Cultivation of fear of Blacks in Las Vegas television news media

Mark Leigh Curry
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CULTIVATION OF FEAR OF BLACKS IN LAS VEGAS

TELEVISION NEWS MEDIA

by

Mark Leigh Curry

Bachelor of Science
University of Nevada, Las Vegas 1999

A thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Communication Studies
Hank Greenspun School of Communication
Greenspun College of Urban Affairs

Graduate College
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ABSTRACT

Cultivation of Fear of Blacks In Las Vegas Television News Media

by

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This study was a content analysis of Las Vegas television news (N = 1,145) and was designed to determine whether the potential exists for media consumers in the Las Vegas market to become fearful due to the overrepresentation of crime committed by Black offenders. One research question and two hypotheses were generated for this study. Research question one asked if there was an inverse relationship existing between media reports of index crimes and actual data offered by the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety, and was supported. There was partial support for hypothesis one. Results indicated that Latinos were overrepresented and that Blacks were underrepresented in Las Vegas television news. There was no support for hypothesis two; Whites were overrepresented as criminal offenders. A discussion of findings, implications, and suggestions for future research follow.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Television news can have a significant influence on audiences. According to Morgan and Signorielli (1990), "Each day, in the average American household, a television set is turned on for over 7 hours" (p. 13). For some viewers, television news serves as the primary source of information and knowledge. Such consumer use of television news has spawned research studies examining the implications arising from heavy exposure to recurrent messages. That is, such heavy viewing may cause viewers to believe that what they see on television reflects the society in which they live. For these viewers, "The media provide information about events that are significant to [them], and in one sense paint a portrait of society" (Chermak, 1994, p. 96).

Previous research suggests that the structure of television news reveals an overrepresentation of reports of violent crimes in society (e.g., Dixon & Linz, 2000; Lowry, Nio & Leitner, 2003). As some theorists suggest, the implications resulting from "long-term exposure to television, in which frequent violence is virtually inescapable, tends to cultivate the image of a relatively mean and dangerous world" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 185). In other words, due to the amount of violence seen in television news, media consumers may conclude that the world poses such threats to them. Gerbner's (1998) concept of a mean and
dangerous world becomes evident when taken into consideration with reports of crime in television news. In the minds of heavy media consumers, exaggerated numbers of criminal reports, especially those depicting Blacks as crime offenders, have the potential to associate violent criminal activity with Blacks.

The overrepresentation of crime in television news illustrates Gerbner's (1998) conception of a mean and dangerous world. In the world of television, "Crime is an important news topic, every day" (Chermak, 1994, p. 95; emphasis in original). Each day, news sources offer consumers the latest reports about events taking place in their society. Homicides and robberies set the scene for approximately 80% of crime stories during some newscasts (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981). Westfeldt and Wicker (1998) discovered in their research of 102 local television news shows in 52 metropolitan areas that for "a typical day for local television news," 26.9 percent of airtime involved crime (p. 14). When compared to other issues such as human interests and the environment (2.0% and 2.5% respectively), the exaggerated amount of crime reporting becomes apparent. As a result of such practices, "Anyone interested in learning about crime from the mass media is treated to examples, incidents, and scandals but at such a level of description that it is impossible for them to develop an analytical comprehension of crime" (Sherizen, 1978, p. 204). In other words, the mass media do not offer information in a way such that the consumer can contextualize those messages within a broader scheme of crime in society.
Because of the supposed informative nature of news programs, the audience assumes that there is an inherent truth that news reports represent the world outside. Chermak (1994) explained that although "the media provide information about events that are significant" (p. 96) to society, that same information may lead the audience to the wrong conclusions. Most viewers who do not think critically about what they are watching may conclude that crime is increasing, even though empirical data report the contrary. Studies suggest that crime in America, in fact, is not as out of control as the media would have their audience believe (Westfeldt & Wicker, 1998). Furthermore, the "available evidence shows that reported crime rates are declining" (Westfeldt & Wicker, 1998, p. 1; emphasis in original), not increasing. One obvious consequence of such crime reporting practices may be that the audience will fear being victimized by a Black offender.

Research indicates that crime is the most prominent topic on television news, so much so that some news programs devote a large percentage of their news reports to stories about crime. Certain societal implications, such as the fear of crime and the fear of being victimized, arise when mass media research (e.g., Duwe, 2000; Lowry, Nio & Leitner, 2003) finds that crime news reporting does not reflect the amount of crime that actually exists.

Television offers an indirect connection with the society in which media consumers live. However, with respect to criminal depictions in television news, that society appears different when compared to the empirical data of criminal activity. In their study of crime in television news media, Lowry, Nio
and Leitner (2003) found that "from 1993 through 1995, the networks devoted more stories to crime than to any other topic" (p. 64). However, when compared with law enforcement statistics, they reported that "the amount of crime coverage bears little resemblance to reality" (p. 63).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine criminal reports that appear in newscasts in the Las Vegas area to determine whether media trends in that city reflect trends found in other studies on the overrepresentation of Black crime offenders in television news. Additionally, representations of minority (e.g., African Americans and Latinos) criminal index crime offenses will be studied in relation to index crimes in the Las Vegas area. A content analysis of the four major television affiliates will be conducted and content from a four-week sample of programming from each affiliate will be studied and coded. The results of this study will be used to test hypotheses based on mass media theories of cultivation in order to ascertain whether the socially constructed reality of Las Vegas media consumers do, in fact, reflect the "mean and dangerous world" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 138) Gerbner posited.

Historical and Contextual Information

During the 1980s, news agencies faced new obstacles in their path to informing the public. Previously, the idea that newscasts operated at a financial deficit was offset with the belief that news organizations were following mandates set forth by the Federal Communications Commission: to serve the public good. However, when certain events came to pass, such as
news media agencies being controlled by conglomerates and having non-news personnel assume control of newsrooms, the face of television news forever changed. The late Roone Arledge, former ABC Sports Division President, was influential in fomenting change in the television news industry. Arledge, who "put news on the air in non-traditional formats and at non-traditional times" (Tedesco, para. 7), garnered high ratings, which translated into increased profits for television stations.

News organizations are rated in terms of the number of people watching a newscast (ratings). They can lure advertisers to pay for a "prime advertising spot" during news broadcasts if they promise the reward of high consumer viewership. Each spot earns revenue for the station. News organizations need to convince advertisers that a certain number of viewers, who fit within a specific target market, will be in front of the television watching their station. In essence, audience members are sold to advertising agencies and the "cultural environment in which we live becomes the byproduct of marketing" (Gerbner, 1998, p. 176). Indeed, "Crime stories provide real-life drama and entertainment that can stir a host of emotions, making such stories more appealing to the public" (Chermak, 1994, p. 106). More appeal translates into more viewers. Therefore, "...the news media are compelled to market a crime product that sells" (Duwe, 2000, p. 390) due to its entertaining allure.

One of the most popular trends in the television news industry is the entertainment format. In these cases, "The drive for audience ratings pushes local news organizations to favor an 'action news' format" (Gilliam & Iyengar,
2000, p. 560) that is more appealing to media consumers. This obvious preference for entertainment rather than information is a choice made by news outlets. Unfortunately, “The television network doesn’t care which stories it broadcasts because its reward is not in the telling, but in how many people it can persuade to listen and how long it can keep their attention” (Twitchell, 1992, p. 206). As a result of such ideologies, “the press claims no responsibility for the world that it displays” (Fallows, 1996, p. 5) to its viewers.

One way to explain these trends is to understand commercial logic or commercialism (Althiede, 2002, p. 46), which is the concept that the market drives the news media. The change of news formats during the 1980s signified a markedly different television format for news agencies. Conglomeration and a financial focus initiated a profound move from the informative nature of television news to a format that is entertainment-based. The *raison d'être* of television changed from the traditional “talking head,” where an anchor person disseminates the news in a relatively bland format. Present-day formats of television news offer viewers a host of fast paced images, digital video effects and elaborate newsroom sets that appeal to the viewer’s insatiable eye. Connected to commercial logic is media logic, that dictates the use of images over content. Such use of images explains how “Crime dominates other news because [of] its emphasis on vivid picture and emotional personal accounts” (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000, p. 572) rather than information. Such use of the medium serves to reinforce commercial logic by appealing to the viewer’s sensory gratifications.
An obvious result of the use of media (images) and commercial (entertainment) logic is the blurring of the lines that once existed between news and entertainment. Some feel this conflation of the previously dichotomous entities of information and entertainment, presently known as “infotainment,” begins to discredit the news industry. Althiede (2002) pointed out that viewers, at times, cannot distinguish between what is considered “real” news, and entertainment news. For example, it was not surprising that “a majority of American viewers thought that an entertainment program, America’s Most Wanted, featuring dramatic reenactments of brutal crimes, was a news show” (p. 46-47). This inherently dangerous maneuver demonstrates one of the implications of such entertainment formats in television news. Indeed, if some viewers believe shows like America’s Most Wanted are, in fact, genuine news programs, then viewers may have the potential to blur the already vague lines that exist between entertainment and information.

