

Center for Community Development & Family Policy and the
Graduate School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy, University of Delaware

Crime, Community & Local TV News: Covering Crime in Philadelphia & Baltimore

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Crime, Community & Local TV News

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Abstract

News organizations make crucial decisions about what is and what is not news. The news we see as citizens constructs the frame through which we see our social environment and it imparts a public character to occurrences and transforms mere happenings into public events. Very often the media, particularly local television news choose crime to form a major portion of the newscast. What is the nature of that coverage? What might that coverage mean for the community's cognitive map of its character? Can we develop a program to constructively engage possible changes in that coverage?

We conducted research to answer these questions. Our objectives were: (1) to conduct an in-depth examination of the crime coverage of local broadcast news in two prominent television markets, Baltimore and Philadelphia; (2) to analyze and to compare the images of crime, justice and community they portray for the public; (3) most importantly, to inform the public, policy makers and news organizations about the nature of the broadcasts in order to prompt discussion and, if necessary, change in the presentation of crime and the public's consumption of news.

Crime, Community & Local TV News

“And **that's** the way it is.”

Crime, Community & Local TV News

When Walter Cronkite signed-off the CBS Evening News with, "And that's the way it is," we took him at his word. He might just as well have said "Amen". Mr. Cronkite's implicit message was that his report was an objective rendering of the important events of the day; that neither he, nor the CBS news staff, unduly influenced the reporting of the objective facts. They were simply acting as a mirror of society.

News organizations, however, make crucial decisions about what is and what is not news. Many imperatives, some organizational, some

This constructed news is offered to citizens every day with an explicit promise of quality; it is "all the news that's fit to print" or it is "the way it is", or some other tag line.

economic, some ideological, influence what is covered, how it is covered, and when it is covered. Walter Lippman recognized that when he concluded that "journalism is not a first hand report of raw material," but a "report of that material after it has been stylized." The news is a

construction. This constructed news is offered to citizens every day with an explicit promise of quality; it is "all the news that's fit to print" or it is "the way it is", or some other tag line.

For the most part, citizens accept that promise of quality and consume the news in an uncritical manner. Further, the news we receive as citizens creates the frame through which we see our social environment. The news imparts a public character to occurrences and often we have come to equate what is on the news with what is important for public attention.

Crime & Justice

One of the most important areas of public policy is crime and justice. It pits two fundamental concepts, individual rights (defined as due process) and the collective good (defined as public safety), in conflict. Even the language of justice hardens the image---"The *People v John Doe*". Not surprisingly, the media cover the way we handle the conflict between the two concepts. According to research conducted by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, the coverage of crime has greatly increased on network newscasts since 1992.¹ But, crime is fundamentally a local phenomenon

and local television news places great emphasis on crime and justice issues. For local television news, there is no more salient issue than crime; 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 is that the domestic defense is being violated, often by our youngest citizens, and something must be done. It is that premise that accepts increases in state budgets for prison construction that are many times higher than any other item and supports policies that, for serious offenses, now treat many juveniles as adults.

Even though crime has fallen in the United States in the past four years, public opinion polls indicate that crime and public safety are the overriding concerns of citizens in communities. In fact, The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press tells us that "crime is the one concern found to be driving pessimism among all major political subgroups, including those who voted for Clinton, those who voted for other

presidential candidates, and those who decided not to vote at all.² Further, based on opinion polls, there is a view that crime is a persistent feature of urban life in America. For example, in May 1996, a plurality of twenty-five percent of Americans (more than for any other issue) thought that crime violence was the most

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important problem facing the country. The federal deficit, at fifteen percent, was seen as the next most serious issue.³ 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.⁴

These attitudes give rise to the remedies that citizens would employ. Increasing jail sentences for violent criminals was viewed as doing the most to reduce violent crime (68% said it would reduce violence “a lot”) as compared to restrictions on TV violence, jobs programs for inner cities, putting more police on the street or stricter gun control.⁵

Those policy preferences are understood more clearly when we consider that over three-fourths (77%) of Americans feel that we are “losing ground” regarding crime. That is more than any other issue including the splitting of families (75%), moral/ethical standards (70%), the legal system (68%), the welfare system (68%) and drugs (60%).⁶

It is illustrative that crime and the legal system are seen so negatively. They represent the two sides of the public safety issue. Crime is perceived as an attack on the domestic defense while the legal system is that set of institutions that we have charged with the responsibility of dealing with the problem. If the vast majority of our citizens think we are “losing ground” in both of those areas of public policy, it is no surprise that the public makes demands on the political system for remedies.

These attitudes have important implications for the sense of well-being in our communities. It is impossible to build and to sustain community when we, as citizens, mistrust other citizens; when the cognitive maps of our

communities are influenced as much by mediating institutions (as we will see) as by our own experience.

For a \$10 membership fee, *Dead Serious* gives you a bumper sticker and a promise; it will pay you \$5,000 if you kill someone who is committing a crime. Wounding them does not count.

The reality and the perception of danger have significant policy implications. For example: (1) President Clinton promises to put

100,000 more police officers on the streets of America’s cities as a response to crime; (2) Thirty-four states in the United States allow citizens to carry concealed weapons, justifying that action as a deterrent to crime; (3) State legislatures enact laws that increase lengths of sentences, requiring consecutive rather than concurrent sentences; (4)

State executive branches embark on prison-building programs that represent the fastest increasing portion of state budgets; (5) State attorneys general call for changes in state laws that will make it easier to prosecute more juveniles as adults. Beyond public policy developments, “private” policies have also been adopted. *Dead Serious*, an organization in Texas, makes a straightforward offer. For a \$10 membership fee, *Dead Serious* gives you a bumper sticker and a promise, it will pay you \$5,000 if you kill someone who is committing a crime. Wounding them does not count.⁷

This is not to say that crime is not a serious problem in the United States. The issue is how much is the *reality* of crime versus the *perception* of crime driving policy and behavior.

Why Local TV news?

A fundamental question is how do citizens learn about crime and criminal justice. How is the perception of crime acquired? Very few of our citizens have direct contact with the criminal justice system and so the information must come from other sources. For the most part, those sources are media institutions, i.e., newspapers, radio, television, magazines.

Recent polls have shown that Americans have a strong appetite for local news. 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 fact, a Fall 1996 poll sponsored by the Center for Media and Public Affairs and Louis Harris found "that Americans cite local

In short, these polls tell us that most of our citizens get most of their information from local television news and, in general, they believe what they are being shown and told.

television as their most important source of news twice as frequently as they chose the flagship network newscasts".⁸

That support is evident in other polls. In 1997 a majority (54%) said that they used local TV news as an information source "every day", more than any other news source.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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: sixty-nine percent said they were extremely/very interested in "news from where you live"; that figure was sixty-eight percent for "crime". The next closest topic area was the environment (59%).¹¹

In short, these polls tell us that most of our citizens get most of their information from local television news and, in general, they believe what they are being shown and told. It is reasonable, then, to begin with a systematic examination of the coverage of crime of local television news

broadcasts. We start at this point because in order to understand the public's perception of crime through this mediated reality, we must understand the nature of that mediated reality. That has practical policy implications for the advocacy of the well-being of communities. Before we can make any suggestions for change---to news institutions, to government, to citizens---we must be able to support our recommendations with sound evidence.

Why Crime News?

In 1963 Reuven Frank was the executive producer of the NBC Evening News. In order to give structure to the newscasts, he offered the following prescription to his news staff:

Every news story should, without sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and de-nouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative.

The narrative and dramatic logic explicit in Frank's concept of television news directs producers to select stories that are melodramatic in plot and story line. Further, given the nature of television news, the drama must be visual, for above all else, television is pictures; and there are no more dramatic pictures in local television than those of crime.

Beyond Frank's prescription, however, crime news is perfectly suited to satisfy the four information biases in the news identified by critics. These

Further, given the nature of television news, the drama must be visual, for above all else, television is pictures; and there are no more dramatic pictures in local television than those of crime.

biases are the result of the American news style that downplays large societal issues in favor of the human trials and triumphs that sit at the surface of events.¹² News then becomes biased in favor of stories that are: (1) personalized; (2)

dramatized; (3) fragmented and (4) normalized.

The personalized nature of a crime news story is obvious. Victims and offenders are the very core of the personal trials of crime stories. Reporters cannot get more personal than putting a microphone in the faces of parents whose child has been abducted and asking them “how they feel at this moment”. Conversely, pictures of the hand-cuffed offender being escorted by the police to jail or to court make very clear that the danger is real and personal. The audience is constantly made to identify with the victim and to be repulsed by the offender.

As personal as crime news is, it is even more dramatic. Dramatized news comprise the second bias. Conflict and tension are the essential elements of a crime story. With personal actors at their center, crime stories are presented in short capsules that are most easily dramatized. They are offered as their own individual vignettes, complete with good guys and bad guys.

That leads to the third information bias--fragmentation. The stories are isolated from each other and larger events. Consequently, they are much harder to assemble into a big picture that might offer context to the audience. They are simply offered as a set of random and chaotic incidents through which the audience is instructed that their own possible trauma is just a matter of chance.

Having presented personalized, dramatized and fragmented news, there is an attempt to bring depth and coherence to the system and it leads to

“What to do if a member of *your* family is the victim of a mafia hitman”.

Promo for newscast by local anchor during network presentation of Bella Mafia.

the fourth information bias--normalization. It is a “journalistic tendency in which the reassuring voices of officials offer *normalized* interpretations of the otherwise threatening and confusing events in the news”.¹³

Officials reassure us that, even though there is a problem (in this case, a crime), things will soon return to normal “if only we trust them to act in our interest”.¹⁴

The biases that are described here are distilled in a memo by an executive producer of ABC News to his staff:

The Evening News, as you know, works on elimination. We can't include everything. As criteria for what we do include, I suggest the following for the satisfied viewer: (1) "Is my world, nation, and city safe?" (2) "Is my home and family safe?" (3) "If they are safe, then what has happened in the past 24 hours to help make the world better?" (4) "What has happened in the past 24 hours to help us cope better?"

The distillation was brought to an absurd level by the anchor's promo for the 11 PM newscast for the NBC affiliate in Philadelphia in 1996. The network was broadcasting the made-for-TV movie entitled *Bella Mafia*, a story about the criminal exploits of the wives of mafia members. Apparently, the anchor thought that the link between the fictional crimes

It was not a question; it was rather a promise that the upcoming newscast would contain useful consumer information in the event a member of your family was whacked by the organized crime syndicate.

in the movie and the actual crimes in the newscast needed a direct connection. So he took the personalized, dramatized, fragmented and normalized biases we just mentioned above and put them into one succinct "news-you-can use" teaser for the upcoming newscast. He looked earnestly into the camera and said: "What to do if a member of *your* family is the victim of a mafia hitman." It was not a

question; it was rather a promise that the upcoming newscast would contain useful consumer information in the event a member of your family was whacked by the organized crime syndicate. As nearly as we can determine, the most recent gangland murder (a mafia boss was the victim) in Philadelphia had occurred over a decade earlier than the broadcast. To suggest that there was connection between the fictional crimes of the movie and the real experiences of viewers in Philadelphia was not only ludicrous, but irresponsible.

Crime is news because it possesses all of the necessary ingredients of drama, conflict and tension that news producers define as essential to the enterprise. It is perfect vehicle through which to deliver small, self-contained episodes that are offered to portray the human condition and, as it happens, to sell the broadcast.

Our Questions

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth comparative examination of the crime coverage of local television news. To that end, the objectives of this project were: (1) to examine the crime coverage of local broadcast news in two prominent television markets, Philadelphia and Baltimore; (2) to analyze and to compare the images of crime, justice and community they portray for the public; (3) most importantly, to inform the public, policy makers and news organizations about the nature of the broadcasts in order to prompt discussion and, if necessary, change. To this point, newscasters have largely dismissed criticism of their work as being anecdotal and, therefore, not sufficient to prompt change. Consequently, the prospect for changing the behavior of media organizations remained remote. Further, these findings will provide the basis for developing a program through which the public can be informed about how to more critically "consume" the news.

In order to focus the study, we asked the following questions.

-) What was the nature of the treatment of crime and justice issues by local television news broadcasts in the Philadelphia and Baltimore television markets? Is the conventional wisdom correct that suggests that the coverage is skewed toward an over-representation of violent crime? Which aspects of the criminal justice system received coverage?
-) What was the nature of crime coverage as it related to communities in both television markets? Was there a difference between urban and suburban crime coverage across the television markets? Was there a difference in the types of crime that were covered across communities?
-) Was there a difference in the coverage of crime and justice issues across types of local television stations, i.e., network affiliates, commercial, independent stations and public television stations?
-) Was there a difference in the coverage of crime and justice issues across local television news broadcasts over time?

Our Method

The basic methodology for this project was content analysis. It is a method that produces a systematic and objective description of information content. The researchers catalogued or “coded” the material according to several analytical categories following explicit rules and procedures to minimize their subjective predispositions.¹⁵ We used the individual story that was broadcast during the news programs for our unit of analysis.

