

Local Television Evening News



IF IT BLEEDS, DOES IT LEAD? LOCAL TELEVISION EVENING NEWS IN HAMPTON ROADS

Newton Minow, once the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), became forever famous, or at least perennially quotable, in May 1961 when he told the National Association of Broadcasters that American television had become a “vast wasteland.” Minow challenged, even excoriated, the broadcasters as he told them he was “not convinced that the people’s taste is as low as some of you assume.” He asserted that the television spectrum was a public asset and therefore broadcasters were “jointly accountable to the American public for ... the special needs of children, for community responsibility, for the advancement of education and culture ... for decency and decorum in production. ...”

Almost 50 years have passed since Minow threw down the gauntlet to television broadcasters. Every reader of the State of the Region report has his or her own opinions about the validity of Minow’s assertions, as well as the current performance of television stations located in Hampton Roads. It is well beyond the scope of this report to evaluate all of the programming and activities of the region’s television stations. We did find it possible, however, to examine the local evening news coverage of the four major television network stations in Hampton Roads. This chapter reports our findings.

Our Focus and the Questions We Ask

Some people perceive that graphic images of crime and violence routinely populate local television evening newscasts. And without a doubt, shootings, beatings, assaults, racial tension and celebrity crime all are potentially part of the local evening news. However, is the widely held assessment that crime stories dominate the news actually an accurate representation of local television evening news programming in Hampton Roads?

We address three questions.

1. What are the subjects of the stories broadcast on local television evening news programs in Hampton Roads?
2. What priority is given to specific types of stories in local evening news broadcasts? That is, where is a particular kind of story placed in newscasts, how much emphasis is given to that story (via teaser leads and the like) and how long is the story?
3. Who are the individuals in the stories and what is their race? Some believe that local television news misrepresents minorities by too frequently showing them in crime stories, or portraying them as criminals. Is this true?

Providing Some Context

Although most people would agree that crime is a major problem in the United States, the majority of us have not actually experienced violent crime firsthand. Americans, particularly those who do not actively seek information about social issues, rely on the media for information about crime. New York Times journalist Walter Lippman, in his classic book “Public Opinion,” observed that people form opinions about “a greater number of things than we can directly observe. They (opinions) have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported.”

In reporting about social issues, the news media not only seek to present the facts, but sometimes also to suggest solutions. Television news broadcasts, by reporting some things but not others, implicitly tell news consumers what issues are worthy of their attention and how they should feel about those issues. This process is commonly referred to as “framing” and is an important way in which the media emphasize certain perspectives and beliefs, while necessarily ignoring others.

Although news consumers commonly soon forget specific details of news stories, they do form general impressions about issues that later become integrated into their basic belief systems. They carry these beliefs with them when they interact with other individuals, where they choose to live, work and recreate, and, of course, when they go to the polls.

Whether they are conscious of it or not, local evening news producers engage in framing when they select certain stories to broadcast, assign priorities, headlines and leads to those stories, determine the length of the stories, and even when they choose the reporters to cover them. While this may sound a bit controlling, framing enables local evening news programs to present complex issues efficiently and in ways that are readily understood by audiences that may only be paying partial attention. Without a certain amount of framing, television news audiences might not assimilate a particular news story, or might even ignore it.

Michael Schudson, in his “The Sociology of News” (2003), explains: “To say that journalists construct the world is not to say they conjure the world. Journalists normally work with materials that real people and real events provide. But by selecting, highlighting, framing, shading and shaping in reportage, they create an impression that real people – readers and viewers – then take to be real and to which they respond in their lives.”

At the end of the day, however, framing highlights certain aspects of issues while obscuring or ignoring others, and this may lead audiences to one conclusion rather than another. Of course, not everyone is affected in the same way by a particular framing of a news story. Whereas Mary may be highly sensitive to a story describing environmental damage, John may not.

