitnesses; neighbors/community members; defense attorney). This is a significant finding because neighbors were cited as sources in less than ten percent of the general crime stories in both markets. Yet, they were used in ***all*** of the Baltimore stories regarding crime in the suburbs. In every instance, the neighbors did not add any additional factual information to the story. Their purpose was to "react" to the events. Not surprisingly, they registered their "shock" and their comments were consistent with the reaction of one community resident: **"It's pretty scary; you don't know who you're living next to".** In addition, the reporters set the scene of the story with introductions like the following:

> - **"Residents are still in a state of shock...their talk is of murder–a brutal crime that most thought could only happen in a big city".**

> - **"No one in the quiet community of Canterbury Riding expected to see their neighborhood become a murder scene".**

These attributes (placement, presentation mode, length and sources) made these stories fundamentally different than the general crime stories that were broadcast by the Baltimore stations.

The theme of creeping crime and danger was also attended by two sub-themes. First, there was a rhetorical "why?" that was part of the stories. Why did this happen? Why did it happen in our neighborhood? Why did it happen to good people? How could someone do something like this? Second, there was also an implicit answer to the "why" and it was very disturbing--random violent crime is a feature of late twentieth-century America and there is nothing we can do about it. In short, the stories suggested to the viewers that they were captives of a dangerous reality that was delivered randomly to their neighborhood. By implication, then, the only prudent response was to adopt security measures to reduce their chances of being victimized. In this scenario, responsible citizenship was reduced to reacting to events rather than trying to influence them.

Offenses

When I looked at all four of the categories of crime stories (crime event, police, courts and corrections) that included a specific crime, I found that the stations in both television markets were consistent with each other. Murder accounted for about half of the stories in both Baltimore and Philadelphia. But, was there any difference between the TV markets when I only considered the crime stories to which I could attach a location, i.e., the crime event and police stories? The short answer to that question was a resounding yes.

The stations in Baltimore and Philadelphia were almost reverse images of each other regarding which offenses were covered (Figure 4).   The Baltimore stations focused on *murder* twice as often as the Philadelphia channels (47% and 23%, respectively). Further, the Baltimore stations assigned another one-third (33%) of their stories to *other violent offenses*. That crime category accounted for almost one-half of the stories in Philadelphia (48%). The *other crime* category accounted for more stories in Philadelphia (29%) than in Baltimore (20%).

Figure 4: Coverage of Murder in Baltimore and Philadelphia*
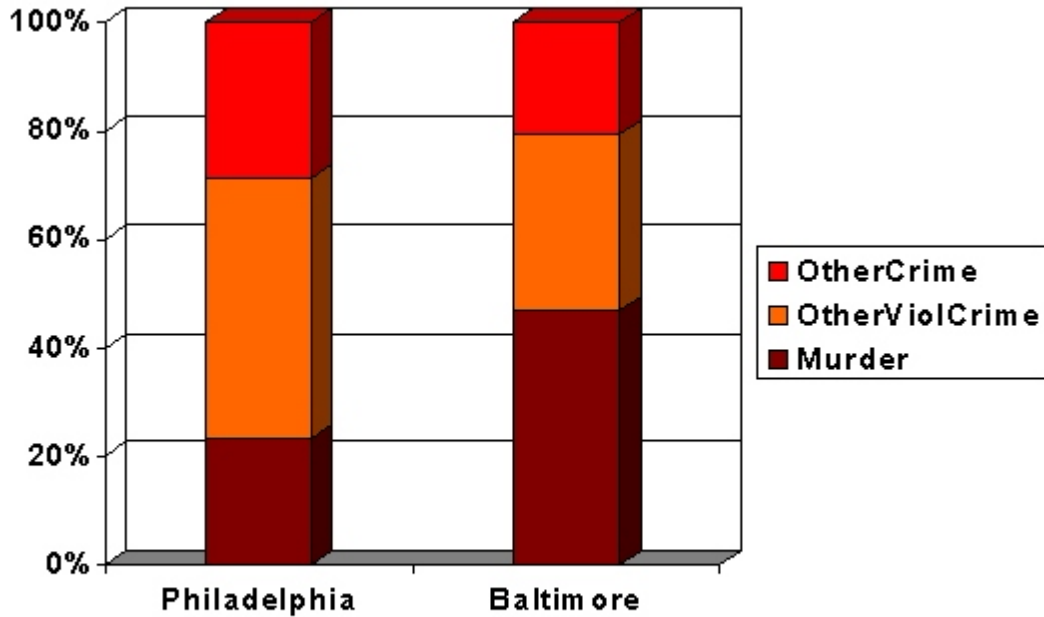
*These findings applied only to the crime event and police stories because we could attach a location to the crime that was being reported.