Unfortunately, some audience members may lose sight of the fact that the news media are businesses and not necessarily concerned with providing the most accurate information available. In reality, the nature of a television newsroom requires fast and concise “packages” that do not lend themselves to either intense research or intense systematic processing by media consumers. An obvious question that arises concerns the effect of long term exposure to themes such as the fear being victimized by Black offenders.

Violent crime is not as prominent in our society as news reports may suggest. Crime statistics acquired from the Department of Justice reflect a
declining trend for reported violent crimes in the past few years. Statistically, property crimes comprise the most conventional crimes committed by offenders in the United States. Other more violent and sensational crimes, such as murder, statistically rank among the least frequent crimes committed, even though they are the most prominently portrayed crimes in the media. This declining trend in national crime is not mirrored by the number of crimes reported by media agencies.

Some studies indicate this inverse relationship existing between crime reports and actual crime committed in society illustrating that “the news is not an accurate reflection of the real world of crime” (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000, p. 562). Further research shows that the number of crimes committed by Blacks is overrepresented as well. Studies indicate that “Blacks were more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news” (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 142). Taken together, the decline of nationally reported crimes, the overrepresentation of crime in the news media, and the overrepresentation of Black offenders, denote a tendency to single out racial out-groups in news reports.

The following discussion serves to put United States criminal activity into context. Each year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation summarizes national crime statistics and publishes them in the Uniform Crime Report (UCR). The UCR is broken down to what are known as index crimes, which “include the violent crimes of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, and the property crimes of burglary, larceny-
theft, and motor vehicle theft" (Department of Justice, 2001, p. 10). From this report, criminal justice policy is made. For the year 2000, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported more than 11.6 million crime index offenders (Department of Justice, p. 10). That is, for every 100,000 United States inhabitants, there were over 4,000 offenses (p. 10). These statistics may be interpreted as demonstrating a significantly high rate of violent crime offenses. However, when compared to data from prior years, that seemingly high rate reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigation actually reflects an overall decrease in crime over the last seven years. For example, the total number of reported index crimes in 1995 totaled more than 13.8 million offenses (Department of Justice, 1996, p. 5); a significant decrease when compared to 11.8 million in 2001 (Department of Justice, 2001, p. 10), just a few years later. As Gerbner (1998) explained, “While FBI statistics have clear limitations, they indicate that in any year less than 1% of people in the United States are victims of criminal violence” (p. 184-185). Other research on violent crimes (such as murder) supports the suggested decline in the nation’s crime rate. In 1998, Westfeldt and Wicker found, “…the national murder rate has fallen by 20% since 1990” (p. 2). The asymmetrical nature of the data indicates a substantial difference when compared to the high frequency of violent crimes in television news.

Overrepresentation of Black Crime

The final component of this discussion examines the disparate nature existing within crime reports and actual crime and provides the foundation for
an even more problematic situation: the overrepresentation of crime committed by Black offenders. For the purposes of this study, the overrepresentation of crime refers to the number of criminal reports in television news as compared with the number of criminal reports found in law enforcement statistics.

As a result of the role the mass media play in constructing a viewer's social reality, the media have "evolved in present-day America to become the dominant player in the symbolic reality realm, and, by default, in the subjective reality construction process" (Surette, 1994, p. 133). As a result, audience members may begin to construct their own reality and may draw incorrect conclusions not only about the rate at which offenders commit certain crimes, but also about the identity of the offenders. Through such means as media cultivation, consumers of television news may come to understand that most criminal offenders in society are committed by members of social out-groups. Research that suggests "Blacks were more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news" (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 142) may lead consumers to erroneous perceptions of criminal offenders. That is, due to the high frequency of Black male portrayals of crime in television news, one obvious conclusion is that Black males commit crime at a higher rate than their White counterparts.

If empirical data revealed Blacks were the offenders of most of the violent crime, then part of the controversy surrounding the excessive amount of violent crime coverage committed by Black males may be, in part, justified. Statistics from the federal agencies may help put this debate into context. Data gathered
from the 2001 UCR seem to provide support for the idea that the majority of offenders are male (82.7%) and adults (84.6%). However, the same report reveals that offenders are “most often white” (60.2%) (Department of Justice, p. 10). Arrestee demographic data are further supported by statistical data offered by the Bureau of Prisons concerning federal prison populations. These reports reveal that the majority of inmates are White (56.5%), followed by Black (40.4%) (2003, Inmates by Race sect.), and finally, Hispanic (32.0%) (2003, Inmates by Ethnicity sect.). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), as of 2002, Whites comprised 74% of the population, followed by Latinos (23.9%), then Blacks (8%). What these statistics reveal is a dissimilar association between what the mass media depict about Blacks, and what statistical data reveal. This relationship illustrates how “Blacks are clearly overrepresented as lawbreakers on news programs” (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 151).

Summary

Considering this overview of findings, the implications for fear of crime and further, the fear of Black crime offenders, are staggering. Heavy media consumers exposed to a disproportionate amount of crime news may associate unwarranted feelings of fear being victimized by a Black offender. The unfortunate idea remains that because, “Over time, heavy television entertainment watchers tend to accumulate more television entertainment memories than do light viewers” (Shapiro & Lang, 1991, p. 698), those consumers may tend to associate their memories of news events about racial out-groups with the violent crimes they are said to commit. Generally, media

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consumers view television newscasts in order to get a sense of the world outside – the reality that exists beyond the safety of their homes. As some research suggests, such biased reports may serve as the foundation for a viewer’s socially constructed reality. A more detailed discussion of a viewer’s socially constructed reality can be found in Chapter Two.

This chapter offered a brief introduction concerning the implications of the practices existing within the mass media. Exaggerated reports of crime coupled with exaggerated reports of crime committed by Black offenders, generates potentially subversive depictions of this racial minority and may cause some viewers to fear the possibility of their own victimization. As a result, the more alluring versions of crime reports depicting a Black offender become popular images on the screens of American television. The unfortunate effect is that some audience members may have the tendency to process such images and may base their beliefs on what the evening news disseminates. Such practices begin to demonstrate marked effects with relation to how some viewers perceive this out-group.

Along with the discussion concerning a media consumer’s socially constructed reality, Chapter Two will also review applicable scholarship in the area of creating fear and the overrepresentation of crime committed by Blacks. Included is a discussion concerning the tendency for individuals to extend such beliefs beyond the borders of the television screen and on to other areas such as criminal proceedings. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology behind the study including measurement and coding of data, and Chapter Four will
discuss the results of the study. Finally, Chapter Five will be devoted to a
discussion of the results and offer new means of fomenting research in this
field.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter synthesizes the scholarship pertinent to the areas of research mentioned in Chapter One and begins with a discussion concerning the use of media as a basis for social reality. The discussion will then turn to the idea of how messages of fear may serve as the foundation for social reality. In later sections of this chapter, research in the area of the overrepresentation of crime committed by Blacks will be joined with the previous two discussions. The combination of these three concepts forms the basis for the argument posited in this study— that the overrepresentation of crime, particularly crime committed by Blacks, has the potential for constructing a viewer's social reality founded in fear. In the chapter summary, the implications of fear-based realities will be discussed by contextualizing the underlying societal problems associated with such media practices.

Social Construction of Reality

Lowry, Nio and Leitner (2003) posited, "Media scholars have known for more than half a century that audience perceptions of reality can at times outweigh the effects of reality itself. In other words, people's perceptions of reality based upon the mass media are sometimes more powerful" (p. 61) than
the world that truly exists. That is, the ideologies cultivated by recurrent messages within the mass media provide a more believable and entertaining socially-constructed reality, than lackluster factual events.