Some observers believe broadcast media tend to oversimplify associations between crime and its perpetrators and victims, due to constraints of time. The causes of crime are complex and there are many different reasons why people engage in antisocial and deviant behavior. One oversimplification appears to be that the media consistently overemphasize links between poverty and crime. It is plausible that poverty has an influence upon crime, but the vast majority of lower-income individuals are not criminals. Even so, the media often suggest that poverty nearly always generates crime. Initial portrayals of Muslim terrorists by mainstream media following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks fell into this framing trap.

Media framing also can reinforce stereotypes. Peter Parisi, writing for the *Howard Journal of Communication* (1998), examined Leon Dash’s Pulitzer Prize-winning story, “Rosa Lee’s Story: Poverty and Survival in Washington.” Although the Dash article appeared to make a call to help the poor, Parisi found that the story actually reinforced the stereotype of the poor as black, inner-city residents engaging in drug use and other criminal behavior. Parisi compared Dash’s focus on the criminal behavior among urban blacks with Janet Cooke’s notorious Pulitzer Prize-winning story, “Jimmy’s World,” which portrayed a young black heroin addict. Although Cooke’s Pulitzer was withdrawn after it was revealed that she fabricated the story, the story’s initial acclaim suggests that the public found her “construction of ever-deepening levels of depravity among the poor, urban minorities to be ideologically resonant,” Parisi notes.

Our Methodology

We examined nearly three weeks of local television evening news in order to report the content that makes up the news presented by the four major network-affiliated stations: WTKR (CBS), WAVY (NBC), WVEC (ABC) and WVBT (Fox). We recorded and examined weekday programming from Sept. 10-27, 2007 – 14 days in all. This time period was chosen in order to avoid major political events that could skew the results.

For the local ABC, NBC and CBS stations, we recorded the news from 5-6 p.m., 6-6:30 p.m., and their 11-11:30 p.m. news shows. For the Fox affiliate, we recorded the same early evening newscasts plus the first half-hour of its 10 p.m. news show. Trained coders analyzed all of the programs to assess the news content. Our unit of analysis for this study was the individual news story. We examined 2,111 stories from the four stations in order to address our three questions.

What We Found

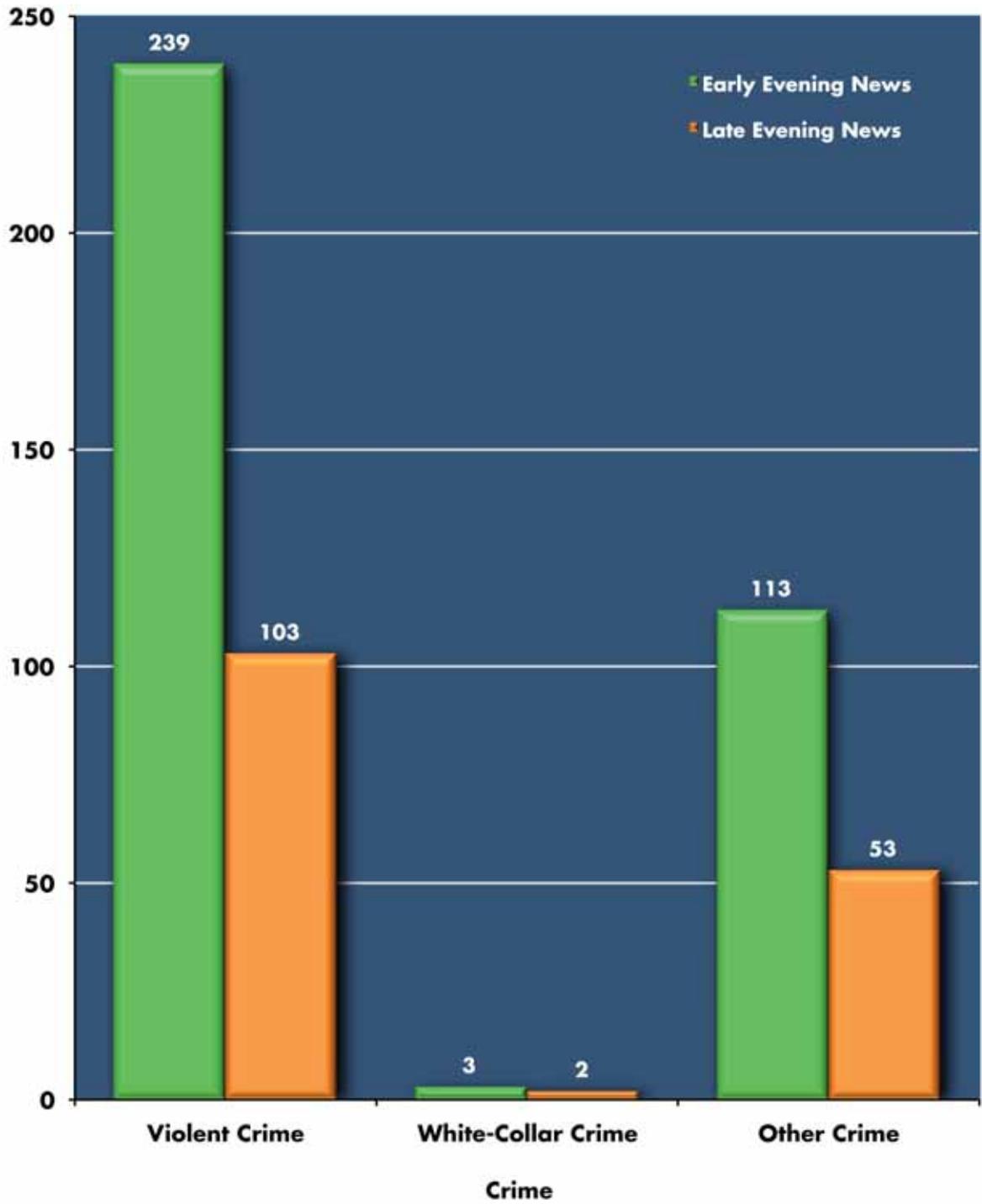
Question No. 1: What are the subjects of the stories on the local television evening news programs in Hampton Roads?