Our Sample

The sample 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”. We 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 included the following videotaped broadcasts:

For 1991, 1992 and 1993: The early evening broadcast of every station that produced a newscast in the Philadelphia market for a constructed week that included February (a sweeps month) and March of each year. In 1991, that included 28 newscasts; in 1992 and 1993 there were 35 newscasts each.

For 1996: The early evening broadcast of every station that produced a newscast in Philadelphia and three of the four stations in the Baltimore market for a constructed week in February and March. This sample included 55 newscasts. Philadelphia is the fourth largest television market in the United States; Baltimore ranks 24th.

Philadelphia

The broadcasts included in Philadelphia market data for each year (1991, 1992, 1993 and 1996) represented a sample of every regularly scheduled nightly newscast that was offered in that market. The number of newscasts changed throughout the study period as some broadcasts were added to the mix of stations. In each instance where a new broadcast was offered in the market, it was included in the sample.

In 1991 and 1992 the sample included: WNS, Channel 2, the TCI Cablevision newscast directed toward New Castle County Delaware;¹⁶ KYW, Channel 3, the NBC affiliate; WPVI, Channel 6, the ABC affiliate; WCAU, Channel 10, the CBS affiliate; WHYY, Channel 12, the Public Broadcasting System; WXTF, Channel 29, the Fox station.

In 1993, Channel 23, the New Jersey Network's Public Broadcasting System was added to the list of broadcasts for the Philadelphia market.

In 1996, the only addition to the Philadelphia market's list of stations was WPHL, Channel 17, an independent station.

Baltimore

The Baltimore stations included in the 1996 data were WBAL, Channel 11, the NBC affiliate, WJZ, Channel 13, the CBS affiliate and WBFF, Channel 45, the Fox Channel. The ABC affiliate, WMAR, was not included due to a technical error with the videotaping equipment. In 1996 the "constructed week" during which the newscasts were videotaped consisted of the exact same dates in both the Philadelphia and Baltimore markets.

The broadcasts that were included in the sample were the major evening news shows for each station. For the network affiliates, the local cable channel and one PBS station, that program (one-half hour in length) was presented at 6:00 PM. The Fox stations and the independent channel presented only one newscast at 10:00 PM (one hour in length). The PBS station in Wilmington/Philadelphia broadcast its half-hour news show at 5:30 PM.

Stories: the object of our attention

The unit of analysis, that is, the object of our attention, was the individual story that was presented on the newscast. The broadcasts that comprised the data for this project yielded 2,104 separate stories, excluding sports and weather stories. These stories fell into the following categories:

1. **Crime**
2. **Public issues, all public issues such as environment health, the economy, etc. other than crime**
3. **Human interest**
4. **Political campaigns**
5. **Consumer news**
6. **Fires/Accidents**
7. **International stories**
8. **Promos for the news or the station**

The crime stories were further separated into five categories for more detailed analysis.

1. **Crime event**
2. **Police**
3. **Courts**
4. **Corrections**
5. **Criminal justice policy**

Ratings

The stations in both markets are very different in the size of audience that their newscasts capture. Channel 6, the Philadelphia ABC affiliate, was the flagship station owned by Capitol Communications, the parent company of the ABC network, until Capitol Communications was sold to the Disney Company in 1995 for over \$18 billion. The Channel 6 newscasts have been the overwhelming ratings leader in the Philadelphia market for over a decade. In fact, its ratings lead over the NBC and CBS local affiliates¹⁷ is such that, on a regular basis, 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 Channel 12 and Channel 2.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

Crime

in Philadelphia & 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.

Table 1: Crime in Baltimore & Philadelphia, 1996

	City	Suburbs	MSA*
Baltimore			
% Murder	.4	.1	.2
% Other Violent	22.3	12.6	17.4
% Other Crime	77.3	87.3	82.4
Philadelphia			
% Murder	.4	.1	.2
% Other Violent	21.7	10.4	15.6
% Other Crime	77.9	89.5	84.2

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

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. 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. 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.

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 rates²⁰ for specific types of crime.

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

	City		Suburbs	
	1977	1996	1977	1996
Baltimore				
Total crime	8,369	12,001	5,726	5,023
Property crime	6,593	9,278	4,785	4,384
Violent crime	1,777	2,723	491	639
Murder	21.3	45.8	3.6	3.7
Philadelphia				
Total crime	4,040	6,920	4,034	3,613
Property crime	3,362	5,391	3,745	3,234
Violent crime	678	1,529	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.

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 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 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).

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 television news, very rarely was a homicide.

In both metropolitan areas the crime rates for murder in the city 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 television 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 & Baltimore

The Philadelphia and Baltimore markets are major concentrations of population along the northeast corridor between New York City and Washington, D.C. The population of the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) was almost 5 million people in 1996, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The population of just the city of Philadelphia was over 1.5 million people. The Baltimore PMSA had a population of about 2.5 million people (with the city of Baltimore accounting for over 700,000 people). Accordingly, both metropolitan areas represent significant television markets.

The Nielsen Media Research Company defines a television market as a Designated Market Area (DMA), identifying 214 such DMA's across the country. Each market's DMA consists of all the counties in which the home market stations receive a preponderance of viewing, and every county is allocated exclusively to one DMA—there is no overlap.

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.

In order to properly compare the coverage of crime and criminal justice by local television newscasts in Philadelphia and Baltimore, we used only the data for 1996 for both cities because we had only data from 1996 for the Baltimore market. The inclusion of data from 1991 through 1993 for Philadelphia and folding them into the comparative analysis was not appropriate. As a result, the total number of stories broadcast in both markets for the 1996 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. Therefore, their content and inclusion in the newscast were both predictable and regular. As a result, the news director had no real discretion to remove those segments from the newscast. We were concerned with those stories that were subject to the news selection process. The stories that were examined in this

project were all subject to being *excluded* from the newscast if another story was deemed to be a better “fit” for the program. That is, there was no regular structural feature that dictated their inclusion. Of the 847 stories that were subject to the selection process, 265 (31.3%) focused on crime and 582 (68.7%) were non-crime stories. These stories form the basis for this examination.

Which stories made the news?

The content analysis of the crime stories of the newscasts was accomplished at two levels. We examined: (1) the substantive content of the stories that were presented, i.e., topic, offense, etc. and, (2) the production characteristics of the stories, i.e., duration, placement, etc. Both sets of attributes are important to the decisions regarding the selection and presentation of material which is offered as news.

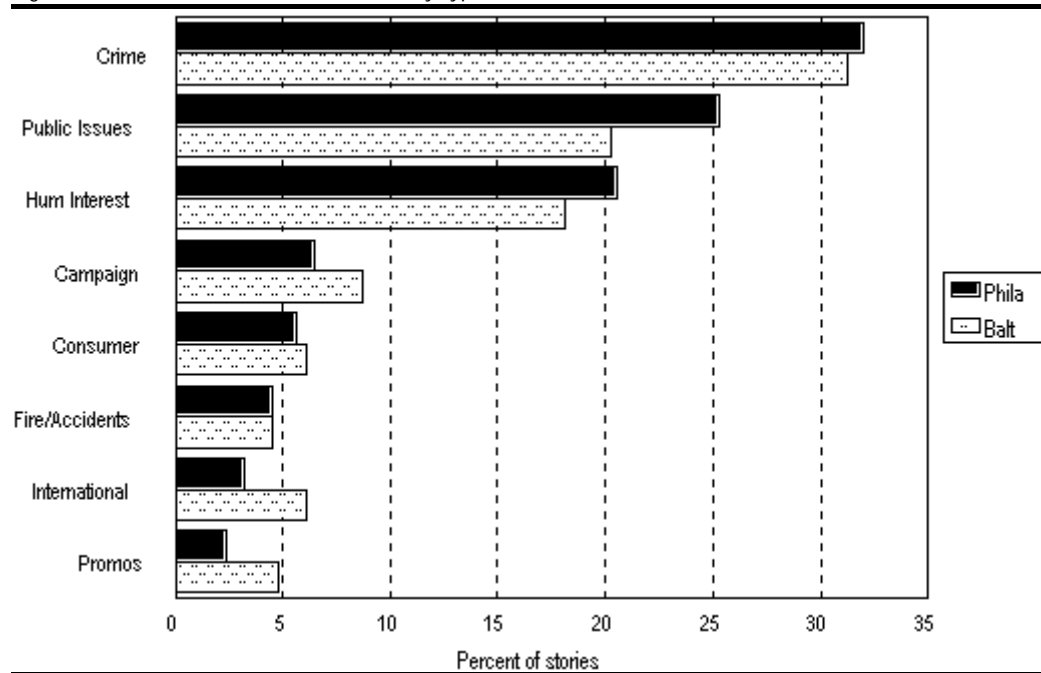
Our first task was to determine what kinds of stories, as defined by story topic, comprised the newscasts. An examination of the stories yielded eight categories of story topics: (1) crime; (2) public issues, all public issues such as environment, health, the economy, etc. other than crime; (3) human interest; (4) political campaigns; (5) consumer news; (6) fires/accidents; (7) international stories; and (8) promos for the news or the station.

The obvious question was what information was selected as news by the producers of the broadcasts. What were the topics of the stories that were reported in the newscasts in both Philadelphia and Baltimore?

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 topic in both markets (Figure 1). 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

Fig.1: Crime stories were the dominant story type in both TV markets.



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, as in many others.²¹

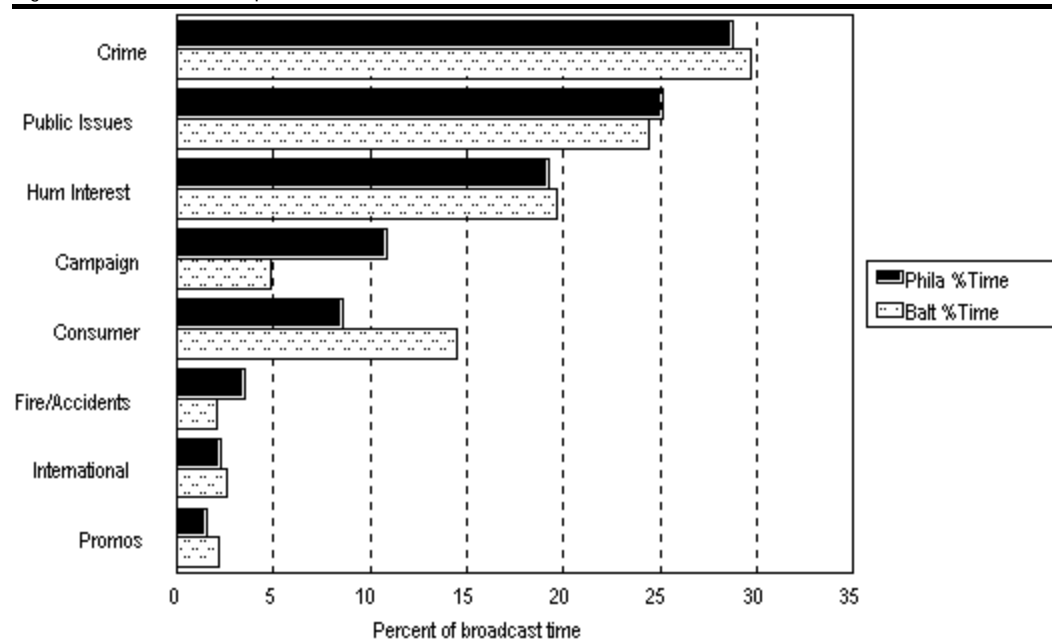
A Matter of Time

All media use a particular method to communicate their messages. For the print media, that method is words on a page; for the broadcast media it is pictures (and words) delivered over the airwaves. Each method has its constraints. For print media it is space, i.e., the number of column inches, pages, etc. that can be devoted to a particular topic. For the broadcast media, that constraint is time. The constraints, though, are slightly different for each type of media. For the print media, space can be quite flexible and the news hole (that amount of the newspaper/magazine devoted to news) can be expanded as more advertising is sold and more pages are added to the edition. That flexibility is not possible to a local television news director. The amount of time available for stories (including sports and weather) in a typical

thirty minute newscast is finite and averages about twenty-two and one-half minutes. The other seven and one-half minutes are occupied by commercials, the very lifeblood of revenue for the broadcast media. The news director cannot simply add time to a specific newscast to accommodate stories. Time is unrelenting and the news director must make choices among stories in a zero-sum game. Stories are included in the newscast as others are excluded because there is not enough time for all of them. Choices must be made. Time, then, is the most precious commodity with which news directors must wrestle. Given its uncompromising constraint and its scarcity, the use of time by the news director offers another glimpse into what is considered important for the newscast.

The importance to the newscast of crime as a topic was confirmed when we looked the amount of time devoted to the issue. In fact, the

Fig. 2: Crime stories occupied the most broadcast time in both markets.



big three story types as defined by topic were also given the most time by the newscasts. In both Baltimore and Philadelphia (Figure 2), crime occupied the most broadcast time (almost thirty percent). Public issues was second with about one-quarter of broadcast time in both markets, followed by human interest stories at about one-fifth of broadcast time.