A summary of Baltimore's crime coverage of offense frequency put *murder* at the top, followed by *other violent crime*, followed lastly by *other crime*. That distribution is grossly at odds with the occurrence of those crimes in reality (see Table 1). A similar summary for Philadelphia puts other violent crime as the most frequent offense that was reported, followed by other crime and, lastly, murder. The reverse image between the two television markets, while not exactly a match, certainly indicated Baltimore's penchant for more coverage of murder or other violent crime.

Offenses & Location

The contrasting picture in the offenses that were covered by the stations in each market was also apparent when I looked at the locations of those crimes, particularly *murder* (Figure 5). In Philadelphia, over three-fourths of the murders

(77%) that were covered were located in the core city. Obviously, the remaining one-fourth were located outside of the core city. Baltimore stations covered murder in precisely the opposite manner. Almost three-fourths of the murder stories (74%) were located outside of the core city, with the remaining one-quarter inside the core city.

Figure 5: Geographic Location and Type of Crime Coverage in Philadelphia and Baltimore
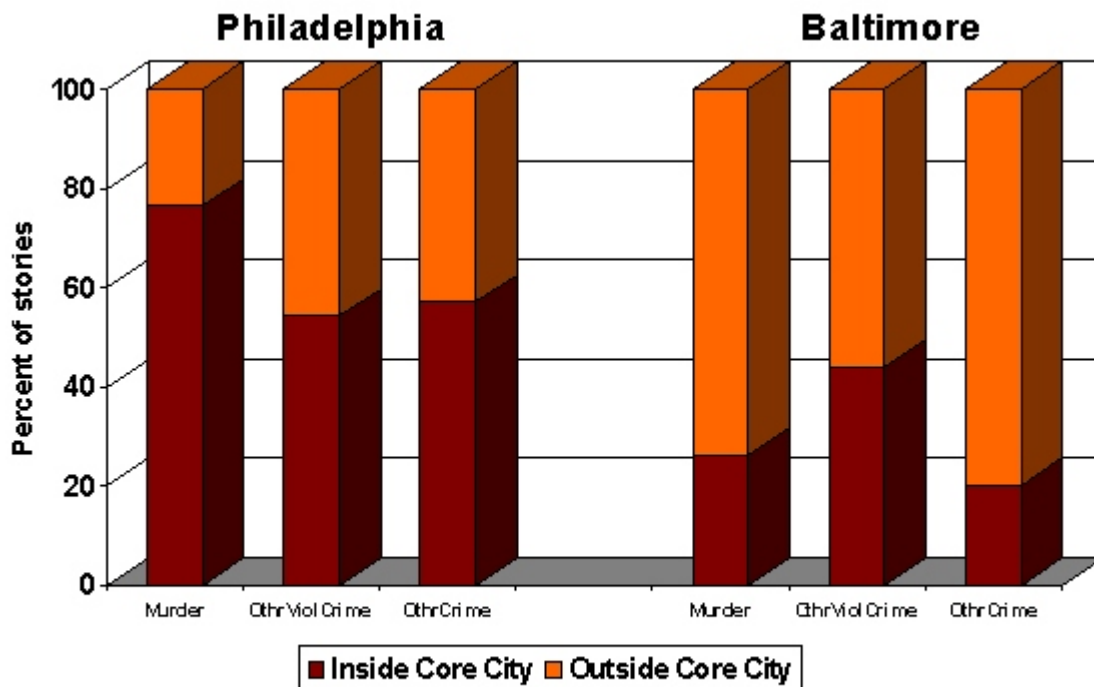
*These findings applied only to the crime event and police stories because we could attach a location to the crime that was being reported.