We found that more than 16 percent of the news stories involved incidents of violent crime – including the Jena 6, the Delaware State University shooting, the Michael Vick case, a police officer shooting and other such stories. Other crimes and white-collar crime made up another 8.1 percent of the stories reported by these stations. Taken together, violent crime, white-collar crime and other crimes were identified as the topic of the local news in more than 24 percent of the stories. Some of the other news story categories were: weather (12.4 percent), the military (9.1 percent), politics/government (8 percent), legal issues (5.7 percent) and medical (5.7 percent).

Weather turned out to be important because there was significant storm activity in Hampton Roads during the September 2007 study period. It is no surprise that military stories made up a significant proportion of local news. There was an important story that involved where the military was going to locate one of its bases. Graph 1 provides a visual description of the raw number of crime stories reported on the early evening and late evening news (513 crime stories out of 2,111 stories analyzed, which is 24.3 percent of all news stories).



GRAPH 1
TOTAL NUMBER OF CRIME NEWS STORIES AMONG 2,111 STORIES
ON LOCAL EVENING NEWS BROADCASTS, SEPT. 10-27, 2007



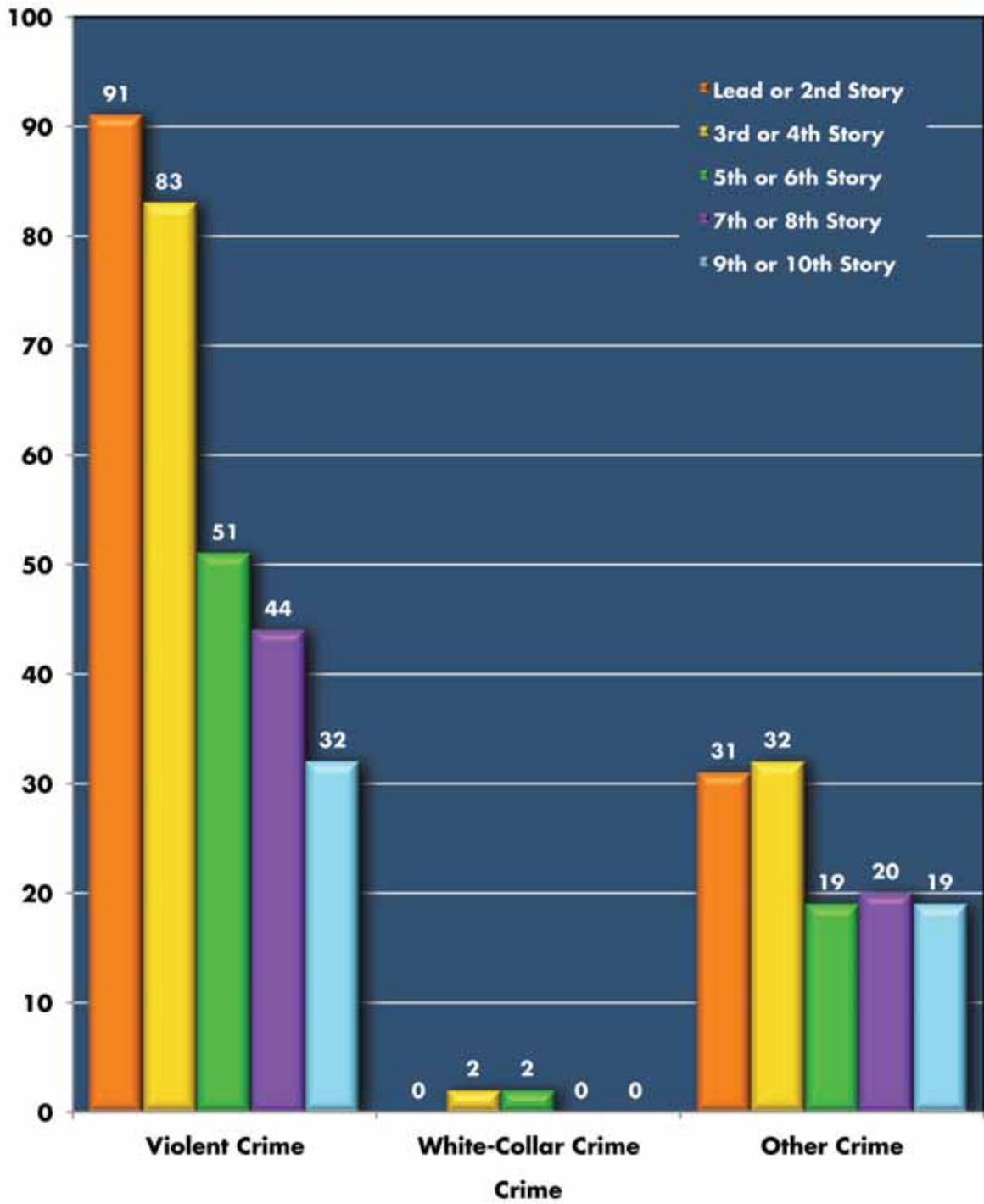
Question No. 2: What types of stories lead the local newscasts?

While violent crime formed the basis of 16 percent of local television evening newscasts, many may not view this as a high number. After all, this is only one out of every six stories. However, **we found that almost 33 percent of the lead stories dealt with some sort of violent crime. Further, when we examined all the lead stories that dealt with any type of crime (both violent and nonviolent), we found that they constituted the lead story in more than 45 percent of all newscasts.**

Next, we examined the *top three* stories in each newscast. **We found that, on average, there was very little change in the percentage of the top three stories reporting on crime – 40.8 percent of the second stories were devoted to crime and 44.6 percent of the third stories were devoted to this subject. Thus, crime stories appear to dominate local evening news coverage in Hampton Roads.** Graph 2 reports these data. Note that violent crime news stories in particular are reported up front in newscasts. In terms of the language we discussed earlier, local television evening newscasts are framed in terms of crime.



GRAPH 2
PLACEMENT OF CRIME STORIES ON LOCAL EVENING
NEWS BROADCASTS, SEPT. 10-27, 2007



Question No. 3: How are minorities portrayed in local television news?