Production Techniques

The only two areas in which there were differences between the two markets were campaign and consumer stories. Philadelphia stations spent more time covering election campaigns than Baltimore (10.9% and 4.9%, respectively) and, conversely, Baltimore stations utilized more broadcast time covering consumer stories (14.5% and 8.5%, respectively). In general, story topic and proportion of broadcast time devoted to the topic were relatively congruent in both television markets.

Viewers have often expressed the perception that the local television news is “nothing but crime news”. This analysis of crime coverage supported that conclusion to a point. The story topics and time allotted to crime stories were substantial in both television markets. However, certain production techniques were used in the presentation of those stories that increased our sense of crime dominated news.

Placement

The first production attribute was story placement, i.e., where the story appears in the chronological order of the newscast. The newscast was divided into blocks or segments, separated by commercial breaks. The first block (from the opening of the program to the first commercial break) is the most important portion of the newscast and, as such, is reserved for the most newsworthy stories of the day. Typically, the first block lasted between nine and eleven minutes. As we might expect, the zero sum game of deciding which stories were included in and excluded from the newscast was played most seriously in this instance. These first block stories must capture and hold the audience for the broadcast. They represent, essentially, the newscast’s “best shot” to play the ratings game. News directors are keenly aware of the fickle fingers that wait nervously on the remote control ready to zap to another channel and the dreaded “zap” must be avoided at all costs. As such, the stories that comprise the first block tell us much about what the stations considered not only newsworthy, but, more importantly, audience-generating.

We found that the news directors in both cities had remarkably similar views regarding which stories should lead the newscast. In both Baltimore and Philadelphia, over half of the crime stories appeared in the first block of the newscasts. Conversely, under one-third of non-crime

Table 3: Most crime stories appeared in the first block of the newscasts.

City	% Crime Stories in First Block	% Non-crime Stories in First Block
Baltimore	55	31
Philadelphia	54	32

stories were broadcasted in the first block (Table 3). Crime, more often than not, was not only the most prominent type of story in the first segment, it was regularly the very first story in the newscast.

Montage

There was another attribute of crime coverage that may be significant in giving the impression that the local news was dominated by crime. It referred to the sequence in which crime stories were presented. They can be broadcast as a single story or in a block of several stories. We defined crime stories that were broadcast as part of a block of at least three crime stories as a *montage* story. The montage technique was used substantially in both markets. Over six out of ten (61%) of crime stories in Philadelphia were reported in montage; over half (53%) were broadcast in that fashion in Baltimore. The montage effect of these stories was often heightened by employing a production technique called a “wipe” in which the image of one crime story was replaced by the image of the following crime story. The montage technique, coupled with the placement of crime stories in the first block, yielded a “pace” and continuity to the newscasts that were the goals of the news directors. The result was a set of broadcasts that gave the impression that we were being bombarded by “one crime story after another”. That perception was generally borne out by the facts.

Presentation Mode

Placement and montage techniques were important factors when we considered the character of the broadcasts. Another feature of the stories that affected the “feel” of the broadcasts was the mode in which each story was presented. We defined mode as the method used to communicate the narrative and/or the pictures of the crime stories we studied. Our examination yielded five types of presentation modes. They were: (1) Voice-over by anchor; (2) Package; (3) Live location report; (4) Anchor read without voice-over; and (5) Question/Answer.

In the Voice-over by anchor presentation mode, the story was delivered by the news anchor as he/she provided the narrative while the videotape that was shot for the story was shown on the screen. Typically, the anchor offered some introductory narrative before the video began, but that did not last very long. This presentation mode was the most common in both television markets (Table 4). It was employed in well

Table 4: Most crime stories were broadcast with the anchor providing a "voice-over" of video and lasted about 30 seconds.

Mode	Baltimore		Philadelphia	
	% of stories	Median Story Time (sec)	% of stories	Median Story Time (sec)
Voice-over by anchor	55	25	57	30
Package	28	119	28	131
Anchor read w/o video	11	25	6	25
Live location report	6	95	7	120
Question/Answer	0	N/A	2	220

over half of the crime stories that were broadcast in each market (55% and 57% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). The use of the voice-over by anchor was remarkably consistent between both markets not only in the proportion of crime stories in which the technique was used, but also the time devoted to these stories. In Baltimore, the median time for these stories was 25 seconds; in Philadelphia it was 30 seconds.

In comparison, the median time in Baltimore for *all* crime stories was 28 seconds; for non-crime stories it was 30 seconds. In Philadelphia crime stories lasted a median of 36 seconds; non-crime stories occupied a median of 43 seconds. Therefore, crime stories in Baltimore had a duration about equal with non-crime stories. In Philadelphia, crime stories generally were shorter than non-crime stories.

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).

A third approach to presenting the crime stories was the reading of narrative by the anchor without any video being shown on the screen (anchor read w/o video); the proverbial “talking head”. In Baltimore just over one in ten (11%) of the crime stories was broadcast this way; the Philadelphia stations used this technique about half as often (6%). However, in each market, these stories occupied the same amount of time in the broadcasts (median time of 25 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).

The question/answer format was used least often by the stations. In fact, it was never used in Baltimore. In Philadelphia the question/answer mode was used mostly on the Public Broadcasting Station (WHYY, Channel 12). However, when the technique was employed, it accounted for the longest crime stories (median time of 220 seconds) that were presented in the market.

The presentation modes that we found among the stories involved very different production costs and that seemed to influence the frequency with which news directors utilized them. In general we found that more

expensive presentation modes were used less often than those that were more cost efficient.²² The relatively most expensive techniques were the live location report and the package. Each required the efforts of a complete news crew (reporter and camera operator) in addition to others at the station to produce the story. As we mentioned, that investment was generally reflected in longer, but fewer, stories for the broadcast.

The only instance in which the cost of production did not reflect in the length of the stories occurred in the stories that were presented in the question/answer mode. These stories were relatively inexpensive to produce; they essentially were in-studio interviews of unpaid guests.

There were very few of these stories (only 2% in Philadelphia and none in Baltimore).

The impression that this mode [voice-over by anchor] left was that the station was “at the scene” of the story. That was true in only the most generous of interpretations.

The most common crime story presentation mode, voice-over by the anchor, was also a relatively less expensive approach to news production. Its main ingredient was pictures and those pictures could be acquired by sending a camera operator to a variety of locations during the day and editing the video back at the station. Either the anchor or a producer would

write the narrative (from information gathered by someone else) to accompany the video as it was shown on the screen. The pictures to which the anchor was lending a voice were often not seen by the anchor previously. Essentially, the anchor was a “viewer” in almost the same way as the audience. The impression that this mode left was that the station was “at the scene” of the story. That was true in only the most generous of interpretations. Yes, the station was “at the scene”, but it was only there in the form of a camera operator whose mandate was to get some pictures. The station was certainly not “there” to acquire some context for the story.

A critical aspect of the news process is the sources that provide the life-blood of the enterprise. There is a symbiotic relationship between journalists and their sources. The result of the interaction between them is “news that represents who are the authorized knowers and what are their authoritative versions of reality”.²³ Further, the relationship between

journalists and sources is such that, “sources are used to cite the facts of the matter without further investigation and to give credibility to what the reporter visualizes”.²⁴ Given this understanding of the role of sources in the news process, we examined which sources were used by the newscasts in the reporting of crime stories.

We identified a list of eleven sources that appeared in the crime stories. They were:

1. **Officials from criminal justice agencies, i.e., police, courts, corrections**
2. **Officials from government agencies other than criminal justice institutions**
3. **Confidential informants**
4. **Expert informants**
5. **The victim (s)**
6. **The suspect (s)**
7. **Members of the victim’s family**
8. **Members of the suspect’s family**
9. **Eyewitnesses**
10. **Neighbors/Members of the community**
11. **Defense attorney**

In every crime story we recorded whether or not each of the groups was used as a source. Obviously, the stories could have multiple sources. A source was coded as having been consulted or not consulted in a story only when that was logically possible. For example, if the topic of the crime story was a crime event and no suspect was identified, a defense attorney could not be cited as a source because that was a moot point...no suspect, no attorney. In that case, the defense attorney source designation was recorded as “not applicable”.

Criminal justice agencies were the main sources in the vast majority of the crime stories that we examined (Table 5). In fact, the stations in Baltimore and Philadelphia relied on these sources in exactly the same proportion of stories (81%). That was a finding that we would have expected.

However, the use of these sources has some implications. Criminal justice agencies (particularly the police) are “the primary definers of crime and its control to the public...that is, they develop the system of classification concerning what constitutes crime, crime rates and case clearance.”²⁵ These agencies “now accept that, in relation to a particular incident or activity, a proactive approach to the media is useful in controlling the version of reality that is transmitted, sustained, and

Table 5: Criminal justice officials were the main sources in the vast majority of crime stories in both television markets.

Source	Baltimore	Philadelphia
	% of stories cited	% of stories cited
CJ officials	81	81
Defense Attorney	20	22
Suspect	19	5
Victim	19	3
Family of victim	14	20
Family of suspect	11	4
Neighbor	11	8
Expert	9	11
Gov't officials, not CJ	5	11
Eyewitness	4	11
Confidential source	1	2

accepted publicly.”²⁶ This proactive approach serves as a legitimizing mechanism for the work of these institutions. Further, this more accommodating relationship with the media made it much easier for journalists to acquire the necessary basic information (who, what, where, when, why) about a particular crime in time for the newscast. It also made the *voice-over-by-anchor* presentation mode significantly more enticing (see Table 4) because the process of “getting the facts” was

already accomplished by the justice officials and “fed” to the journalists. This is not to suggest that criminal justice officials should not be primary sources in crime stories. That is both necessary and appropriate. However, we must recognize the role they play in the process.

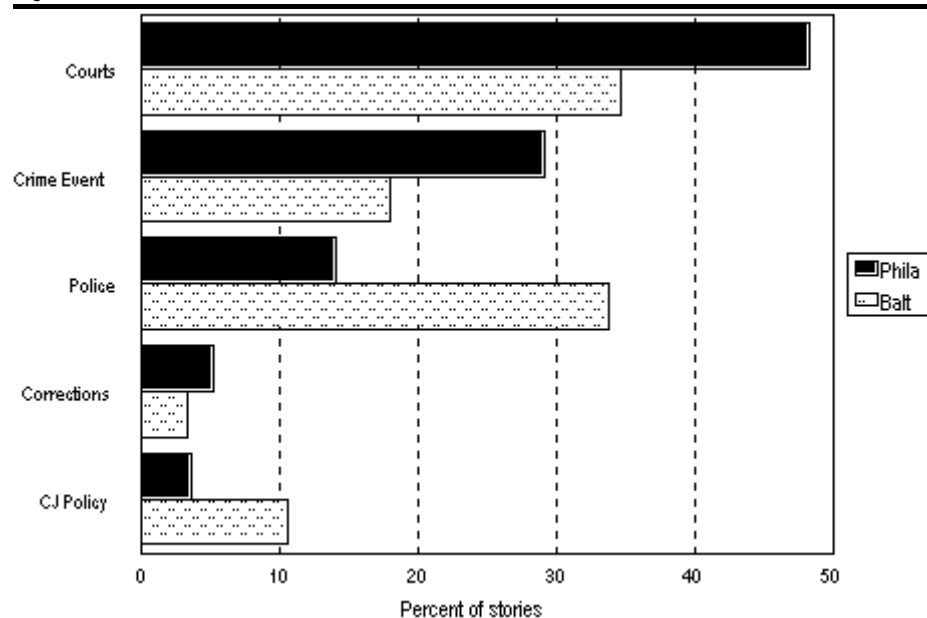
In both television markets, defense attorneys were cited as sources in about one-fifth of the stories (20% and 22% for Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). The use of the remaining nine categories of sources, however, varied between the markets. In Baltimore, the stations employed suspects and victims as sources (19% in each case) significantly more frequently than the Philadelphia channels (5% for suspects and 3% for victims). On the other hand, the newscasts in Philadelphia consulted the family of the victim more often than the Baltimore stations (20% and 14% in Philadelphia and Baltimore, respectively). In virtually all of the instances in which the victim’s family members were employed as sources, the reporter asked for a reaction to the crime. There was nothing substantive that these sources added to the story, but they certainly personalized and dramatized the presentation.

Crime News

The crime news that occupied so much of the broadcasts was divided into five separate categories. One category included criminal justice policy and administration. The remaining four categories were conceptually congruent with the criminal justice process, i.e., Crime Event, Police, Courts and Corrections. In this way, we 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. In the broadcasts that comprise our sample, the execution of a convicted murderer in

Delaware occupied some of the stories in this category.

Fig. 3: Most crime stories were court stories in both TV markets.



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 3). 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 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.