That pattern was continued in the crime stories in which *other violent crime* and *other crime* were the offenses. Philadelphia stations focused on core city locations for their stories. The Baltimore coverage was directed toward crimes that were located outside of the core city. In fact, for all three crime categories the Baltimore stations concentrated on crimes outside of the core city.

Location & Demographics

The demarcation between coverage inside and outside of the core city was clear in both markets. Were there differences in demographic factors between the areas in the Philadelphia and Baltimore markets? I looked at the characteristics of the "places" in the crime stories, separating them by inside/outside of the core city (Table 4). Except for racial

Table 4: Characteristics of the "places" in the crime stories reported on the newscasts in Baltimore and Philadelphia.

Characteristics*	Baltimore		Philadelphia	
	Inside core city	Outside core city	Inside core city	Outside core city
Population (Median)				
Total Population	736014	29732	1585577	27630
Density (pop/sq.mi)	9108	2654	11734	3694
% African-American	59.2	16.2	39.9	18.9
% Caucasian	39.1	73.1	53.5	76.5
% Other race	1.7	3.6	6.6	3.6
Income (Median)				
Annual Household Income	$24,045	$33,465	$24,603	$33,527
% Poverty level	21.2	10.6	19.8	11
Housing (Median)				
House value	$53,900	$99,300	$48,400	$93,400
Distance (Median miles)**				
Distance from core city	N/A	27	N/A	35.6

Note: This table comprises the characteristics of the "places" where the crimes occurred in the crime event and police stories that were broadcast in both television markets. Consequently, these data reflect only those places and not all of the cities and towns in the Baltimore and Philadelphia Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

* For purposes of consistency, the distance from the location of the crime in the story reported on the newscast to the core city was expressed as the distance between the city halls of both "places". They were derived by using the mapping and directions services of the MapQuest web site at: http://MapQuest.com.

Source: *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995.*

make-up, the core cities were very similar. The majority of Baltimore's population (59.2%) was African-American. In Philadelphia the majority of the population was Caucasian (53.5%).

The "places" inside and outside of the core cities in both television markets exhibited significant differences. As compared to places inside the core city, places outside of the core cities:

(1) Were less dense: The places outside of the core cities were only about one-third as dense as the core cities. The median population/square mile in the places outside of the core cities was 2,654 in the Baltimore market and 3,694 for the Philadelphia market. That compared to populations/square mile inside the core cities of 9,108 in Baltimore and 11,734 in Philadelphia.

(2) Had different racial compositions: Places outside of the core cities had populations that were not as racially diverse as the core cities. Baltimore's majority population was African-American (59.2%) while the places outside of the core city registered a significant three-fourths Caucasian majority of the population (median of 73.1%). In the Philadelphia market the Caucasian majority in the core city (53.5%) increased significantly in the places outside of the city (median of 76.5%).

(3) Had household incomes that were about fifty percent higher: Places outside of the core cities had median annual household incomes of approximately $33,500 compared a median annual household incomes of just over $24,000 in the core cities.

(4) Had poverty levels that were about fifty percent lower: Places outside of the core cities had median poverty levels around ten percent compared to poverty levels of approximately twenty percent in the core cities.

(5) Had housing values that were almost double. The median housing values in the places outside of the core cities approached $100,000 while the median housing values in the core cities hovered around $50,000.