Crime news stories do not always reveal the race of the individuals involved, but in 325 cases, strong tips to their race were revealed. Our analysis found that when the race of the people in a crime story was known, 185 (56.9 percent) were black¹ and 123 (37.8 percent) were white. **Since a total of 277 black people were identified in all news stories, two-thirds (66.8 percent) were in crime stories, while less than a quarter (23.3 percent) of white people were shown in crime news stories.** Graph 3 reports these data.

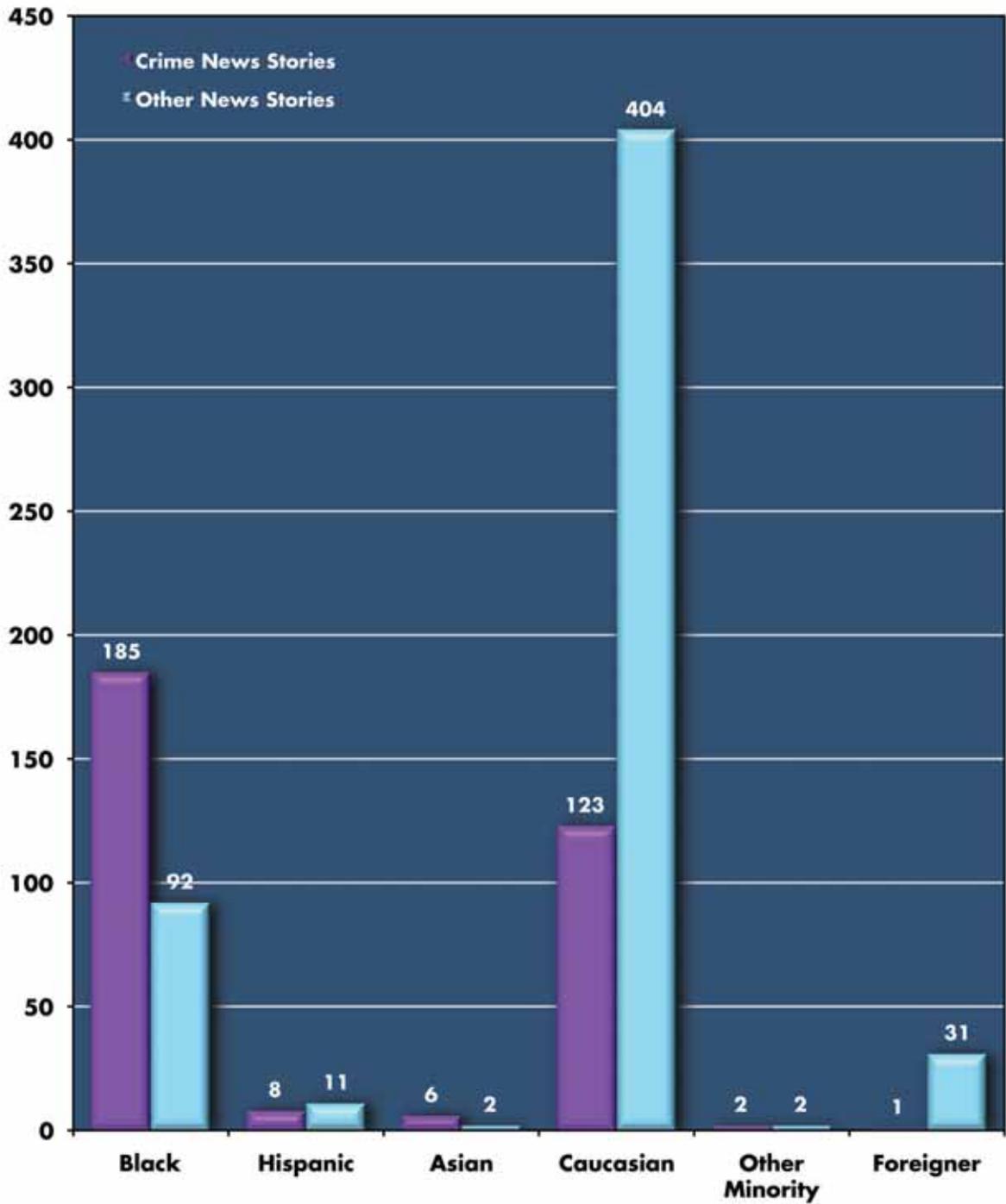
While not reported in Graph 2, we also found it significant that when the race of the *victims* of the alleged crimes was identified, 28 or (21.1 percent) of these victims were black, while 96 (72.2 percent) were white.