Empirical studies support this argument. Shapiro and Lang (1991), for example, posited a model that explained that a viewer's social reality may reflect images and ideologies offered by media outlets. The authors stated, “contextual information typically associated with television may be systematically similar to contextual information associated with memories of real events” (p. 686). That is, the tendency exists for misconstruing actual events with fictitious events. They went on to note that the processes by which media consumers contextualize a given situation, whether fictitious or real, may have some bearing on future behavior. To explain, their model suggested that in cases where media consumers were exposed to a large number of fictional shootings, “the more fictional shootings in memory, the more times a fictional shooting will be inappropriately identified as real when a person is engaged in mental procedures based on event memory” (p. 698). The authors went on to say that, “…in aggregate, such errors would result in a small shift to a view of reality in which more shootings occur” (p. 698). In other words, some viewers may tend to exhibit behavior based on prior interactions with mass media events, whether fictitious or real. A viewer’s memory of fictitious and real events may blend together to form one attitude toward that event. If such processing takes place, then there may be a tendency for viewers to harbor memories and emotions attached to media images seen in television news.
Creating Fear

As the previous discussion asserted, some viewers have the tendency to believe what they see in the mass media is real. Understanding that news reports have been known to exaggerate the amount of crime existing in society, then a media consumer’s reality may be based on inflated reports of crime occurring in the world outside. In his discussion concerning fear of crime, Surette (1994) illustrated how the predator icon exists in the mass media. Surette contended that the predator icon represents “a largely unquestioned set of beliefs about the world.” He further explained, “Media content, dominated by the predator icon, has been credited as the single greatest source of fear of crime” (p. 143) by individuals. While this does not mean all audience members may become more fearful due to media messages, it does mean that some audience members will become more fearful because of what they witness on television.

Lowry, Nio and Lietner (2003) found that “from 1993 through 1995, the networks devoted more stories to crime than to any other topic” (p. 64). They believed that, “To some extent, then, network TV crime news had indeed become the American public’s virtual crime reality as it influences the public fear agenda” (p. 72). The power held by the mass media has the potential to alter the perceptions of reality held by some heavy viewers. Surette (1994) concluded, “All told, the available statistics suggest that the empirical reality of predator crime is a serious but not representative component of the crime picture” (p. 140) in the social environment. “Fear reflects people’s individual
vulnerability to crime and its harmful consequences, risks in their neighborhood, and their personal victimization experiences and those reported by their families and friends" (Skogan, 1998, p. 119). As Gerbner (1998) suggested, heavy consumers may conclude that the world is, in fact, a mean and dangerous place.

Overrepresenting Black Crime

The final component of this discussion deals with the problems which may arise due to the types of crimes reported by television news. This section will discuss media practices concerning news stories dealing with crimes committed by Blacks and how some individuals may perceive that this group poses a serious threat.

In their study of late evening newscasts from 1994, Romer, Jamieson and de Cocteau (1998) wanted to find out if Blacks were overrepresented in news stories about crime. The researchers were also interested in learning if Blacks were more likely to be presented as perpetrators of crime rather than as persons reacting to or suffering from crime (p. 286). They explained, "According to the discourse explanation, journalists reporting to largely White audiences form a problem behavior committed by persons of color as intergroup conflict, making such stories more newsworthy than comparable stories about White persons" (p. 288). Focusing on violent crime, they "reasoned that if persons of color were blamed for crime, their presentation in crime stories would primarily accentuate their role as perpetrators rather than as victims or other roles related to the effects of crime" (p. 289). With their
intercoder reliability “greater than 90%” (p. 292), their results indicated that there was a considerable number of Blacks portrayed as “perpetrators rather than bystanders, experts, or other participants” (p. 298). Conversely, they found that “viewers were more likely to see White actors presented as victims and non-White actors as perpetrators” (p. 298). They concluded, “Reporting tended to accentuate the victimization of White persons at the hands of non-white persons” (p. 298). Their study illustrated how a heavy consumer may conclude that a true threat of Black crime exists in society due to the amount of reports focusing on index crimes.

Dixon and Linz (2000) took a similar approach to that of Romer et al. (1998) when they attempted to discover whether news programs presented “crime in such a way as to perpetuate ‘misrepresentations’ or ‘distortions’ of African American and Latino citizens’ propensity toward criminality in society” (p. 132). An important aspect of their study, was to “measure whether television news has a tendency to distort the contributions of Whites as guardians of order in society by representing them as police officers or other defenders of law” (p. 132) as opposed to perpetrators of violent crimes. Essentially, they searched for instances where Blacks and Latinos were overrepresented as criminals in crime news stories and where Whites were portrayed as guardians (i.e., law enforcement agents). Dixon and Linz believed their study was the first to utilize “the cultivation hypothesis, an ethnic blame discourse, and social cognitive theories of stereotyping [to] predict that White viewers would come to cognitively link lawbreaking behaviors with African Americans and Latinos as a
group if they were overrepresented as criminals on television news" (p. 132). Their sample consisted of all news programs from Los Angeles and Orange Counties (p. 137) for a 20-week period. From that model, they were able to construct a “7-day composite week of news programming” (p. 138). Coder consistency for their study “was quite good, given the complexity of the task and the number of coders involved” (p. 140). Their results found that “Blacks were more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news” (p. 142). In cases where “only felons (e.g., murderers) were included in the analysis, Blacks were almost two and a half times more likely to be portrayed as felons than Whites” (p. 142).

A third component of the study predicted “that the distribution of perpetrators of crime by race on television news would be inconsistent with the distribution of arrests in crime reports by race” (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 143). The researchers utilized “chi-square statistics to determine whether these percentages were significantly different. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests” (p. 143). Their results indicated a dramatic difference between reports on arrest rates by race and those portrayed in television news. Blacks, for example, showed the greatest disparity with a 16% difference where arrest rates were 21% and television representations of perpetrators was 37%. The authors found a similar trend with regard to the portrayals of White actors as “guardians.”

This study illustrated the tendency for some viewers to believe that Black individuals commit crime at a higher rate (16%) than exists in actual law
enforcement data. What is also evident from this study is the possibility that due to this recurrent pattern of discrepancies in crime reporting, viewers will come to believe that fewer White individuals commit crime.

Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) contended that local television news followed a pattern, or “script.” They assumed that viewers may come away from their television news experiences with the sense that not only is most crime violent, but that it involves a “presence of a particular suspect” (p. 560). Each news story “requires a regular ‘cast’ of characters, the most prominent of which is the suspect” (p. 560). Gilliam and Iyengar performed a content analysis of the “Los Angeles television news market” (p. 562). Out of the “3014 news stories on crime during 1996 and 1997,” they found that “2492 (83%) were about violent crime” (p. 562). Similar to other research findings mentioned in this review, the authors found a bifurcation between the crimes committed in the area, and the reports generated by the news media. For example, “The crime of murder, which accounts for less than 1 percent of all crime in Los Angeles County, was the focus of 17 percent of crime stories in the newscasts sampled” (p. 562). Their data also provided a substantial finding in that “the number of murder stories (510) is equivalent to the total number of nonviolent crime stories (522) during the period sampled” (p. 562). Similar to the findings of Dixon and Linz (2000), this study also found exaggerated reports of minority crime publicized by news agencies. They found, “Minorities accounted for 56 percent of all suspects and 59 percent of suspects in violent crime cases” (p. 562). Statistics concerning White suspects were markedly different. The authors stated, “The
comparable figures for white suspects were 44 percent and 41 percent, respectively" (p. 562). They concluded that "minorities are more likely to be depicted in the role of the suspect" (p. 562). In other words, there is a disproportionate nature with respect to crime news and crime statistics that conveys that Blacks are committing most of the violent crime. Gilliam and Iyengar triangulated their study by employing an experiment of "2331 residents of the Los Angeles metropolitan area" (p. 564). They believed that prior research methodologies suffered from inherent problems stating that college students and experiments were not suitable for comparison with the "real world" (p. 563). They ran four experiments involving crime news stories. Three of the experiments used race as a variable (i.e., Black, White, or no race identified) and the fourth experiment used no crime story at all. After watching the 15-minute videotaped local newscast the participants were asked a series of questions, one of which was designed to tap into their "beliefs about the attributes of particular racial/ethnic groups" (p. 564). The analysis showed that "over 60 percent of the respondents who watched the story with no reference to a perpetrator falsely recalled having seen a perpetrator. Such responses are indicative of the nature and possibility of a socially-constructed world of fear. This study found that individuals falsely report seeing a criminal in news reports. What this may mean is that media consumers are cultivated to believe that criminals are depicted in television news stories. Even more striking, in 70 percent of these cases, the perpetrator was identified as African-American" (p. 564). Indeed, these results suggested there is evidence to support the
tendency to believe that Blacks commit a disproportionately large amount of
violent crime in society.