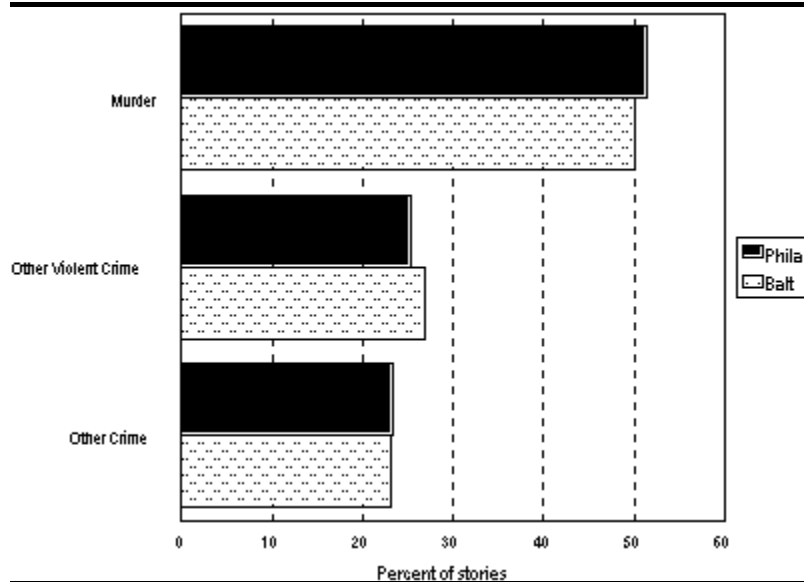
In both markets, crime news rarely focused on the corrections component of the criminal justice system. However, when it did, it covered rare events for that component. For example, in the Philadelphia market, the execution of a convicted murderer by the state of Delaware in March 1992 occupied a sizable portion of the corrections stories in that year.

The most striking differences in the crime news of both markets occurred in reporting police and criminal justice policy stories. While the Philadelphia newscasts focused on the police in only fourteen percent of its crime news, the Baltimore stations covered the police in over twice as many of their crime stories (34%). Baltimore newscasts, on the other hand, covered criminal justice policy issues almost three times as often as the Philadelphia stations (10.5% and 3.5%, respectively).

Offenses

We also looked at the crime stories through the prism of the offenses that were reported within the crime event, police, courts and corrections categories. That is, a story in each of those categories referred to a specific crime, i.e., burglary, robbery, murder, etc. By definition, the criminal justice policy stories did not focus on a particular crime.

Fig. 4: Murder was the crime of choice for coverage in both TV markets.



We found that stations in both television markets exhibited an exceptional degree of agreement about which crimes should be included in the newscasts (Figure 4). In both Baltimore and Philadelphia, murder occupied half of the crime stories (50% and 51.3%, respectively). The other violent crime category of offenses referred to all violent

crime except murder and included rape, robbery, attempted murder and assault. In both markets these offenses were the crimes in about one-fourth of the stories. The other crime grouping contained every other crime that was reported within the crime stories. This category included property, drugs, non-violent, official misconduct, traffic and civil offenses. They occupied the remaining one-fourth of the stories.

What was remarkable about the offenses that were chosen for inclusion in the newscasts in both television markets is how far they were from the reality of crime in both Baltimore and Philadelphia. Remember, murder accounted for less than one-half of one percent of the crimes in both metropolitan areas (See Table 1). In other words, the coverage of murder on newscasts was about one hundred times more likely than its occurrence in reality in both metropolitan areas.

As murder was vastly over-represented on the newscasts, the *other crime* category was significantly under-represented. It comprised only

about one-quarter of the newscast offenses, but it accounted for over three-quarters of the offenses reported to the police (See Table 1).

The newscast reporting of the *other violent crime* category was, perhaps, the most congruent with the prevalence of those crimes in the metropolitan areas. We learned that *other violent crime* accounted for under one-fifth of crimes in the Baltimore (17.4%) and Philadelphia (15.6%) metropolitan areas (See Table 1). In each of the core cities, however, it comprised a slightly higher proportion of the crimes committed (22.3% and 21.7%, for Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). In both television markets, *other violent crime* constituted about one-quarter of the offenses reported on the newscasts (25.3% in Philadelphia and 26.8% in Baltimore).

In summary, our research was consistent with the findings of other analyses of crime and the news.²⁷ Crime news occupied a prominent place in newscasts far out of proportion with its actual prevalence in the community.

Victims & Suspects

We wanted to learn more about the presentation of crime beyond which component of the system or which offense was covered. The crime stories that were broadcast in Baltimore and Philadelphia were populated by suspects and victims. What did we learn about them? What did that knowledge tell us about the presentation of crime?

In looking at the stories, we distinguished several types of suspects and victims. They were: (1) individuals, in which only one person was identified in the story; (2) group, in which a group of individuals was the victim and/or suspect; (3) an organization, i.e., a public or private institution, etc.; (4) the public (only as a victim, for example, a consumer fraud case). These categories were based on a identification of the suspect and/or the victim in the story. However, we soon learned that there was another possibility—that the identity of either or both the suspect or victim was not reported or not known. That is, the story simply did not tell us.

The crime stories that were broadcast were heavily dependent on the actions or the circumstances of individuals, significantly outnumbering all

other categories. Over half of the victims in the Baltimore market (53%) were individuals; almost six out of ten (58%) were individuals in Philadelphia (Table 6). Further, individuals accounted for an even higher proportion of the suspects in the stories. In both markets, the suspects were individuals in more than six out of ten stories (65% and 62% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively).

Table 6: Individuals were most often the suspects and the victims in the crime stories that were broadcast in both markets.

Type of Victim/Suspect	Baltimore		Philadelphia	
	Victim % of stories	Suspect % of stories	Victim % of stories	Suspect % of stories
Individual	53	65	58	62
Group	41	26	30	29
Not reported/not known	3	10	4	8
Organization	3	0	3	1
Public	1	N/A	5	N/A

The reliance on individuals as suspects and victims in the stories provided very strong evidence of the “bias” toward personalized news that we mentioned earlier. The presumption was that the public would identify with the message of the story when the circumstances that animated it were those they could understand as part of their own experience.

The individual focus of the stories was even more significant when we considered that organizations were virtually neglected, either as suspects or victims. Only in Philadelphia was an organization distinguished as a suspect (1% of stories) in the story. There were no such stories broadcast in Baltimore.

In both markets, groups of individuals comprised the second most prominent categories of suspects (26% and 29% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively) and victims (41% and 30%, respectively). About one in ten stories did not identify the suspects and victims at all. Either the information was unavailable or it was simply not reported.

Gender

We know that the suspects and victims in the crime stories were individuals in the significant majority of cases.

A logical question was what demographic characteristics did they have. The most obvious demarcation was gender. The markets were remarkably consistent with each other regarding the reporting of the gender of suspects. Males were overwhelmingly the suspects in the crime stories. Over three-fourths of the stories in Baltimore and Philadelphia (78% in both markets) broadcast stories in which only males were suspects (Table 7).

Table 7: Males were the suspects in most stories in both markets; the victims were most often female in Baltimore and most often male in Philadelphia.

Type of Victim/Suspect	Baltimore		Philadelphia	
	Victim % of stories	Suspect % of stories	Victim % of stories	Suspect % of stories
Only males	25	78	42	78
Only females	42	8	31	7
Not reported/not known	16	14	13	12
Male & Female	17	0	14	3

In contrast, female suspects were reported in fewer than one in ten stories in both markets (8% and 7% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). There were very few stories in which there were multiple suspects of both genders (only 3% in Philadelphia and none in Baltimore).

The gender of the suspects was not reported or not known in a consistent proportion stories in both markets (14% and 12% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively).

The stations in both markets were more diverse regarding the gender of the victims in their stories. The most striking difference in the markets was Baltimore's focus on female victims (a plurality of 42%). In contrast, less than one-third of the Philadelphia stories (31%) reported a female victim; a plurality (42%) revealed a male victim. In summary, males comprised the vast majority of suspects in both markets, while the victims were most often female in Baltimore and most often male in Philadelphia.

Race/Ethnicity

In addition to gender, we also examined the race/ethnicity of the suspects and the victims in the crime stories. First, some definitions are in order. The “only” that precedes the various racial and ethnic categories here refers to the fact that when there were multiple suspects or victims in the story, they were comprised exclusively by a particular racial/ethnic group. By extension, then, the mixed race/ethnicity category indicates that there were a group of persons who were the suspects or victims and they consisted of several racial/ethnic categories. The most striking finding here was that in most stories the race or ethnicity of the suspect and /or

Table 8: In the significant majority of stories in both markets, the race/ethnicity of the victims was not reported or not known.

Race/Ethnicity of Victim(s)/Suspect(s)	Baltimore		Philadelphia	
	Victim(s) % of stories	Suspect(s) % of stories	Victim(s) % of stories	Suspect(s) % of stories
Not reported/not known	57	41	54	40
Only Caucasian	22	41	25	29
Only African-American	16	17	16	25
Only Hispanic	0	1	3	5
Mixed race/ethnicity	5	0	1	1
Only Asian	0	0	1	0

the victim was *not* reported (Table 8). Either the reporter did not know that information or it was simply not reported.

Let’s look at the victims, first. In both markets, over half of the crime stories did not report the race or ethnicity of the victim(57% and 54% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). The victim(s) was identified as only Caucasian in just over one-fifth of the stories (22%) in Baltimore and one-quarter of the stories (25%) in Philadelphia. African-Americans accounted for the victims in exactly the same proportion (16%) in both markets. The victims were only Hispanic or only Asian or were a group with mixed racial/ethnic identities in a very small proportion of stories.

The racial/ethnic make-up of the suspect(s) in the crime stories was consistent in some ways across the markets and in other ways inconsistent. It was consistent in the proportion of suspect(s) whose race/ethnicity was not reported (41% and 40% in Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). However, where the race/ethnicity of the suspect(s) was identified, the markets were inconsistent with each other. In Baltimore, the stories in which only Caucasian suspect(s) were reported (41%) more than doubled the number of stories in which only African-American suspect(s) were identified (17%). That distribution was more even in Philadelphia. Just under three out of ten stories (29%) in that market identified only Caucasian suspect(s); exactly one-quarter of the stories reported only African-American suspect(s).²⁸ In summary, when the race or ethnicity of the suspects and the victims was reported, they were most often Caucasian.

Who Victimized Whom?

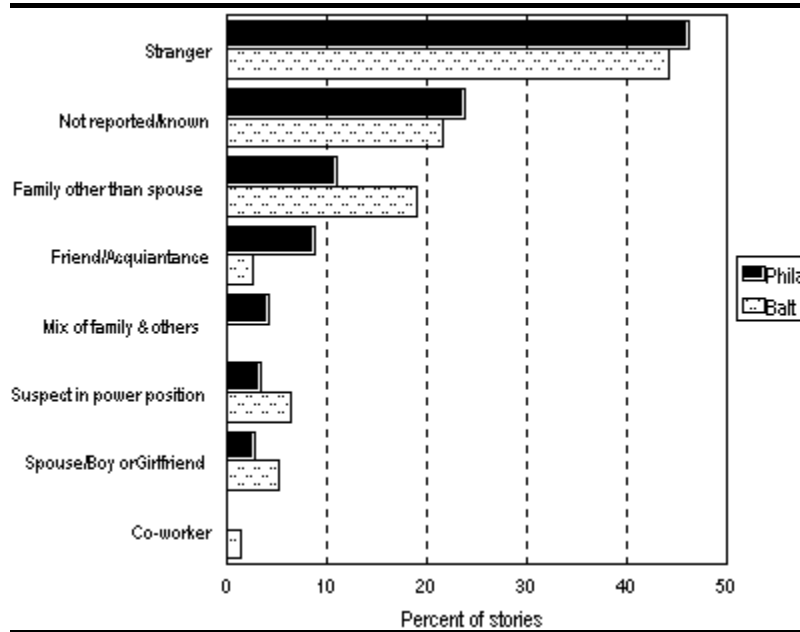
In most crime stories that we examined, the most important actor in terms of public sentiment was the victim. It was easy and effective to make that person (it was most often an individual as we stated earlier) the focal point of the empathy of the audience. So, an obvious question was who victimized whom in the vignettes that were broadcast as crime stories. We looked at several factors: (1) the relationship between the suspect and the victim; (2) the age of the suspect and the victim; (3) the gender of the suspect and victim; (4) the race/ethnicity of the suspect and the victim.

Strangers?