The most important picture that these factors present, however, had less to do with what was ***different*** between the places inside and outside of the core cities than what was ***alike*** between the television markets. That is, the places outside of the core cities in the Baltimore market were remarkably similar to those types of places in the Philadelphia market. For example, the median annual household incomes were only separated by less than $100 ($33,465 and $33,527 in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively) and the median value of housing showed about a $6,000 difference ($99,300 in Baltimore and $93,400 in Philadelphia). Consequently, the television stations in Baltimore and Philadelphia were faced with landscapes outside of their core cities that were virtually the same along these demographic dimensions.

While the demographic characteristics of the locations outside of the core city in both markets were alike, the coverage of crime stories was very different. The Baltimore stations focused the significant majority of their crime coverage outside of the core city; in areas that were more affluent and had less crime. Further, they concentrated on murder in those locations, a crime that accounted for only .01 percent of the crime committed in the area. Coverage in Philadelphia concentrated on the core city and reported offenses in the other violent crime category.

When it came to the ***location*** of crime stories, the Baltimore and Philadelphia stations constructed very different newscasts. Baltimore's focus on violent crime outside of the core city was in sharp contrast to Philadelphia's concentration on crime inside of the core city.

Why Is It So?

Crime stories were *the* most conspicuous part of the local news broadcasts in both Baltimore and Philadelphia. The conflict, drama, and tension that were explicit in any crime story were used by the stations to communicate their versions of the particular crime, the nature of crime and justice and, by extension, the "lived" reality of the cities and suburbs of Philadelphia and Baltimore. The audiences in both markets were told essentially

the same story—that random, violent crime was a persistent and structural feature of American society. The only difference was that the Philadelphia stations perpetuated the idea that it was an urban blight while the Baltimore stations warned suburbanites that crime was making its way toward them. What factors influenced this coverage? I suggest that part of the answer lies at the juncture among several points.

The first point to consider is the role that local television newscasts claim for themselves in the community. Elayne Rapping suggests that local news, carrying out part of the social role of television, provides a "sense of community integrity in a fragmented world" (Rapping, 1987).   Television stations pursue activities that are specifically designed to reinforce their role as responsible citizens. The activities include broadcasting special reports about on-going social problems such as teen pregnancy or domestic abuse and "public service" announcements such as "Crimestoppers", among others. The stations also produce public relations material that portrays their news teams as intimately connected to the community and touting them as the best source of community news. In short, local television news offers itself as much more than an information source; it claims the role of neighbor. Local television can make that claim because the "atomization and impersonality of most cities make small, close-knit communities difficult to sustain" (Rapping, 1987). Of course, that sense of isolation and vulnerability is all but assured by news coverage that is fixated on violent crime.

Local television as neighbor brings us to the second point of the juncture: news consumers use crime news as a symbolic reference point to make sense of the world around them. That is, the crime news is interpreted, used, and given content by viewers in a manner that gives them an understanding of the world with which they can cope. In short, crime news is consumed by the public in an active way to work out the problems of everyday life. Whether consciously or not, local television newscasts that significantly focus on crime help to provide the symbolic touchstone against which the viewing public can measure human behavior and morality.

On its face, the use of crime news to examine the relative safety of a community may seem contradictory. The mass media, however, assume a very active role in crime and justice and, as such, assist the law in constructing the realities of crime, justice, and social order. In that context, crime news indicates the nature of those realities. Crime is presented as an individual, not as a collective, dysfunction and, therefore, the threat that it represents to the community is not an assault on the community's *definition* of social order. Rather, the community's definition of social order is confirmed and it is the referent against which the community will judge the behavior of its citizens. In that sense, it is the ultimate guarantor of the public's safety.