While not specifically mentioning the script that Gilliam and Iyengar (2000)
discussed in their study, Oliver and Fonash (2002) found that certain
associations are made with respect to the types of crimes and the types of
criminals who commit them. The crux of their study concerned "the association
of minorities and crime" (p. 137) and how it "revolves around the idea that the
stereotyping of persons of color can lead to any individuals being mistakenly
identified as criminals – but particularly if they fit the 'profile'" (p. 137). It was
this assumption that served as the driving force behind their research. They
examined "Whites' mistaken identification of White and Black individuals as
criminal suspects pictured in newspaper crime stories" (p. 138) and believed
that "Although there are potentially limitless ways in which readers may
process or remember news, research in social cognition or person perception
provides a basic theoretical framework for understanding individuals' memory
of crime and race-related news information" (p. 138-139). They hypothesized,
"Misidentifications of individuals as criminals will reflect greater same-race than
across-race errors," that "Same-race misidentifications will be greater for
photographs of Blacks than Whites" and that the "Misidentification will be
greater for photographs of Blacks than of Whites, and particularly so for violent
crime stories" (p. 143). The researchers asked whether or not "self-reported
racial prejudice [will] be positively associated with greater misidentifications of
Black as criminal suspects, and particularly so for violent crime stories" (p.
Their sample consisted of 60 undergraduate students. The entire sample was White because "the focus of this research concerned White racism toward Blacks" (p. 144). Phase one dealt with background questionnaires, which included items that "reflect a general tendency to blame Blacks' social problems on perceived shortcomings of Blacks, such as lack of respect, laziness, and family instability" (p. 144). The second phase, conducted about two weeks after the final collection of the questionnaires (p. 144), consisted of giving the participants approximately 5 minutes to read short news stories and to answer short questions germane to each story. The two analyses employed $t$ tests and showed that "individuals' memory of photographs of criminal suspects in the news can result in misidentifications of individuals never pictured" (p. 150). The authors found that misidentifications did exist and did not appear random, but rather reflected systematic patterns that were consistent with research on social cognition and research concerning stereotypes of crime and race (p. 150) making race a rather significant point of contention. The authors concluded, "the mistaken identification of Blacks as violent criminals appeared to be equally likely across levels of racial attitudes" (p. 151).

These arguments lead to the belief that due to the influence of the mass media, some viewers may base their behavior and perceptions on images propagated by the mass media. While the argument can be made that such beliefs mainly pertain to the fictitious world of television, other research tends
to suggest that these perceptions extend beyond a media consumer’s experience to areas such as the county’s court system.

As mentioned earlier, perceptions of Blacks do not seem to be germane to a single television experience. Research suggests some viewers may harbor certain feelings toward a specific race due to both real and fictitious messages within the mass media. What may result are perceptions of Blacks based on inaccurate experiences. Fujioka (1999) provided a useful vantage point in discussing the impression that African-Americans had on Japanese international students who experienced indirect contact with Blacks via the mass media. The researcher noted that the study looked at effects for individuals with limited exposure to African-Americans in an otherwise culturally homogeneous environment. Fujioka’s purpose was to “examine effects of vicarious contact via television on stereotypes of African Americans among White and Japanese international college students” (p. 52). The researcher hypothesized “that the less contact a group has with African Americans, the more television will influence their perceptions of African Americans” (p. 52). Particularly, Fujioka’s study “test[ed] whether, in addition to direct interracial contact, vicarious contact with African Americans (through television) affects respondents’ perceptions of African Americans” (p. 54). The author went on to assert that, “It further assume[d] that vicarious contact [was] more influential for those individuals who lack or have limited direct contact with African Americans than it is for those who do have frequent contact” (p. 54). Employing the theoretical frameworks of cultivation theory as well as social cognitive theory,
Fujioka conducted “A self-administered survey questionnaire [that] was distributed to 83 Japanese international college students (44.6% male; 55.4% female; 18.1% Intensive American Language Center Students) and 166 White (Anglo) students (43.4% male; 56.6% female) who were enrolled in an introductory mass communication class at a public university in the northwest” (p. 58). Fujioka’s “study tested the hypotheses using structural equation analysis” (p. 61), where the dependent variable was the student’s stereotypes and the independent variable the vicarious contact. The hypothesized model was evaluated on the basis of Chi-square goodness of fit test (p. 61). Overall, the results indicated that the “respondents’ (positive or negative) evaluations of television portrayals were significantly associated with their stereotypes of African Americans” (p. 66).

Cultivation Analysis

Some of the empirical studies of mass media discussed in this review spoke of audience behavior with relation to media messages. One theoretical framework through which to view media effects is Cultivation. This method of analysis that “focuses on the consequences of exposure to its recurrent patterns of stories, images, and messages” (Gerbner, 1998, p. 191), and attempts to explain how some consumers may come away from television programming with an inaccurate perception of the outside world (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shanahan, 2002). Gerbner, the central researcher in cultivation analysis, and his associates assert that mass media messages may cultivate, within heavy viewers, the idea that the outside world
reflects the mediated world depicted on television. That is, "Cultivation analysis... focuses specifically on television's contributions to viewers' conceptions of social reality" (p. 43-44) – a reality that is media-based. The researchers concluded that because "television has become the primary common source of socialization and everyday information (usually cloaked in the form of entertainment) of otherwise heterogeneous populations" (p. 44), then television will have an effect on viewers' perceptions of the social environment in which they live.

Cultivation researchers theorize that heavy consumers of media tend to align their ideologies with those presented by the mass media. In essence, the media can influence a viewers social reality and, due to recurrent images and messages (such as criminal reports in television news) tend to confirm for those viewers that they do live within the walls of the mean and dangerous world Gerbner (1998) mentioned. Throughout Chapter One and Chapter Two, the messages of an individual's socially constructed reality as well as heavy media consumption were discussed. From these discussions it is reasonable to assume that the theory of Cultivation fits as the final portion of this discussion.

Summary and Implications

As mentioned briefly in Chapter One, some viewers tend to believe what they see on television is representative of existing social structures in society. Implications arise when such constructions are based on exaggerated depictions of both crime and criminals on television news. Building on these
concepts is the literature pertinent to creating fear among media consumers. In light of research that suggests that some viewers will construct their social realities from mass media events such as news, what some scholars assert is that some viewers will construct a world based on fear. That is, for those consumers who base their perceptions on media portrayals of crime and society, their experiences with the mass media may tend to reflect what Gerbner (1998) alluded to in his research, the idea of a mean and dangerous world.

This review of literature illustrated the propensity for media consumers to fear crime committed by Black offenders. These key studies have shown that not only is crime prevalent in television news, but also that index crimes are of most importance. The disproportionately high percentage of reporting of violent crimes in the media focuses more on Blacks than Whites. Based on those overrepresentations, it is not a large inferential leap to conclude that Blacks are the most prominent criminal offenders. As a result of the high frequency of reported crimes committed by Blacks, “One likely outcome of the reporting practices we observed is the perpetuation of fear of persons of color in urban settings” (Romer et al., 1998, p. 301).

This chapter also shed light one the idea that media consumers demonstrate the tendency for misidentification. One point particular to this discussion was the potential for individuals to misidentify fictitious versus real crime events. As the researchers mentioned, some media consumers may process memories of real events with those of fictitious events, which may
cause them to draw inaccurate conclusions about the world around them. The second point to consider is the possibility for these same consumers to misidentify the actual race of criminals based on those prior events. In essence, an individual’s perception of crime may be biased based on their experiences with fictitious and real events involving Black criminals; criminals who have been shown to commit fewer crimes than what television news would have them believe.