In the stories in which the identity of the suspect and the victim were reported, they were most often strangers (Figure 5). That was consistent in both markets. In Philadelphia they were strangers in 46 percent of the crime stories; in Baltimore that was the case in 44 percent of such stories. The relationship between the suspect and the victim was not reported/known in the next most numerous group of stories and the proportion was consistent across both TV markets (24% and 22% in Philadelphia and Baltimore, respectively). After these two categories, the markets became more inconsistent regarding reporting the relationship between the suspect and the victim. Stories in which the relationship between the suspect and the victim was that of a family member other than a spouse accounted for just over one out of ten (11%) reports in Philadelphia; in

Baltimore almost one-fifth of the stories (19%) identified that relationship. The suspect and the victim were friends/acquaintances (as stated by the reporter) in three times as many stories in Philadelphia (9%) as in Baltimore (3%). In some stories in Philadelphia (4%), the relationship between the suspects and victims was a mix of family and others who were not family. Obviously, in these stories there were multiple suspects and/or victims. None of these types of stories was reported in Baltimore. In only a few of the stories was the suspect in an

Fig.5: The suspect and the victim were strangers in most crime stories in both TV markets.



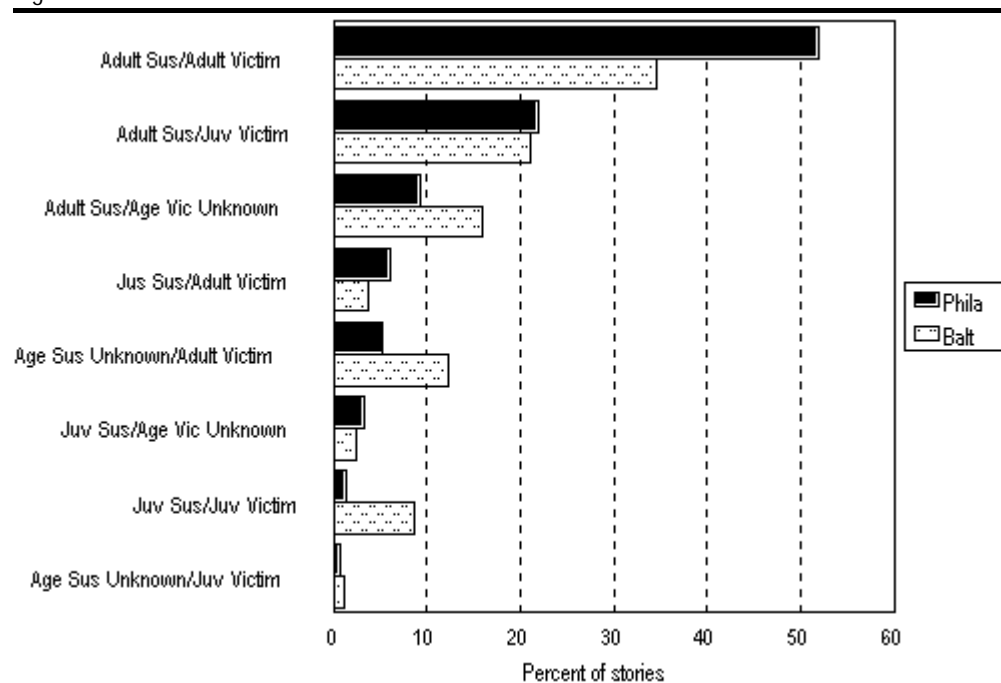
economic) over the victim (3% in Philadelphia and 6% in Baltimore), or a spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend (3% and 5% in Philadelphia and Baltimore, respectively). Stories in which the relationship between the suspect and the victim was that of an equal co-worker only accounted for one percent of the stories in Philadelphia; there was none in Baltimore.

Adults, Juveniles & Victimization

Another relationship between the suspects and victims that we examined focused on age. We defined two age categories, adult (persons 18 years of age and older), and juvenile (persons 17 years of age and younger). We determined age from the narrative in the story (the reporter stated the age of the suspect and/or victim or from the video that was shown on the screen. Because age can be difficult to determine from the video alone, we used the widest possible categories, adult and juvenile. This distinction seemed to be very accurate because the

stations were cognizant of the need to protect the identity of juveniles. Therefore, they were quick to make the adult/juvenile differentiation because they treated juveniles differently in terms of the information they could offer in the story. When neither the narrative or the video contained sufficient information to determine the age of the suspect or victim, we coded it as not reported or not known. Given that age demarcation, there were eight possible combinations of adult and juvenile victimization understanding that these could include individual or multiple suspects and/or victims): (1) adult suspect and adult victim; (2) adult suspect and a juvenile victim; (3) adult suspect but the age of the victim was not reported/known; (4) juvenile suspect and adult victim; (5) age suspect not reported/known and adult victim; (6) juvenile suspect but age of victim not reported/known (7) juvenile suspect and juvenile victim; (8) age of suspect not reported/known and juvenile victim.

Fig. 6: Adults victimized adults in most crime stories in both TV markets.



There were substantial differences between the Baltimore and Philadelphia stations regarding the victimization among adults and juveniles (Figure 6). In general, adults were most often the suspects and they most frequently victimized adults. In Philadelphia that was the case in over half of the crime stories (52%). In Baltimore, by contrast, just

over one-third (34%) of the crime stories had that victimization pattern. The second most common category of victimization involved an adult suspect and a juvenile victim. In this regard, both television markets were very consistent with each other (22% and 21% in Philadelphia and Baltimore, respectively).

The third most prominent category of victimization that we found in the crime stories was that of an adult suspect with the age of the victim not reported/known. There were more of these stories, by proportion, in Baltimore (16%) than in Philadelphia (9%).

Stories in which a juvenile suspect victimized an adult victim occurred in a very small proportion of the broadcasts (6% and 4% in Philadelphia and Baltimore, respectively). Perhaps a surprising finding showed that juvenile suspects victimizing juvenile victims accounted for a very modest percentage of the stories. However, there was a substantial difference between the markets. That victimization pattern occurred in just under one out of ten (9%) of the Baltimore stories. In Philadelphia, only one out of ten (1%) of the stories portrayed juveniles victimizing other juveniles.

Gender & Victimization

The most basic pattern of victimization that we examined involved gender. What did the stories tell us about this crucial factor?

Table 9: Males victimized males in most Philadelphia stories; males victimized females in most Baltimore stories.

Gender of Suspect(s) and Victim (s)	Baltimore Number of stories	Philadelphia Number of stories
Male suspect and...		
Male victim	15	49
Female victim	23	40
Mixed male/female victims	10	15
Victim gender not reported/known	9	14
Female suspect and...		
Male victim	0	4
Female victim	6	2
Mixed male/female victims	0	5
Victim gender not reported/known	1	0
Mixed Male/Female suspects and ...		
Male victim	0	2
Female victim	0	2
Mixed male/female victims	0	0
Victim gender not reported/known	0	0
Suspect Gender Not Reported/Known and ...		
Male victim	4	6
Female victim	2	2
Mixed male/female victims	3	1
Victim gender not reported/known	2	4

Note: This table comprises only those stories in which the gender was reported for the suspect, victim or both. By definition, it does not include those stories in which the gender of neither the suspect or the victim was reported. Remember, there were significant proportions of such stories in both markets and that reduced the number of stories that were included in this table.

The most striking feature of our findings was that most of the stories in both markets focused on male suspects. Female suspects comprised only a small number of the stories that were broadcast. However, within the stories with male suspects, the markets were very different in their treatment of gender and victimization (Table 9). In Philadelphia most of

Males most often victimized *males* in the Philadelphia stories; in Baltimore, males most often victimized *females*.

the stories in which the gender of the suspect and the victim was reported, males victimized males most often (49 stories) Males victimized females an almost equal number of times in the stories (40). The number of stories in which males victimized males and females (15) and males victimized persons whose gender was not reported/known (14) was substantially fewer than other suspect/victim combinations.

In Baltimore, the gender victimization pattern that was reported in the stories was quite different. Males victimized females most often (23 stories) in the Baltimore broadcasts. Males victimized males in only 15 stories that were broadcast in that market. The number of stories in which male suspects victimized males and females and males victimized persons whose gender was not reported or known were about equal (10 and 9 stories, respectively).

In this section, we presented a lot of information about local television news coverage of crime and justice in Baltimore and Philadelphia. We focused on the content and production characteristics of that coverage. In the following section, we looked at the locations of the crimes that were reported in the stories.

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 been that crime has been portrayed predominantly in the media as an urban dilemma.²⁹

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, we decided to limit our analysis to two of the five categories of crime stories that we identified—the crime event and police categories. We made this decision in order to avoid any locational bias. Remember, the five categories of crime stories that we identified were: (1) the crime event; (2) police, i.e., action by the police; (3) courts, i.e., action by the courts; (4) corrections, i.e., action by the correctional authorities; and (5) criminal justice policy. 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 as we might expect, 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 we had included these stories in the location analysis, we would have biased the results heavily toward the places where these institutions (courts and/or prisons) were located. Our 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.

The Baltimore and Philadelphia television markets were designated by the Nielsen Media Research Company. As we stated earlier, Nielsen defines a television market as a Designated Market Area (DMA), identifying 214 such markets across the country. Philadelphia ranks fourth in size; Baltimore ranks twenty-fourth. The DMA consists 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, we coded the smallest geographic unit or "place" that was identified in the news story for which we could make comparisons between both markets. The smallest geographic unit we could use in the comparison was the town. 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 consistently defined.³⁰ As a result, the smallest geographic unit that we used in this analysis was the town. In some stories, the smallest geographic unit that was identified as the location of the crime was a county.

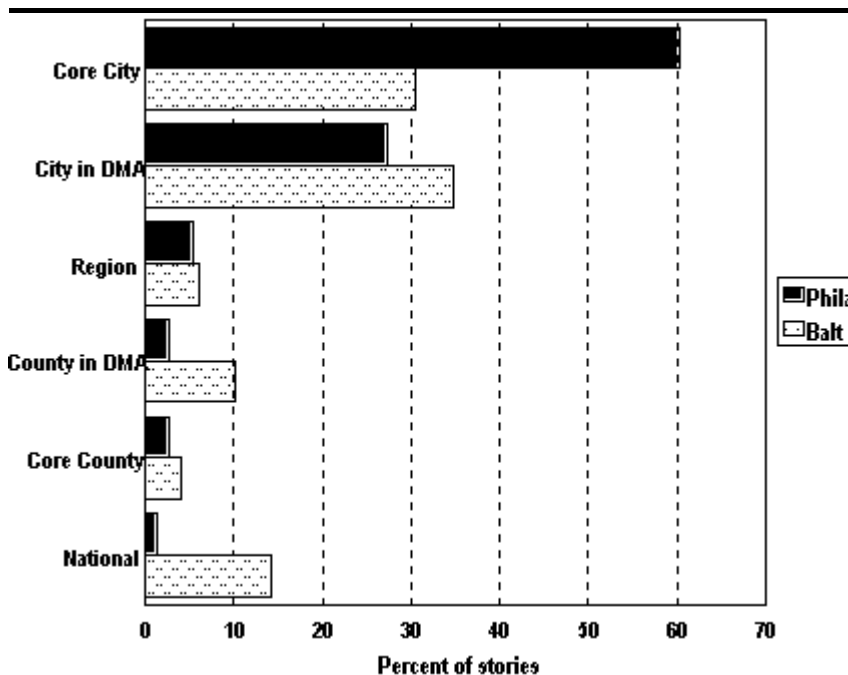
Our examination revealed six types of places: (1) the core city; (2) a city in the DMA other than the core city; (3) the region, a location outside of the DMA but within surrounding states; (4) a county in the DMA other than the core county; (5) the core county and (6) national, a story in which the 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 7). In fact, Philadelphia’s urban stories (60%) virtually doubled 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.

Fig. 7: Philadelphia reported urban crime; Baltimore focused on suburban crime.

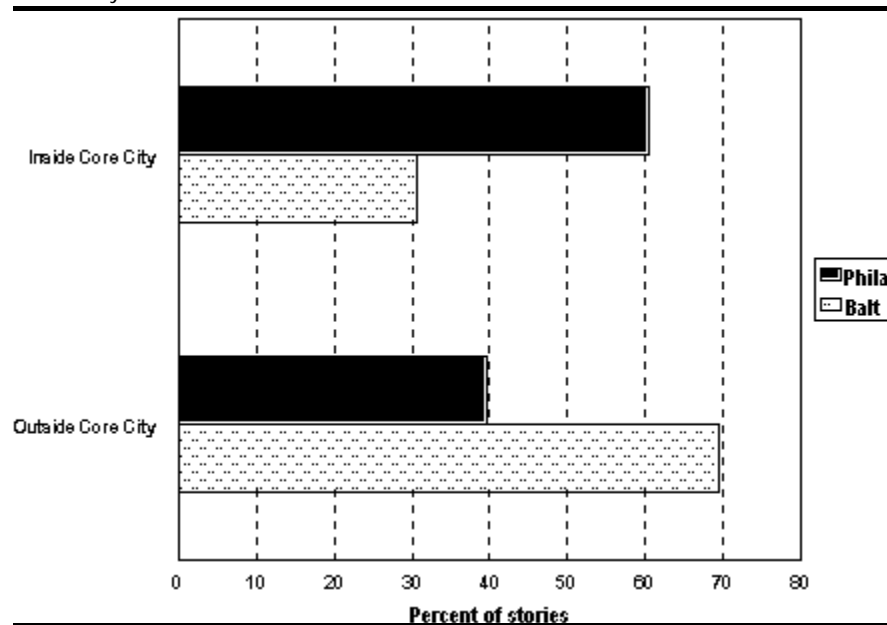


The coverage of regional crime was a small part of the broadcasts (6% in both markets). Baltimore covered more crime stories that were “placed” in a county in the DMA that was not the core county (10% and 3% for Baltimore and Philadelphia, respectively). Another difference

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 that we showed in Figure 7 offered crucial information about the coverage in both TV markets. But, we 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, we combined all of the stories that fell into the location categories that were designated as outside of the core city and

Fig. 8: Philadelphia and Baltimore stations covered urban and suburban crime very differently.



compared that to those stories whose location was inside the core city. The results of that aggregation showed us that the Baltimore and Philadelphia television markets were almost mirror images of each other regarding the locations of the crimes that were reported in the newscasts' stories (Figure 8). In Philadelphia stories of crimes within the core city virtually doubled 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 we saw these locational differences emerge, we looked further into the broadcasts. Was there something in the stories that might help us understand the coverage? We were quick to recognize 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 characteristics in common: (1) they most frequently lead the newscasts; (2) they were much longer than other crime stories (between five and seven times longer than the median of twenty-five seconds); (3) they were broadcast using the package and live location presentation modes; and (4) neighborhood residents were always used as sources and they were interviewed for their reactions to the crime. Not surprisingly, each registered their “shock”. Neighbors’ comments were consistent with the reaction of 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”.