The third point that may help to explain the face of local television news is a realization that   it is market-driven (Cummings,1987; Greenfield, 1987; Westin, 1982; McManus, 1994; Kaniss, 1991) . That is, news producers construct the newscasts not so much to inform an audience as to deliver that audience to a set of advertisers. McManus characterizes this type of journalism as "replacing the journalist with the consumer as the 'gatekeeper' of what becomes news and replacing the standards of journalism with the rigors of the market" (McManus, 1994, p. xii). The result of this approach to news is a blurring of the line between information and entertainment.   Indeed, the very concept has been crystallized in a new term, *info-tainment*. But McManus points out that "stations do not add entertainment to information...so much as they displaced and often distorted information in favor of whatever they believed would attract attention at the least production cost" McManus, 1994, p. 197). Crime news can provide the stations with some of the most cost-effective and attention-gathering stories that a newscast can assemble. They are cost-effective because there is little investigative work that must be done. The vast majority of the information about the crime comes from official sources, either the police, or other justice organizations, which have their own public affairs mechanisms to inform the media. They are attention-gathering because crime stories are, above all else, pictures and pictures are the organizing principle that shape every newscast.

The juncture of these three concepts produce television newscasts that cast the city as a place of danger already manifested, as in the case of Philadelphia. The Baltimore

stations, by their emphasis on suburban crime, cast the menacing city as the source of dangerous acts that exceed the urban boundaries. Either way, the image of the city as a place of decay finds its focus on local television newscasts.

The news producers that constructed this image tell us that there is no malevolence intended in this approach; that they are simply acting as a "mirror" of society. That may be true. However, the second part of that argument, that crime is part of the reality of the city and that the newscasts simply act as a mirror of that fact, is, at best, disingenuous and, at worst, a convenient fiction. Indeed, crime is part of the reality of urban life, and it is a legitimate subject for local news coverage. But crime is only a *part* of city life. The local newscasts in Baltimore and Philadelphia that we examined made conscious decisions to cover more crime news than any other social issue. They also decided what crimes they would cover (mostly murder) and how they would cover them (in a montage of stories placed in the first segment).

Newscasts are a construction designed in the first instance to deliver an audience to sponsors and, secondarily, to inform the public. The newscast reveals what the stations think will accomplish those goals. While there were important differences in the coverage across the stations, each newscast was constructed to portray a particular view of the world, a view driven less by any political or social ideology than by a perception that market considerations should drive the news. The result was a subversion of the news in which audience draw and entertainment became the over-riding criteria for the construction of a newscast. For television, entertainment always begins with pictures; and pictures that convey instantly recognizable symbols of the pathos of the human condition are the most coveted. From that perspective, crime and the city will continue to provide pictures and symbols that will be prominent in local television newscasts and the image of the city as an alien and dangerous place will go unchallenged.

Affecting Public Policy

As this paper has shown, the constructed "realities" of television news are not the mirror of society that they claim to be. Rather, they are the beam searching for what is sensational about the human condition. Through a constant repetition of evocative symbols, what is extraordinary about life seems to become expected, almost normal.

Referring to Baltimore, Mark Crispin Miller called this approach "TV news as anti-urban propaganda" (Miller, 1998) and suggested that this bias had profound effects on that city's social and economic well-being. According to Miller, Baltimore City's population decreased by almost 11 percent between 1990 and 1998, while the surrounding Baltimore County increased in population by 4 percent. In contrast, the other counties in the Baltimore television market experienced remarkable population growth during that period (ranging from 10% in Anne Arundel County to 22% in Howard County). In 1990 alone, the flight of population had cost the city over $112 million in lost local taxes. Disturbingly, over one-third of those who had fled and over half of those who had considered leaving "were moved to do so by their fear of crime—which fear, as we have shown, may have had as much to do with TV's anti-urban propaganda as it did with actual danger" (Miller, 1998, p. 17).