Finally, this review of the literature revealed the existence of varied theoretical perspectives. The studies yielded results based on such perspectives as social learning theories, social cognitive theories and blame theories. While each theory has a relevant purpose in their respective studies, there is a common thread that runs within all of them: how exposure to these messages affects the perceptions held by heavy media consumers. Cultivation theory not only is based on over a decade of empirical research, but is also a common theme for content analytic studies, such as the present study, pertaining to media effects.

The implications stemming from this previous research are astounding for several reasons. Empirical research shows that television news represents crime as a severe social problem. That is not to say crime is not a problem, but the severity of the problem is overstated. In order for news organizations to succeed and turn a profit, they seek to garner the largest audience possible. To do so requires the shift from tedious news stories to a more alluring format. It is apparent that in completing that goal, news organizations must sacrifice
the more traditional news methods for more contemporary images in order to compete. One way to accomplish that goal is to show the sensational, more entertaining side of news reporting.

What is not known is whether the same media trends mentioned above are representative of news trends local to the Las Vegas area. The findings from the content analytic studies mentioned above encourage performing a similar research strategy in this study. Because of the inherent nature of media effects, in order to begin to examine and extrapolate any effects requires an analysis of the messages received by media consumers. Such a research method fits quite well with the strategy of a content analysis. However, the characteristics associated with content analytic studies do not offer the any data concerning actual perceptions or measured effects. Such a design would involve triangulating the research method. Be that as it may, the results from this content analytic study are of import when seeking to understand if media trends are similar in the Las Vegas area. If the findings of this research study are comparable to the aforementioned studies, then one can speculate that the potential to find similar empirical effects exists.
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

This study was a content analysis of television newscasts of the Las Vegas, Nevada market. The research design examined depictions of race, with particular attention to Whites (Caucasians), Blacks (African Americans) and Latinos, as well as other racial groups such as: Asian or Pacific Islander and Indian or Alaskan Native. The results yielded from this study were expected to discover trends in Las Vegas television news media concerning violent (index) crime depictions of African Americans and Latinos as opposed to those of Whites. The structure of this study was based upon research methods employed by researchers mentioned in Chapter Two.

Rationale for this Study

Las Vegas has experienced exponential population growth over the last several years. As a result of such growth, the overall demographics of the city's population have changed. Statistics provided by the City of Las Vegas Planning and Development Department (2000) support this claim. The estimated population as of July 1999 was 466,312 residents (Planning and Development sect). As of July 2002 the population had increased to 520,936 residents (Planning and Development sect.).
Additionally, a large portion of the relevant scholarship reviewed in Chapter Two is dated. One of the goals of this study is to promote research in the field of media effects in order to test previous scholarship. The social implications rising from the changing demographics of Las Vegas, as well as the dated materials pertinent to this field of research, require a contemporary portrait of Las Vegas television news media trends and characteristics. Given the complexity of these findings, it is necessary to examine current media representations of crime and race, and compare them to current law enforcement statistics to confirm the perennial and disproportionate nature previously discussed.

Research Question and Hypotheses

One research question and two hypotheses were generated for this study in an attempt to discover trends due to the overrepresentation of crime in Las Vegas television news. Research question: Will the number of crimes reported in Las Vegas television news media accurately represent the amount of index crimes that exist in that geographic area? Hypothesis one: There will be an overrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos in index crimes in Las Vegas criminal news stories. Hypothesis two: There will be an underrepresentation of Whites as criminal offenders for index crimes in Las Vegas television news media. For the purposes of this study, index crimes “include the violent crimes of murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, and the property crimes of burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft” (Department of Justice, 2001, p. 10).
Sampling

To ensure an adequate sample, news programs were recorded for four
weeks on videotape from Monday through Friday from the Las Vegas area
during the two-week period from December 1, 2003, through December 12,
2003, as well as the two-week period spanning from January 5, 2004, through
January 16, 2004. These dates were chosen to avoid such anomalies in news
programming during periods like ratings "sweeps" where news agencies tend
to alter their regular patterns of news content. During ratings "sweeps," the
nature and content of news reports may become heightened in order to garner
a larger audience. Not only did this sampling period provide a more robust
sample than a composite week of programming, but it also took into
consideration certain short-lived news events (e.g., the California fires of
October 2003 or a missing child) and attempted to avoid such occurrences in
order to provide an example of a more standard newscast.

Newscasts were chosen from the following four Las Vegas network
affiliates: KVCB Channel 3 (NBC), KVVU Channel 5 (FOX), KLAS Channel 8
(CBS), and KTNV Channel 13 (ABC). Each newscast that aired during the late
evening from Monday through Friday served as the sample for this study.
Newscasts scheduled for 10:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. for Fox and the remaining
affiliates, respectively, comprised the sample. The five-day week was chosen
over the seven-day week due to the inconsistent nature of weekend broadcasts
compared with weekday broadcasts. Generally, the crew, anchors, and story
types do not follow the same format as newscasts during the five-day week.
There were three reasons to explain why newscasts broadcast during early evening were not considered for this study. First, inconsistencies exist in the material covered in early evening newscasts. Some newscasts at that time are what are known as “wrap arounds” which “book-end” national news from a major network. At times, local newscasts will base their stories on such national news broadcasts, thereby creating a program that is not representative of events specific to Las Vegas. Next, such programs were omitted from this study because channel 5 (KVVU) does not have an early evening newscast. Therefore, to ensure a representative sample of evening news, the later broadcasts were chosen. Finally, the late evening broadcasts represent the final newscast of the evening for each network affiliate. Essentially, those broadcasts are similar in nature to each other and also offer audiences similar viewing coverage of news stories. Additionally, the number of houses using television (HUT) is higher at 10:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. than during the dinner hour because more people are at home at that time as opposed to early evening. Typically, people watch prime-time television news programming and then slide into a 10:00 pm or 11:00 p.m. local newscast (Krajewski, H., personal communication, February 11, 2004).

Typically, a half-hour newscast is divided into two parts, the news block for the first fifteen minutes, followed by weather and sports. Only the news block was videotaped for analysis (the first fifteen minutes of each newscast). The entire taped news sample consisted of approximately 19 hours of news
broadcasts. Five newscasts were not recorded as a result of technical difficulties.

Measures

Story

News stories are reports delivered by some combination of anchorpersons, field reporters, or video packages. For the purposes of this study, a news story consists of a report given by an anchor person or field reporter who describes an event or occurrence particular to Las Vegas. Each story typically begins with an anchor person or reporter introducing the story content. The brief introduction they offer is called a lead. Essentially, the news anchor will not only introduce a report, but also conclude a story. Accordingly, the end of a story can be defined as the point at which the television personality changes the topic of such subject matter. The end of a story can be marked by: (1) a segue into another story; (2) a "toss over" where one on air talent will introduce a story, but will have another personality give the details; or (3) by a commercial break.

Crime Story

Crime stories were further categorized. This study will use the operational definition of crime offered by Dixon and Linz (2000): "Crime was defined as behavior or information either pertaining to the commission of a particular law breaking act, or social or legal reaction to lawbreaking more generally" (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 138) that occurs in the form of one of the seven index crimes listed by the Department of Justice. Following similar methods employed by
Romer et al. (1998), participants in crime were classified as the person who "was reported as having been accused of, arrested for, or convicted of a violent or non violent crime" (p. 292). For the purposes of this study, only those crime stories dealing with offenders were coded. Separate stories that exclusively depicted victims of crimes, bystanders or experts were not included. Index crimes included murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft (except auto theft), and auto theft. As with previous methods utilized by Sheley and Ashkins (1981), "Only crimes committed, as opposed to those reported in 'trial' stories" will be included in this study (p. 496). Finally, crime stories that cover previously related stories were treated as discrete stories. For example, another account of a perpetrator being associated with a series of murders was counted as a multiple occurrence because it is the same offense and same perpetrator. To further refine these measures, a distinction was made between local and national crimes.

Each crime was coded (see Appendix) in accordance with the Department of Justice crime index table. The following codes were used when classifying Las Vegas index crimes: local murder and nonnegligent manslaughter=1 which is the willful (nonnegligent) killing of one human being by another; local forcible rape=2, local robbery=3, local aggravated assault=4 which is an unlawful attack by one person upon another for the purpose of inflicting severe or aggravated bodily injury. This type of assault is usually accompanied by the use of a weapon or by means likely to produce death or great bodily harm.
The remaining codes follow: local burglary=5, local larceny-theft (except auto theft)=6, and local auto theft=7, local other=8 and nationally reported crime=9. This coding method will serve for crime statistics reported by the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety as well as for the crimes reported by the news media. The benchmark for this study was a comparison between the actual crimes reported by the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety and the reports disseminated by Las Vegas television news media agencies.