The theme of creeping crime and danger was also attended by a sub-theme. 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?

Philadelphia stations covered urban crime; Baltimore channels focused on suburban crime.

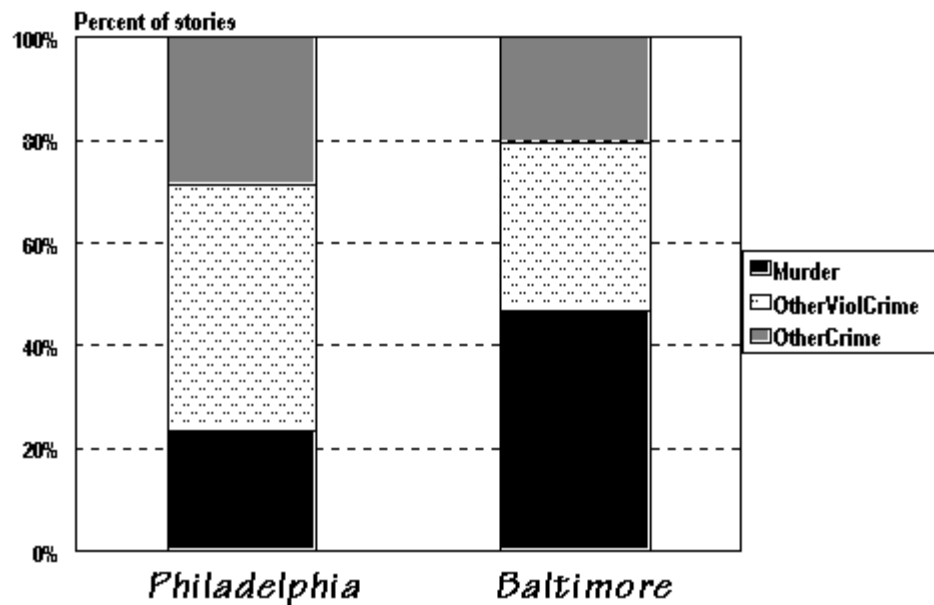
However, there was also an implicit answer to the “why” and it was very disturbing--random violent crime is a feature of late twentieth-century America and there is nothing we can do about it. In short, the stories suggested to the viewers that they

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 your chance of being victimized. In this scenario, responsible citizenship was reduced to reacting to events rather than trying to influence them.

Offenses

When we looked at all four of the categories of crime stories (crime event, police, courts and corrections) that included a specific crime, we 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 (see Table 4). But, we wanted to know if there was any difference between the TV markets when we only considered the crime stories to which we could attach a location, i.e., the crime event and police stories. The short answer to that question was a resounding yes.

Fig. 9: Baltimore stations focused on murder twice as often as channels in Philadelphia.*



*These findings applied to the crime event and police crime stories only because we could attach a location to the crime that was being reported.

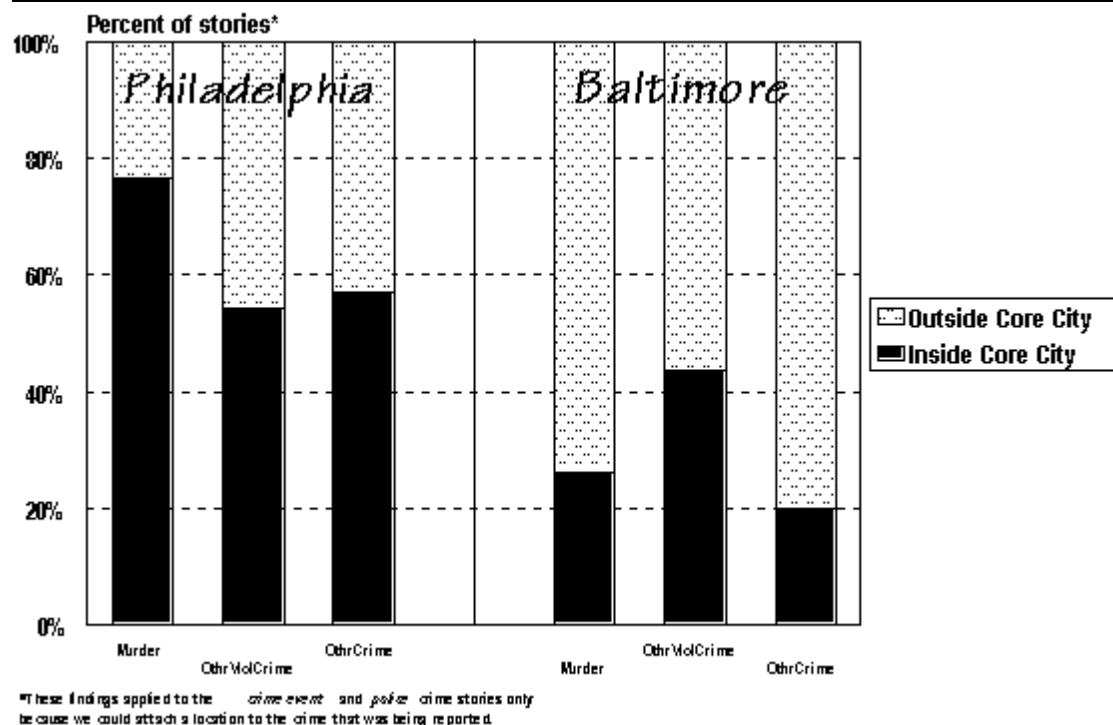
The stations in Baltimore and Philadelphia were almost mirror images of each other regarding which offenses were covered (Figure 9). The Baltimore stations focused on murder twice as often as the Philadelphia channels (47% and 23%, respectively). Further, the Baltimore stations assigned another one-third (33%) of their stories to the other violent crime 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%).

A summary of Baltimore's crime coverage indicated that the progression 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 mirror image between the two television markets, while not exactly in focus, certainly indicated Baltimore's penchant for more coverage of murder or other violent crime.

Offenses & Location

The mirror image that we saw in the offenses that were covered by the stations in each market was also apparent when we looked at the locations of those crimes, particularly murder (Figure 10). In Philadelphia, over three-fourths of the murders (77%) that were covered were located in the core city. Conversely, 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.

Fig. 10: Philadelphia stations covered crimes inside the core city; Baltimore channels focused on crimes outside of the core city.*



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 (murder, other violent crime and other crime) 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? We looked at the

Table 10: 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	736,014	29,732	1,585,577	27,630
Density (pop/sq.mi)	9,108	2,654	11,734	3,694
% 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	11.0
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

*Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995).

**Source: 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>.

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.

characteristics of the “places” in the crime stories, separating them by inside/outside of the core city (Table 10).³¹

The “places” inside and outside of the core cities in both television markets exhibited significant differences. There were expected findings. As compared to places inside the core city, places outside of the core cities were: (1) less dense; (2) had different racial compositions; (3) had household incomes that were about fifty percent higher; (4) had poverty levels that were about fifty percent lower; and (5) had housing values that were almost double. 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).

While the demographic characteristics of the locations outside of the core city in both markets were alike, the coverage of crime stories was quite different. Remember, the Baltimore stations focused the significant majority of their crime story coverage outside of the core city. Further, they concentrated on murder in those locations, a crime that accounted for .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.

Location & Distance

When the Baltimore and Philadelphia stations covered crime stories outside of the core city, a reasonable question was how far were these locations from the core city. In determining these distances, we did not include the stories that were beyond the region (the national stories) because that would skew the data. That is, there could be a story from California on one broadcast and then another from Maine on the next broadcast. For our purposes, both would have been coded as “national” (beyond the region) stories. But, the distances

they represented from either the Philadelphia or Baltimore markets had nothing to do with the cognitive map of those DMA's. We were concerned with the cognitive map that was implied by the *on-going* coverage of crimes by the stations.

We measured distance by the number of miles between the city halls of the "places" that were the locations of the stories and the core city. The

When it came to the *location* of crime stories, the Baltimore and Philadelphia stations constructed very different newscasts.

"places" were identified by the smallest geographical unit for which we could gather distance data. For the most part, the place was a city or town outside of the core city. These distances were derived by using the mapping and directions services of the MapQuest web site on the Internet. We found that the

Baltimore stations covered stories that were much closer to the core city (a median of 27 miles) than those stories in the Philadelphia market (a median of 35.6 miles).

Summary

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. 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.

Covering Crime over Time

Up to this point we limited our examination of the broadcasts to the newscasts in 1996 because we could make an appropriate comparison between the Baltimore and Philadelphia markets. Further, that was our main interest. However, we also wanted to learn how the stations covered crime and other public issues over time. Were there any patterns in crime coverage over the course of the period that we videotaped the newscasts? Were the findings for the 1996 broadcasts consistent with the coverage in other years? Did the various types of stations cover crime differently? Did they cover other public issues differently?

In order to accomplish this task, we looked at all of the data that we gathered. That included all of the 2,104 stories in our sample that were broadcast during the newscasts for 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1996 in Philadelphia and those that were presented in Baltimore in 1996.

We separated the stations along logical dimensions based on time of broadcast, length of broadcast and affiliation. As a result, we defined three station types: (1) network affiliates; (2) Independent and Fox stations; and (3) Public Broadcasting Stations.

The network affiliate stations included the NBC and CBS affiliates in the Baltimore and Philadelphia markets and the ABC affiliate in Philadelphia. These stations broadcast their main early evening newscast at 6:00 PM and the newscasts were one-half hour in duration. The Independent and Fox stations included the Fox stations in Baltimore (WBFF) and Philadelphia (WXTF), the Independent station in Philadelphia (WPHL) and the newscast of the cable company in New Castle County, Delaware (Channel 2). Both Fox stations and the Independent station in Philadelphia presented their only evening newscast at 10:00 PM for one hour. The newscast of Channel 2 lasted for one-half hour and was initially broadcast at 6:00 PM with taped re-broadcasts at 7:00 PM and 11:00 PM. The Public Broadcasting Stations included WHYY (Wilmington/Philadelphia) and WNJS (the New Jersey Public Television Network). The PBS stations presented broadcasts of one-half hour during the early evening.

Crime Content

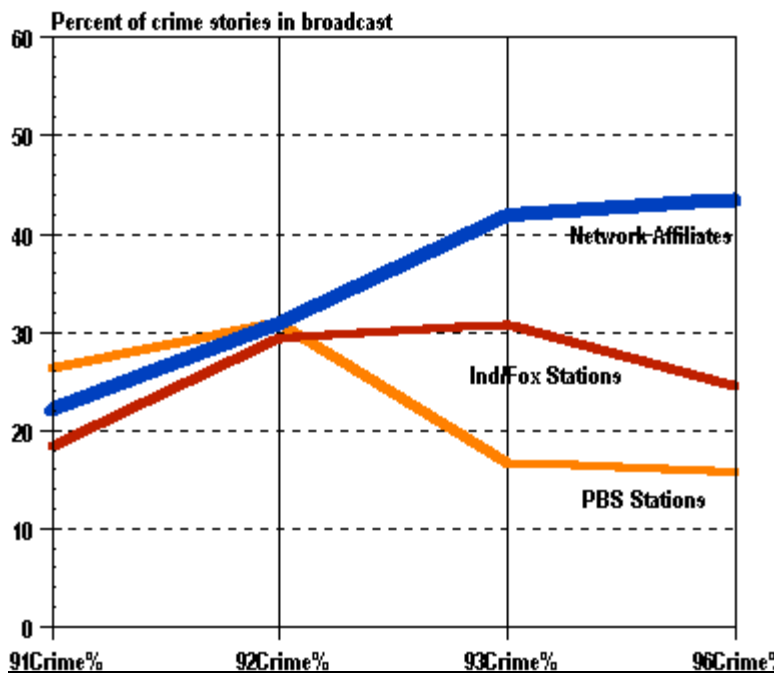
How did the various stations types compare as they covered crime over the course of time. We found that, by a wide margin, crime stories were more prominent on the broadcasts of the network affiliates than any other stations as time progressed (Figure 11).