In addition to individual choices about living in Baltimore, Miller cites the decisions of businesses to leave the city. Between 1972 and 1992, Baltimore lost 44 percent of its retail establishments, twice the national average. In a 1997 survey, CEO's in Baltimore said the two "strongest challenges" city businesses faced were "the perception of crime and the unavailability of parking spaces" (Miller, 1998, p. 17).

Like Baltimore, Philadelphia has suffered similar population loss. Between 1990 and 1998 the population of the city decreased by 9.4%. Of the Pennsylvania counties immediately adjacent to Philadelphia, only one experienced a decrease in population and that was less than one percent. The other three counties had population increases between 6.1 percent and 12 percent. That pattern was repeated in the four New Jersey counties across the Delaware River from the city. One county lost less than one percent of its population while the

remaining three all experienced increases between .5 percent and 7.7 percent. These population patterns, for Philadelphia and Baltimore, compared unfavorably with the overall population changes for the Mid-Atlantic region between 1990 and 1998 in which core cities lost 1.8 percent of population while those counties outside of the core cities gained 3.8 percent (Source: http://uscensus.gov/population/estimates/county.html [21 January 2000]. And, remember, as I have indicated, Philadelphia stations focused their crime coverage inside the city.

The implications of this situation are particularly crucial to public debate surrounding not only criminal justice and public safety, but to all areas of public policy. Resources, both human and capital, are finite for political jurisdictions and the budget is a zero-sum game. Resources used for one purpose are, by definition, taken away from other uses. So, when the state of Delaware spent $180 million on prison construction during the 1990's, other public policy issues, such as education, housing, environment, etc., were greatly affected. Put simply, while prison construction was the fastest growing portion of the state budget throughout most of the decade, there was less money for other concerns. That approach to the budget was acceptable, in large measure, because the public's understanding of the pre-eminence of crime as a social issue (and the appropriate responses to it) was consistently constructed by local news media whose primary function was to maximize profit. Those perceptions directly influence how citizens and public officials develop responses to criminal justice and public safety concerns.

One of the most stark examples of the "news coverage—public perception—policy response" scenario occurred in Delaware in 1991 when four men convicted of the first degree murders of two Brooks Armored Car Company guards were given a life sentence by default when the jury could not agree on the death penalty. At that point, Delaware law placed the imposition of the death penalty exclusively with the jury. When the jury could not reach a unanimous decision to impose capital punishment, the sentence automatically defaulted to life in prison.

The news coverage was thunderous. The sentence was called "outrageous" as the local newspaper quoted prosecutors and the state's attorney general who suggested that the jury was terribly jaded "if they came to *accept* (author's emphasis) that type of conduct without returning the death penalty" (Wilmington News Journal, October 23, 1991). But the most embittered reaction was thrust at the public by one of the newspaper's columnists. In a column entitled, "In Del.[aware], killers really can get away with murder", Berlinda Bruce conceded her concerns about the death penalty. However, as if giving permission for others who had similar misgivings, Bruce explained why she had changed her mind, "Until these guys slithered from beneath a rock, I was ambivalent about capital punishment" (Wilmington News Journal, October 23, 1991). The effect of the default life sentence was summed up by Bruce in this manner: "Four men can drive into our state, kill innocent people, taunt their families and we give them a place to sleep every night" (Wilmington News Journal, October 23, 1991). Within 52 hours of the announcement of the sentence the Delaware General Assembly passed S.B. 79 which made the jury's sentencing decision only a recommendation and gave trial judges the final choice between life and death in capital cases.

The die had been cast in the coverage of the default life sentence. The appropriate reaction was outrage—an outrage at the *re-victimization* of not only the families of the murdered guards, but of all of the citizens of Delaware. Other frames, other views regarding the correct policy response were not part of the calculus. Admittedly, this represents an extraordinary case. But it is extraordinary only in the *time* required for the "news coverage—public perception—policy response" process to come to fruition. By any measure, it is clear that the news, particularly local news, helps to craft the policy context and deserves increased scrutiny in policy discourse.

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