Race

The following indicators were used to assess the race of perpetrators as shown on videotape, in mug shots or artist sketches, actual photos, or indicated by reporters or anchors (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 139). In previous research, "When these more apparent indicators of race will not be available, race will be inferred based on characteristics of the story" (p. 139) such as surname (e.g., Chung is associated with Asian), a family member is shown, as well as a prior news report that indicates race (p. 139). While these criteria are not always definitive, in most cases they will be able to provide the necessary information in order to make an informed decision regarding the race of the perpetrator. The race groups listed by the Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety will serve as the categories for this study. They are White, Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Asian or Pacific Islander. Although Latinos are not represented as a racial group for the race of person charged (State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety,
2003, Age, Sex, and Race of persons charged sect.), the category was included in the newscast analysis. The following codes were used when classifying race: White (Caucasian)=1, Black (African American)=2, Latino=3, American Indian/Alaskan Native=4, Asian/Pacific Islander=5, Other=8 and Unknown=9.

Public Safety Statistics

Index crime statistics obtained from the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety for the years ranging from 1990 through 1999 were compared to the frequency of such crimes as depicted in newscasts. A rolling average of index crimes in Nevada reported within this time frame was calculated in order to determine an average, monthly crime rate for Nevada for each of the index crime offenses. This study also looked at a monthly average of index crimes committed in Clark County for 1999 in order to focus the number of crimes committed in the areas surrounding Las Vegas. The statistics obtained from the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety did not list index crimes by race, only by age and sex (male or female). The data available by age were broken down by age groups. However, since this study sought to examine overall crime statistics, the age and the sex variables were not incorporated.

Coding

Coder training and testing was conducted consequent to completion of sampling all newscasts. The primary investigator trained a colleague in coding procedures utilizing the measures reported in this chapter. A random sample of
five newscasts was chosen for coder training and testing. The primary researcher and associate independently coded five randomly selected newscasts and then compared results, discussed any conflicts and resolved differences. Consequent to satisfactory training, 20 of the 75-episode sample were independently coded by both the primary investigator and trained colleague. Inter-coder reliability measures consistent with conventional practices were used. Cohen’s kappa ranged from $\kappa = .811$ for the index crime variable, to $\kappa = .842$ for the crime story variable, and $\kappa = .803$ for the race variable. The primary investigator completed remaining coding.

Analysis of Data

Chapter Four will include the presentation of results for the current study. Actual presentation of data will be organized in five sections. The first section will include basic reporting of percentages corresponding to the four central measures reflecting data collected for this study. The total number of news stories will be reported, as will the percentage of these stories devoted to both individual index and other crimes. Finally, the introductory presentation of results will report results for the race measure.

Research question one will be addressed by comparing percentages of individual index crimes against their counterparts as reported by the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety. Differences and similarities will be noted. Hypotheses one and two will be tested by means of descriptive and ANOVA statistics. First, race distributions will be compared for each of the index crimes. If subsamples for each index crime are adequate in
size, individual ANOVA statistics will be employed comparing Black (African American), White (Caucasian), and Latino representations in news stories. If subsamples are inadequate, then some form of pooling of index crime data will be performed consequent to consulting with committee members. Any main effects found will be further analyzed utilizing appropriate post hoc tests.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

General Description

The sample for this study consisted of 1,145 (N = 1,145) news stories. An overview of results follows. Despite missing five episodes, frequencies show a relatively even distribution of news stories per station: Channel 3 (KVBC) comprised 21.7%; Channel 5 (KVVU) comprised 26.6%; Channel 8 (KLAS) comprised 23.8%; followed by Channel 13 (KTNV) which comprised the 27.9% of the sample. Descriptive analysis revealed that of those 1,145 stories, 248 (21.7%) of the stories were crime stories and 897 (78.3%) were non-crime stories. On average, there were approximately eight news stories per 15-minute episode (M = 8.27, SD = 4.767). One-way ANOVA revealed no significant difference in the number of crimes stories reported by each of the four stations included in the sample $F(4, 249) = .832, p = .506$. There were a total of 62 individual index crimes reported and 93 crime stories labeled as “Other.” Of the 62 index crimes, the most highly reported was murder and non-negligent manslaughter accounting for 12.1% of crime stories that were not classified as “Other” (8.1%) or as a “National Crime Story” (8.1%).

Further data analysis revealed higher frequencies of Latino criminal depictions ($M = 8.07, SD = 2.017$), followed by White ($M = 7.92, SD = 2.064$)
and finally Black ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 3.108$). That is, Latinos were the most represented and Blacks were the least represented in this sample. These data offer partial support for hypothesis one. Recall hypothesis one: There will be an overrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos in index crimes in Las Vegas criminal news stories. The results of these analyses indicate that Latinos were overrepresented and Blacks were underrepresented overall in terms of the number of racial depictions in the sample. Further, Whites statistically fared higher in the amount of criminal reporting than Blacks.

The findings from this study do not provide support for hypothesis two. Recall hypothesis two: Whites are underrepresented as criminal offenders for index crimes. Contrary to the prediction of the hypothesis, the results indicated an overrepresentation of crime for Latinos over Whites. These findings are not supported by the review of literature in this study. These data also reveal a significant mean difference between depictions of Blacks and the depictions of Whites ($M = 2.04$). A oneway ANOVA was utilized to determine whether there was a strong relationship between the race of the perpetrator and crime. At the $p < .05$ value, the results showed there was a significant relationship with $F(4, 243) = 5.217$, $p = .000$. ANOVA data analysis did not provide any significant findings concerning biases of criminal activity by race $F(4, 243) = .832$, $p = .506$. 

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Crime Story

Descriptive analysis revealed the following breakdown of those 21.7% coded as crime stories. The largest category of crime stories, 37.5%, was coded as "Other" type of crime stories. An additional 37.5% were "National Crime" stories. The largest category of actual local-index crime story was "Murder and Non-Negligent Manslaughter," comprising 12.1%. This category was followed by "Aggravated Assault" (6.0%), "Robbery" (2.4%), "Larceny Theft" (2.0%), and "Burglary" (1.6%). The remaining index crime categories (Forcible Rape and Auto Theft) accounted for a combined .8%.

Race

General descriptive analysis revealed the following overview of race depictions in all crime stories coded. The largest category coded was "Unknown," accounting for 43.4% of all crime stories coded. Perpetrators coded as "White" were observed in 30.5% of all crime stories, followed by "Blacks" in 16.9%, and "Latino" (6%). "Other" race observations accounted for 3.2% of all crime stories coded.

Research Question One

The research question asked whether the amounts of crime reported in Las Vegas television news would not accurately represent the amount of crimes reported in the geographic area. Table 1 illustrates comparative figures for index crimes and shows the percentage that each index crime contributes to that category. The table lists a 120-month average of the percentage spanning from 1990 through 1999 for the entire State of Nevada Department of Motor
Vehicles and Public Safety, the 12-month average covering 1999 for Clark County, and the final column shows the amounts of local news reports of index crimes. These data show that the most frequently committed crime is larceny comprising of 54% of index crimes for the state and 46.69% for Clark County. Compared to actual figures obtained from the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety, local news reports of index crimes are clearly overrepresented. For example, the least likely crime to be committed was murder, at 0.19% for the state and 0.20% for Clark County.

Table 1: Comparison of 120 month, 12 month and media depictions of index crimes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index Crime</th>
<th>State of Nevada</th>
<th>Clark County</th>
<th>Las Vegas Television News</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>0.19%</td>
<td>0.20%</td>
<td>12.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
<td>1.13%</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>5.02%</td>
<td>5.99%</td>
<td>2.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>6.60%</td>
<td>5.65%</td>
<td>6.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>21.01%</td>
<td>21.41%</td>
<td>1.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>54.00%</td>
<td>46.68%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MV Theft</td>
<td>12.19%</td>
<td>18.94%</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Crime Stories</td>
<td>37.50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results provide support for hypothesis one in that the less frequent crimes such as larceny and burglary were the most reported in Las Vegas.
television news. Only 25% of crime stories qualified as Index crimes local to Las Vegas. The remaining stories were "National Crime" stories and "Other" crime stories. Those news reports coded as "Other" crime stories were for depictions of crimes such as, but not exclusive to, drunk driving, drug related crimes, and police brutality.