The general pattern of the proportion of crime stories that were broadcast by the stations took very clear paths. The network affiliates increased their coverage of crime from 1991 to 1996 (from 22% in 1991 to 43% in 1996). At the same time, the trend for the Independent or

Fox stations increased, then decreased. The PBS stations exhibited the largest decrease (from 26% in 1991 to 16% in 1996).

These findings, however, need some clarification in order to give them proper context. For consistency, we gathered data in February and March of each year. We selected those two months because February is a “sweeps” month and March is not so designated. The “constructed” week that we developed for the data required five weeks to

Fig. 11: Network affiliates increased their coverage of crime over time.



accomplish³² and necessarily moved the data gathering into March. The “sweeps” months (February, May and November) are those months in which the Nielsen ratings are compiled which will govern the generally accepted audience size of the programs. The size of the audience determines the price the networks or the stations can charge for commercial time during a particular program.

The choice of the two months for our sample had special significance in 1991. By happenstance, we gathered data in 1991 before, during and

after the ground offensive of the Persian Gulf War. Our 1991 “constructed” week broadcasts stretched from February 5 through March 11. The United States began the air offensive against Iraq on January 16, 1991. The ground war, however, did not begin until February 23, 1991 and lasted only about four days. That offensive occurred in the middle of our data gathering efforts. Consequently, the Gulf War had an effect on the local television news broadcasts during that period. For the network affiliates, Gulf War news replaced crime as the most prominent topic of the newscasts, but only for the period before the ground offensive was completed. In the broadcasts that occurred after the ground war, crime again achieved its position as the most dominant topic on the network affiliates local newscasts. However, the prominence of the Gulf War in the early stages of our constructed week decreased the proportion of crime stories that the network affiliates included in their broadcasts. But, judging from their dependence on crime in subsequent years, the 1991 broadcasts were more anomalies rather than the rule.

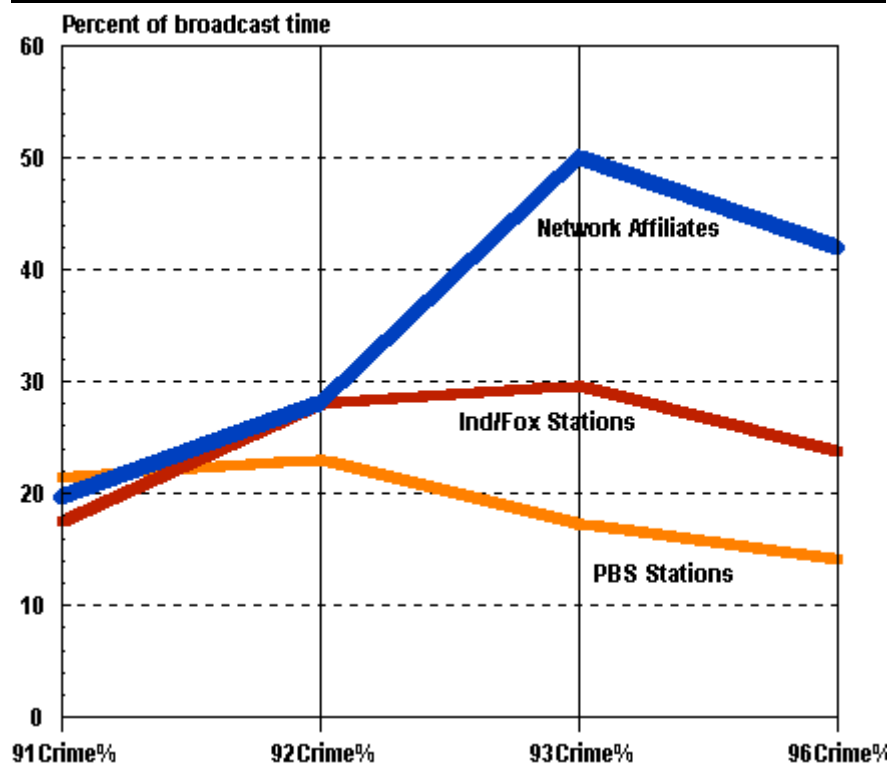
Network affiliates increased their coverage of crime over time while other station types decreased their coverage.

The coverage of crime on the PBS stations, particularly the Wilmington/Philadelphia affiliate, WHYY, also requires some context. WHYY used two production techniques to convey crime stories. The first was the traditional packaged story with the reporter presenting the information as part of the line-up of stories. This technique was used in the small proportion of crime stories. The second technique used by WHYY was called by the station “news-in-brief”. These stories were presented on the screen as text on a bulletin board for the viewers to actually read by themselves. These “news-in-brief” blocks appeared where commercial breaks would normally be inserted in the broadcast by a commercial station. They provided the newscast with a visual break between the segments and also offered information to the viewer. The majority of WHYY’s crime stories were delivered in this fashion and they were, by definition, short in duration. Further, they represented a very different way to report crime news to the viewer because “reading” news about crime, with no other visual cues, rendered the crime news much less sensational than other approaches. Consequently, the crime coverage that *did* occur on the PBS stations was qualitatively different than the coverage by the other station types.

Crime Time

Time is always a pre-eminent concern for broadcasts because it is a finite resource. News directors have only a limited supply of the commodity. Therefore, its utilization can tell us very much about what stories are the most valued by the news producers. By that criteria, crime stories were regarded as very valuable to the news directors (Figure 12).

Fig. 12: In general, network affiliates increased the time devoted to crime coverage over time.



The trends that we observed regarding the *content* of stories (see Fig. 11) were also borne out when we looked at the proportion of time that the various station types devoted to crime. The largest increase occurred for the network affiliate stations (from 20% in 1991 to a high of 50% in 1993). Although the proportion of time used for crime stories by the network affiliates decreased in 1996, it was still about twice as much as the crime coverage on the Independent or Fox stations and about three times as much as the coverage on the PBS stations. In short, the network affiliates made very deliberate decisions to spend more content and time on crime stories in their broadcasts.

Covering Other Public Issues

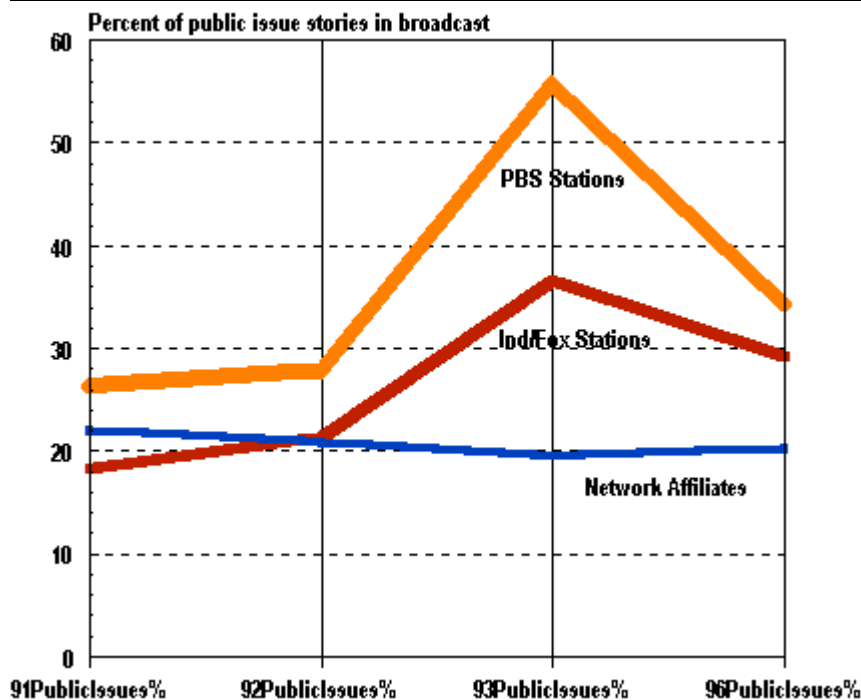
We learned that crime accounted for about one-third of the stories on the broadcasts, more than for any other single topic (see Fig. 1). However, the public issues category (which combined all the other public issues, other than crime) comprised the next most numerous story type. An obvious question was what patterns, if any, were prevalent in the coverage of those stories over time. How did the network affiliates, the Independent/Fox stations and the PBS channels compare regarding that coverage?

Public Issues

The coverage of public issues across the station types was the mirror image of crime coverage (Figure 13). Just as the PBS stations were the least concentrated on crime coverage, they were the most diligent in covering public issues other than crime. Conversely, the network affiliate stations afforded the least coverage to public issues. That was the direct opposite result of the coverage of crime (see Figure 11). Further, the trends revealed that while public issues coverage increased and decreased

for the PBS and Independent and Fox stations, they provided more coverage of public issues in 1996 than they did in 1991. The same could not be said for the network affiliates. Coverage of public issues remained just around the twenty percent range throughout the period and was actually lower in 1996 than in 1991. That is even more remarkable when we considered that the 1991 coverage included the Gulf War stories.

Fig.13: PBS stations consistently covered more public issues stories than the other stations

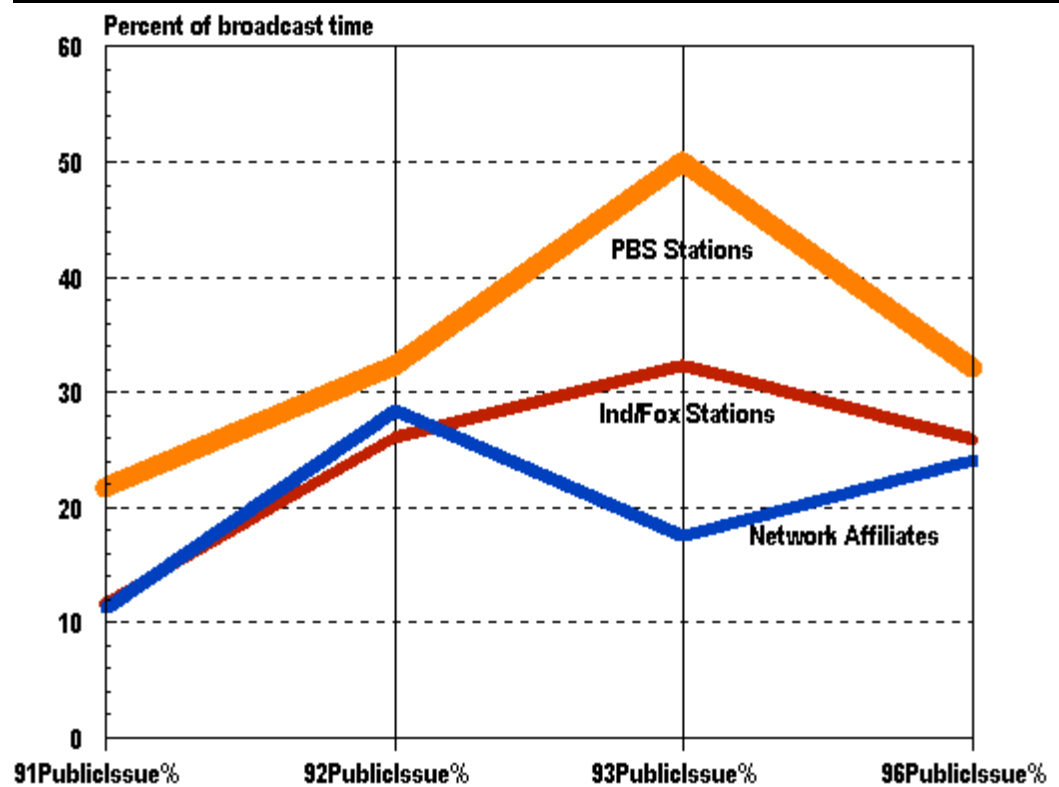


Those stories, predictably, forced other possible stories off of the newscast. So, we could understand the dearth of public issues coverage on those newscasts. However, the Gulf War was no longer part of the news selection mix in the subsequent years and yet, the network affiliates still displayed relatively little interest in public issues stories.

Public Issues Time

The time that the stations devoted to public issues mirrored the proportion of stories that comprised their newscasts (Figure 14). The PBS stations dedicated the largest proportion of their broadcasts' time to public issues throughout the period (from a low of about 22% in 1991 to a high of 50% in 1993). But even in 1991, the PBS stations coverage of

Fig. 14: PBS stations devoted more time to the coverage of public issues than the other stations.



public issues was double that of the network affiliates and the Independent and Fox stations. By 1993, the PBS stations spent about three times as much time on public issues than the network affiliates. While the network affiliates' attention to public issues fluctuated over the period, there was an increase in the time they devoted to public issues by 1996.