Hypothesis One

Recall that the first hypothesis predicted an overrepresentation of criminal depictions in Las Vegas television news by race, particularly for Blacks and Latinos. A one-way ANOVA statistical analysis was utilized to test differences in race portrayals for perpetrators in reported crime stories. There was a main effect $F(4, 247) = 5.217, p = .000$. Post hoc analyses revealed higher reporting of Latino criminal depictions ($M = 8.07, SD = 2.017$), followed by White ($M = 7.92, SD = 2.064$) and then Black ($M = 5.88, SD = 3.108$). Latinos were the most represented and Blacks the least represented overall in these crime stories. These data offer partial support for the first hypothesis. The results indicate that Latinos were over represented and Blacks under represented in terms of the number of depictions in television news. Further, Whites perpetrators were reported more often than Blacks.

Hypothesis Two

Hypothesis two stated that Whites would be underrepresented as criminal offenders for index crimes. Post hoc tests for the same one-way ANOVA analysis performed to test hypothesis two do not provide support for the second hypothesis. The results indicated an overrepresentation of crime
perpetrated by Latinos over Whites in terms of the number of depictions in Las Vegas television news reports.

Extended Analysis

Reporting in an earlier section of this chapter indicated that more than one third of all reported crime stories were "National" in nature. Potentially, results generated for statistical tests for hypotheses one and two were influenced by perpetrator's race as depicted in these national television news stories. Analysis was extended to determine what, if any, differences existed in terms of portrayals of perpetrator's race when comparing "National" and local television news stories. All categories for local news stories (i.e., "Murder and Non-Negligent Manslaughter," "Aggravated Assault," etc.) were collapsed into one category for comparison to "National Crime Story" with race as the independent variable. Results based on Chi Square tests revealed significantly more White perpetrators were reported in stories originating from national news networks or services compared to local stories \( \chi^2 (4, N = 155) = 25.908 \), \( p < .000 \). The same trend was found for Latino representations as well as for "Other" race groups. In contrast, Blacks were significantly more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators in local television news stories compared to national sources. These results should be viewed cautiously as 30% of cells had an expected count less than minimum requirements typically allow.

Additional attempts at analysis were conducted post hoc in order to determine differences, if any, in perpetrator race portrayals for individual crime index categories -- for example, race comparisons for local "Murder and Non-
Negligent Manslaughter." Results were inconclusive because small counts for individual race groupings made testing impossible.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

General Discussion

The purpose of this content analysis was to appraise mass media messages to test trends found in previous research. As discussed in Chapter Two, criminal depictions of Black offenders on television news supported the belief that similar findings would be found in the current study. The practices explained in Chapter One and Chapter Two can now be discussed in relation to the findings reported earlier. This chapter will begin with a discussion covering the results of this study, followed by the strengths and limitations of the study, and will conclude with suggestions for future research.

The results from the current study found support for research question one. Data concerning news reporting practices found a similar inverse nature in crime news reporting versus crime statistics as did previous literature. For example, murder comprised 12.1% of local index crimes reported in Las Vegas television news for the sampling period. However, empirical data from the State of Nevada (1996) showed that, for the entire state, murder comprised 0.2% of index crimes for a 120-month average beginning 1990 through 1999. Also, these data are similar to the 1999 average number of murders committed in Clark County which totaled 0.19%. The most frequently committed crime for
the 120-month period for Nevada as well as 1999 in Clark County was larceny, 54% and 46.48% respectively. These findings support previous research suggesting that “the news is not an accurate reflection of the real world of crime” (Gilliam & Iyengar, p. 562) and that reporting practices of media agencies bear little resemblance to the “reality’ of police statistics” (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981, p. 593).

Hypothesis one predicted that based on prior research, there would be an overrepresentation of crime committed by Blacks and Latinos. However, the present findings indicate that Blacks are underrepresented as criminal offenders in the Las Vegas market and that Latinos are overrepresented. This study found that it was not the norm for common offenders for crimes such as robbery, rape and homicide to be committed by “a black male” (Sheley & Ashkins, 1981, p. 501) as believed to be true. Statistically, Blacks received the least amount of coverage with respect to crime in Las Vegas television news. As mentioned in Chapter Three, there was no bias on the part of each network affiliate that would indicate higher frequencies of crimes committed.

Additionally, the results showed that Latinos were overrepresented indicating partial support for hypothesis one. Where authors Dixon and Linz (2000) found that “Latinos do not receive much attention at all” (p. 148), the current study found the contrary even though “much of the prior literature suggests that Latinos will be portrayed in a similar fashion to African Americans” (p. 151). Such was not the case. As a result of these findings, this study may be the first to see a declining trend in reports of criminal activity by
Blacks as well an inclining trend for reporting Latino criminal offenders. Even though these results suggest criminal depictions of Blacks seem to be decreasing, the fact that depictions of Latino perpetrators may be increasing still seems to the belief that minorities are "more likely to be depicted in the role of the suspect" (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000, p. 562) in television news.

With regard to hypothesis two, Romer et al. (1998) found that in television news, Whites would be portrayed as victims of crime, not perpetrators. The results of the present study found the contrary. Particular to this study, Latinos were more likely than Blacks and Whites to be portrayed as criminal offenders in Las Vegas television news. Therefore, there was no support for hypothesis two. These results discovered an inconsistent nature when compared to prior scholarship in this area. The findings from hypothesis one and hypothesis two illustrate that the Las Vegas market may not share the nature of local television news as other areas of the country mentioned in the literature review. However, it seems safe to assume that news coverage may not be heading toward true representation just yet. Granted, Whites were represented more than Blacks. Along the same vein, they are also the most prominent in prison populations as well as reported actual offenders as Department of Justice data suggest (1996; 2001). However, Latinos are neither the most abundant in prison populations or in the general population of Las Vegas, yet they seem to be the subject of the majority of television news reports concerning criminal activity. This inverse relationship is representative of prior research that
considers race and reports of television news as well as such theories as ethnic blame which explain the focus on minorities rather than on Whites.

The trends discussed here demonstrate the application of ethnic blame theory when understanding why Latinos are at the center of attention for criminal offenses in Las Vegas television news. While the findings revealed that Blacks are not overrepresented as criminal offenders, the fact still remains that minorities, Latinos in this instance, are still depicted as major participants of criminal activity. In terms of ethnic blame, these data suggest that the focal point of blame has shifted from the differences between Blacks and Whites, to differences between natives ("Americans") and immigrants (Latinos). Latinos represent a large influx of foreigners into Las Vegas and, as such, can be seen as a potential threat to the majority. Because of this focus on natives versus foreigners, Blacks may have received less of the blame as opposed to their Latino counterparts.

Along with the overrepresentation of crime, this study also considered the socially constructed reality of heavy media consumers. Recall that recurrent messages with regard to crime in television news have the potential to serve as the basis for a media consumer's reality. The results of the current study indicated that 21.9% of the news stories analyzed dealt with stories about crime. In comparison with previous research offered by Westfeldt and Wicker (1998), these findings concerning the amount of crime news in Las Vegas are similar. Where this study found 21.9% of news stories are stories about crime, Westfeldt and Wicker (1998) found that 26.9% of their sample dealt with stories...
about crime. Whether crime reports encompass 26.9% of total news stories as in Westfeldt and Wicker’s study, or an astounding 83% like that of Gilliam and Iyengar (2000), the results from these data provide support for the possibility that in the Las Vegas market, heavy media consumers have the means available to construct a social world based on exaggerated criminal depictions.

Interesting to note, the social construction of reality may not be particular to media consumers alone. That is, producers of television content may have also come to believe that such depictions of offenders, namely Latinos, may also be a true representation of society. Indeed, if media producers cultivate within themselves the idea that Latinos are the most prominent criminal offenders, then news content may reflect such beliefs. In such a case, the potential exists for media producers to participate in a cyclical effect of placing more Latinos in criminal news as a result of their belief that Latinos may be responsible for the majority of criminal offenses.

Associated with the social construction of reality is the fear of crime. With the overrepresentations of Latino crime found in this study, there exists the potential for media consumers to fear the world existing beyond their homes. In this case, exposure to newscasts where 21.9% of stories deal with crime and, of those, the majority are Latinos, then heavy consumers may conclude that victimization by a Latino offender is more probable than what real world data suggests. As a result, the findings assume that heavy media consumers of Las Vegas television news may come to cultivate those feelings into a fear of being victimized by Latino offenders. Because of such exaggerated reports,
media consumers may be placing undue attention on the fear of being
victimized by Latinos.

Implications

One of the major implications of this study involves the discovery of the
overrepresentation of murder in Las Vegas television news. Current findings
showed that crime stories comprised 21.9% of the crime stories studied. Of
those 251 stories, approximately 30 stories within a one month period dealt
with murder. Figures gathered from the 120-month average report that, on
average, there are approximately 14 murders per month in Nevada, and 10
murders per month in Clark County. The number of murders reported local to
Las Vegas is more than double the state average and triple the average for
Clark County. Such practices may cause media consumers to believe that
murders occur at a much higher rate than the State of Nevada actually reports.

As a result of such exaggerated reports, the possibility exists that heavy
television news media consumers may come away from these persistent
messages and become fearful of being victimized.

Alternatively, the crimes that occur more frequently are among the least
reported. Where larceny offenses consist of approximately half of index crimes
for both the 120-month average as well as the 1999 Clark County average,
such offenses only were covered in 2.0% of crime news coverage. The
obvious question lies within the "newsworthiness" of larceny crimes as
opposed to more violent, and more exciting, crimes such as murder.
Recall that 37.5% of the crime stories reported were "National Crime" stories. It is surprising that almost 40% of crime stories on local television stations involve crimes that do not occur in the Las Vegas area. One of the possible reasons why local television stations import crime stories from other states may be explained by the need to provide media consumers with exhilarating accounts of sensational crimes that Las Vegas cannot offer. That is, in order to justify prices for airing commercials for Las Vegas, news agencies must be able to offer the viewer something appealing and interesting, not mundane or dull.

The findings from this study provide the opportunity to speculate on the changing nature of television news. The possibility exists that news agencies realize that undue importance is being placed on Black criminals instead of those who commit most index crimes. This perspective, however, is highly altruistic because it does not explain why Latinos are overrepresented in criminal stories. Federal prison populations show that Latinos rank third behind populations of Whites and Blacks. Furthermore, as of 2002, data offered by the U.S Census Bureau reported that Latinos comprise approximately 23.9% of the population in Clark County (Hispanic Origin and Race sect.). Considering how Latinos place third in prisons and how they comprise less than one-fourth of the population of Clark County, it is alarming that they comprise the majority of criminal reports found in Las Vegas television news.

One of the questions answered by this study is concerned with why Blacks or Latinos are prominently displayed as criminal offenders as opposed to those
who actually commit most of the crime. As some theories, such as ethnic blame discourse (Dixon & Linz, 2000) suggest, there is a focus on crimes committed by minorities in order to illustrate the possible threat posed to the majority. Dixon and Linz (2000) posited that, “As a result of such ethnic blame discourse, a cognitive association of Blacks and Latinos with lawbreaking and Whites with law defending might develop” (p. 132). In their study, they mentioned that ethnic blame was “an intriguing idea” but that it did “not offer a sufficient explanation for the underrepresentation of Latinos found” in their study (p. 150-151). The current results show a parallel trend. In each case, Whites are not shown to be the common perpetrators of index crimes in television news even though they commit the majority of those crimes. Where Dixon and Linz (2000) believed that such associations might develop, the results from this study support the idea that such cognitive associations are a likely result.

What these findings illustrate is that past research did not provide a solid foundation for media practices in the Las Vegas market. What this may reflect is the tendency for media providers to stray away from the stories that involve Black criminals and lean toward stories that depict Latinos.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations in this study should be noted. One of the limitations was its inherent nature – a cross sectional design. Although the sample consisted of four weeks of news programming, that does not take away from the fact that it only looked at a snapshot in the overall scheme of a viewer’s experience with
the mass media. However, as other research suggests, cross-sectional trends seem to be stable across studies.

Another limitation of this study was the fact that it did not take into consideration stories that dealt with criminal trials. Stories such as the 311 Boys, the Binion trial, and Michael Jackson's alleged crimes were not coded because such stories were currently in courts. In retrospect, these stories should have been coded due to the fact that they did, in fact, deal with criminal activity.

Due to the nature of the data offered by the State of Nevada Department of Motor Vehicles and Public Safety (1996), a comparison could not be made with relation to the race of reported index criminals, to those appearing in Las Vegas television news. Because of the lack of such information, claims of over or underrepresenting the amount of crime based on race was difficult to sustain.

An additional limitation to the study was the "Unknown" category for the race of the perpetrator. While the coding scheme appeared sufficient to operationalize race, such was not the case when it came to criminal reports. Recall that over 43.4% of the crimes coded were committed by an "Unknown" offender compared to the next highest total of 30.5% for Whites. In other words, the "Unknown" category had the largest number of perpetrators. "Unknown" offenders were those in which the identity of the suspect was not known by the news reporter, or those in which the primary coder could not accurately discern the race of the offender. Even taking into consideration
issues such as surname and picture, doing so did not offer clear signs that were indicative of White, Black or Latino. Rather than assuming an offender was White, Black or Latino, based on the news report, the primary coder opted for using the "Unknown" category. What this means, however, is that the results of this study could have been dramatically different had those identities been either discernable or known.

Such issues with coding schemes are not particular to the current study. In other research, Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) coded "over one-half of all crime reports [that] made explicit reference to the race or ethnicity of the suspect" (p. 562; emphasis in original). In other words, those that did not make such an explicit reference were not coded and, thus, the race was not known. Additionally, Romer et al. (1998) only coded stories that pictured an offender and, as such, those which did not picture an offender were not included in their study. This present study, however, coded all news stories regardless of whether race was explicit or if the perpetrator was pictured.

One final limitation to this study was the fact that due to its methodological design, it was not possible to measure actual audience perceptions to determine whether audience members feared White, Black or Latino criminals, or whether they actually had a fear of crime at all. Future research should attempt to incorporate such a design methods similar to those mentioned in the previous review of literature. Perhaps Las Vegas media consumers watch television news with a critical eye, or perhaps they understand the idea that some assert that television news is mere entertainment.
One of the assumptions of this study was that the media had the potential to influence a viewer's socially constructed reality. Past research has found that such a large presence of Black criminal offenders in television news tends to cultivate perceptions of a predator criminal. In light of these findings, future research should seek to determine whether perceptions of such perpetrators are changing as a result of changing media practices.

Another avenue for future studies is whether individuals will mistakenly identify Latinos as criminals, as opposed to Blacks. Recall that Oliver and Fonash (2002) found that Blacks would be misidentified as criminal offenders. In light of this study's findings, perhaps Latinos will be misidentified. The likelihood of such findings does seem improbable due to the many years that Blacks have been the center of violent crimes in television news. That is, media consumers may become accustomed to the crime scripts mentioned by Gilliam and Iyengar (2000).

Future research should seek to replicate the findings from this study in order to determine whether the results are generalizable beyond the Las Vegas television market. Further, such a study should consider the implications resulting from the coding measure and find a means to improve upon its methodological design.
**APPENDIX I**

**CODE SHEET - CURRY NEWS CAST ANALYSIS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEWS STORY</th>
<th>STATION</th>
<th>CRIME STORY</th>
<th>INDEX CRIME</th>
<th>RACE IDENTIFIED</th>
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Legend:

- **Crime Story**
  - 1 = Yes
  - 2 = No

- **Index Crime (1-8 = Las Vegas)**
  - 1 = Murder/Non Negligent Manslaughter
  - 2 = Forcible Rape
  - 3 = Robbery
  - 4 = Aggravated Assault
  - 5 = Burglary
  - 6 = Larceny-Theft (except auto-theft)
  - 7 = Auto theft
  - 8 = Other
  - 9 = National Crime Story

- **Race**
  - 1 = White (Caucasian)
  - 2 = Black (African American)
  - 3 = Latino
  - 4 = American Indian/Alaskan Native
  - 5 = Asian/Pacific Islander
  - 8 = Other
  - 9 = Unknown
REFERENCES


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