What Viewers Saw

We learned much about how the stations in the Baltimore and Philadelphia television markets presented crime to their audiences. There were many salient features about that coverage. Here are three lists that specify the production, content and location characteristics that stood out.

Production

- Crime stories were the dominant story type in both television markets.
- Crime stories occupied the most broadcast time in both TV markets.
- Most crime stories appeared in the first segment of the newscasts, almost twice as often as non-crime stories.
- Most crime stories appeared in a montage along with other crime stories.
- These montage stories were often connected by a “wipe” of the screen as the scene of one story was replaced by another.
- Most crime stories were presented with video that was narrated by the anchor person.

Content

- In both TV markets, most crime stories were court stories.
- Murder was the crime of choice for coverage in both TV markets.
- Individuals were most often the suspects and the victims in the crime stories in both markets.
- Males were the suspects in most stories in both markets.
- The victims were most often female in Baltimore and most often male in Philadelphia.

- The race or ethnicity of the victim was not reported or not known in the significant majority of stories in both markets.
- The suspect and the victim were strangers in most crime stories in both TV markets.
- Adults victimized adults in most crime stories in both TV markets.
- Males victimized males in most Philadelphia stories; males victimized females in most Baltimore stories.

Location

- Philadelphia stations reported urban crime; Baltimore channels focused on suburban crime.
- For the crime event and police stories, Baltimore stations focused on murder twice as often as the channels in Philadelphia.

Crime stories were *the* most conspicuous part of the local news broadcasts in both Baltimore and Philadelphia. Further, they were a prominent feature over time. The coverage of crime by the stations was

The audiences in both Baltimore and Philadelphia were told essentially the same story—that random, violent crime was a structural feature of American society.

very consistent with Reuven Frank's prescription (cited earlier) for a news story. 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 and, by extension, the nature of crime and justice in general. The

audiences in both Baltimore and Philadelphia were told essentially the same story—that random, violent crime was a 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.

Why is it so?

Having examined the treatment of crime on local television news broadcasts in Baltimore and Philadelphia, an obvious question is why it looks the way it does. What factors influenced this coverage? We 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 portray for themselves in the community. Elayne Rapping suggests that local news, carrying out part of the social role of television, provides a “lost sense of community integrity in a fragmented world”.³³ 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. Further, the stations tell viewers that they can get all of the information necessary for good living by tuning in to whatever “watch” is appropriate—health “watch”, consumer “watch”, travel “watch”, etc.

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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.³⁴ Of course, that sense of isolation and vulnerability is all but assured by news coverage that is fixated on violent crime.

The idea that local television functions as neighbor brings us to the second point of the juncture: news consumers use crime news as a symbolic referent to make sense of the world around them.³⁵ That is, the crime news that is reported by local television 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 referent 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 a personal, not as a political, 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.

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The third point that may help to explain the face of local television news is a realization that it is market-driven. 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".³⁶ 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, *infotainment*. 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".³⁷ 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 where 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 disingenuous. Indeed, crime is part

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.

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).

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 entertainment became the overriding criterion 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.

What to do?

The pictures of crime and justice in the newscasts painted the cognitive map of the communities in Baltimore and Philadelphia, just as they do in every television market. They suggested that there was little that could be done about either the coverage of crime or crime in general. But that is not true. There are steps that can be taken to influence that coverage directly and other steps that *must* be taken to change the way we, as citizens, “consume” the news. We’ll look at the coverage first and then we’ll turn our attention to how we “watch” television news.

TV Stations

The argument is constantly advanced that television stations are making too much profit with their local newscasts to change them; that the crime and mayhem they offer generates ratings. To a large extent, that is true. News directors and producers are extremely reluctant to change the criteria that drive the news selection process, even though the newscasts that are the result of that process present a very skewed picture of reality.

KVUE’s Criteria

Does action need to be taken?

Is there an immediate threat to safety?

Is there a threat to children?

Does the crime have significant community impact?

Does the story lend itself to a crime-prevention effort?

There are, however, several television stations that have changed their approach to the coverage of crime and justice.³⁸ One in particular, KVUE, the ABC affiliate in Austin, Texas, has developed criteria that govern whether or not a crime story is presented on a broadcast. They are:

1. Does action need to be taken?
2. Is there an immediate threat to safety?
3. Is there a threat to children?
4. Does the crime have significant community impact?
5. Does the story lend itself to a crime-prevention effort?

The application of these criteria is taken seriously and each criterion must be met in order for the story to make the newscast. At last count, KVUE has lost none of its audience.

Citizens v. Consumers

For the most part, the viewers of television news have watched it uncritically. We have taken for granted that what we have been shown and told has enough truth to justify our trust. That is understandable when we consider the effort that news organizations expend to keep us tuned in. The media's explicit promises of quality ("And that's the way it is"; "All the news that's fit to print.") that we mentioned at the beginning of this report are only the most repeated litanies.

The media create a news product that exhibits excitement and drama that they "sell" to us and then they, in turn, "sell" us to advertisers. That is how the media are organized in the United States. They are private firms who must be profitable in order to stay in business. In this arrangement, it is no surprise that the media need consumers for their programs, rather than citizens. But consumership and citizenship are very different roles. Registering a consumer preference for a particular media "product" is as easy as switching from one magazine or one channel to

The media create a news product that exhibits excitement and drama that they "sell" to us and then they, in turn, "sell" us to advertisers.

another. That may be true in the broad scheme of things. However, that is not true when it comes to local television news. Our examination has just shown us that the television stations in Baltimore and Philadelphia, except for the PBS channels, reported crime with a remarkable

sameness. No matter which newscast a viewer saw, the crime story mantra was identical...mostly murder, mostly at the top of the show, mostly personal, etc. Given that condition, registering a consumer preference was rather limited. Yes, viewers did have "choices" among the channels. They just did not have any alternatives.

So, what do we do? We suggest here that the fundamental "alternative" is not among media outlets. Rather, the viewers of television news must adopt an alternative role, that of citizen. It is a role that requires deliberation and reflection. But, how is that role manifested when watching local television news? It begins with a substitution. Citizens must substitute *their* criteria for a good news story for those of the news producers. We can do that by exercising a critical pause in our viewing habits. In that pause we must apply a test, the same test, to every news

story that we see. It's a simple and straightforward question: "What makes this story news?" If the story passes the test, i.e., it offers us useful information, we can decide what it says about the world, how it will influence our views and, maybe, our actions. If the story fails the test, then the response is obvious. We should dismiss it.

This is a prescription for active viewing that most of us do not practice. But, it is a forceful way to hold the newscasts to a standard, if only our own individual norm. As we apply the test consistently in our viewing, we will become less consumers and more citizens and we will learn the extent to which the media's promises of quality match our own expectations.

Endnotes

1. Center for Media and Public Affairs, Media Monitor, Volume X, Number 1, January/February 1996.
2. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The Optimism Gap Grows: Politics, Morality, Entitlements Sap Confidence. Washington, D.C., January 1997, 5.
3. Source: Gallop Polls reported in Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1995. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1997), Table 2-1, 128.
4. Source: Executive Office of the President, Office of National Drug Control Policy, Consult with America: A Look at How Americans View the Country's Drug Problem. (Washington, D.C.: Office of National Drug Control Policy, 1996), pp 22-25.
5. Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1995. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1997), Table 2.45, p 165.
6. Source: Poll conducted April 6-9, 1995 by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press (now the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press) reported in Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1995. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 1997), Table 2.2, p. 129.
7. Source: All Things Considered, National Public Radio. Texas Group Offers Bounty for Killing Criminals. Transcript #1767, Segment #10, February 23, 1995.
8. Source: The Henry J. Kaiser Foundation/Center for Media and Public Affairs. Assessing Local Television News Coverage of Health Issues. Washington, D.C., 1998, p. 2.
9. Source: Newseum Survey on Attitudes Toward the Media, January 1997.
10. Source: Newseum Survey of Attitudes Toward the Media, January 1997.
11. Source: Newseum Survey of Attitudes Toward the Media, January 1997.
12. See W. Lance Bennett. News: The Politics of Illusion, Third Edition (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996).
13. Bennett. News: The Politics of Illusion, Third Edition, p. 41.
14. Bennett. News: The Politics of Illusion, Third Edition, p. 41.
15. The final coding categories were developed over a six-month period. The stories were randomly assigned to the four coders for the project to reduce systematic error. The reliability of all of the included variables was 82%.

¹⁶ At the time of the 1991-1993 broadcasts, Channel 2 was owned by the TCI Cablevision. On February 13, 1996 TCI Cablevision sold its Delaware operations to Suburban Cable.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Audience size is indicated by two units of measurement: a rating, the percentage of all households in the market with a television that are tuned to the program; a share, the percentage of all households in the market with a television in use that are tuned to the program. The Philadelphia market consists of 2,675,400 households with televisions, therefore one ratings point, or one percent of the total, represents 26,754 households.

The ratings for 1996 are reported here and they represent averages for the period in which the data were gathered. Channel 6 captured a huge portion of the audience with a rating of about 22 throughout the period, representing 588,000 households. That rating translated into a share of 38, meaning that thirty-eight percent of the households with televisions in use in the Philadelphia market during the 6:00-6:30 p.m. time period were tuned to Channel 6. Channel 3 (KYW) and Channel 10 (WCAU) had average ratings of 6, thereby reaching about 160,00 households. In stark contrast, Channel 23 (NJN) produced a rating of less than 1 with an estimated audience of just 7,000 households. Further, Channel 12 (WHYY) garnered a rating of about 1 representing about 26,000 households during the 5:30-6:00 p.m. time slot. The broadcasts for Channels 17 and 29 (both one hour) took place at 10 p.m. Their ratings were 3 and 6, respectively; households were 80,000 and 179,000, respectively. Source: A.C. Nielsen ratings for the Philadelphia market or Dominant Market Area for February/March 1996.

Channel 2's ratings are somewhat difficult to discern because the A.C. Nielsen ratings service folds their ratings into the combined ratings for all cable programs for any time slot. Further, we must remember that Channel 2 is operated by Suburban Cablevision and is available only to its 150,000 subscribers in New Castle County, Delaware, the largest and northern-most county in the state. Suburban Cablevision was previously owned by TCI Cablevision and TCI had conducted its own surveys to determine the size of its audience for the 6:00 p.m. newscast. Based on the latest information about audience size, the Manager of Programming Operations estimated that, on average, the Channel 2 newscast is seen daily in 15,000 households. Source: Author's discussion with TCI's Manager of Programming Operations, January 4, 1995. These data indicate the vast difference in the size of the audiences that each of the newscasts in this study reaches.

¹⁹ These data reflect the average ratings for the newscasts of the Baltimore stations for the month of February 1996. There are 980,310 TV households in the Baltimore DMA and one rating point equals 9,803 TV households. The ratings and share information for each station is as follows: WJZ (CBS), 12 rating and 21 share; WBAL (NBC), 10 rating and 18 share; WMAR (ABC), 8 rating and 14 share; WBFF (Fox), 7 rating and 11 share. Source: Author's communication with Nielsen Media Research, October 23, 1998.

²⁰ The rate of crime that is used here is expressed as the rate of crimes per 100,000 population. For purposes of comparing the prevalence of crime across jurisdictions, in this case Baltimore and Philadelphia, this approach is satisfactory. But, we should be cautious in using that metric to infer other features about crime in any jurisdiction. A crime rate stated for a particular population of 100,000 implies that each of the persons in that population has an equal chance of being victimized by crime. That implication is patently false. We have much evidence that tells us that certain groups in the population are victimized much more than others.

²¹ See for example the findings of Joseph Angotti's examination of broadcasts in eight cities around the country and Frank Gilliam's analysis of local television news coverage in California as reported in: Mark Crispin Miller, *It's A Crime: The Economic Impact of the Local TV News in Baltimore, A Study of Attitudes and Economics*. Project on Media Ownership, New York, 1998.

33. Elaine Rapping, *The Looking Glass World of Nonfiction TV*. (Boston: South End Press, 1987). 46.

Endnotes

34. Elaine Rapping, *The Looking Glass World of Nonfiction TV*. 49.

35. For a discussion of the active role that viewers take in using crime news, see: Richard V. Ericson, "Mass Media, Crime, Law and Justice: An Institutional Approach", *British Journal of Criminology*, (31) 1991.

36. John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994). xii.

37. John H. McManus, *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware*. 197.

38. See: Paul Klite, *Not In The Public Interest* (Denver: Rocky Mountain Media Watch, 1998). Rocky Mountain Media Watch (RMMW) is a non-profit media watchdog group that examines local television news for what it call its "mayhem index", i.e., the proportion of crime, disasters, etc. that is presented. RMMW identified three media organizations (in addition to KVUE) that were commended for "presenting quality programs that provide empowering information to viewers". They were: KTCA, Twin Cities; KTVU, San Francisco and NECN (New England Cable Network), Boston.