Thus, when crime news stories are reported, they involve blacks far more often than whites, or than any other non-black minorities, except when the victims of the crimes are identified. Then, whites predominate. Blacks were approximately twice as likely to be mentioned in a crime news story than in any other type of story combined.



¹ "Black" here is inclusive of African Americans and other apparently black individuals. We make no claim to be able to identify flawlessly the race of all individuals who are highlighted on local evening newscasts. Therefore, our percentages should be regarded as estimates, albeit ones with sufficient precision to be worthy of attention.

GRAPH 3
RACE OF INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED IN NEWS STORIES ON
LOCAL EVENING NEWS BROADCASTS, SEPT. 10-27, 2007



Commentary

Local television stations adapt quite readily to their communities, even as they embrace new technologies to report happenings. Their local evening news programs remain a significant aspect of the social fabric of their communities. Their reporting of the news shapes how citizens, particularly those who remain on the periphery of social action and involvement, view the nature of their community. How this news is reported influences our understanding, affects our emotions and contributes to our feelings of anger, fear and distrust, as well as our sense of joy, peace and safety. In short, local television news broadcasts frame how we view the world, how we behave toward one another, and ultimately the choices we make in living out our lives here in Hampton Roads.

In contrast to the television news programs, headlines in our local newspapers during the comparable period of Sept. 11-28 (using the following morning's paper as a plumb line for the previous local evening news program's content) emphasized lead stories of a more general political bent. The *Virginian-Pilot* focused on Blackwater contractors in Iraq, the political plans of state legislators, new port terminals, water conservation and results of the Emmy Awards. Even the top headlines in the Hampton Roads section of *The Pilot* highlighted development projects, pollution issues, tourists at Michael Vick's property and local tax relief issues. Only one top headline in the Hampton Roads section during this period dealt with crime, namely an investigation into the videotaping of a mob attack in Ocean View. While the *Daily Press's* topical coverage differed somewhat, the content of its lead stories did not, in the sense that these stories focused on issues other than crime.

Hampton Roads television news programs showcased reports on crime as their lead story almost half of the time, with violent crimes leading the nightly newscast a third of the time. Stories such as a man attacked and beaten, a fight on a school bus, and an unusual "video-staged" fight showing several African American youths beating up a white youth in Ocean View provided leads for several days in a row. The data regarding violent crime reporting contrast with the overall television reporting of crime stories in general at a much lower level – 16 percent. This implies that news producers do tend to seek out sensational teasers involving criminal violence in order to attract and retain audiences. It was clear, as well, that two of the stations (WAVY and WVEC) placed extra emphasis upon lead stories involving violent crime during the period studied. These two stations perhaps do make different choices at other times, but their behavior stood out in this regard in September 2007 and was statistically significant.

We found that crime stories clearly constitute a common and important part of local television evening news reporting. Statistically, it does appear that "if it bleeds, it leads." While we cannot say what effect these stories had on those who watched (or heard about) them, it seems logical that the deluge of such stories would fail to impress tourists who happened to be watching, or prospective firms that might be thinking about locating in the region. It also seems likely that these stories eventually would have a debilitating effect on African Americans and other dark-skinned people in our region (who have been identified as black in our study). Further, it seems probable that such stories would heighten concerns among non-black racial groups about black crime.

The racial implications of our findings are sensitive, but hardly can be avoided. Local evening newscasts focus repeatedly on crimes committed by blacks. It's true that data from law enforcement agencies indicate that blacks commit more crimes per capita than whites and other racial groups. The data also reveal that blacks are arrested far more often per capita than whites and other groups. (Again, we use the terms black and white because this was the basis for our identification of races in the local evening newscasts.) Regardless, what emerges is a picture of black people as perpetrators of crimes and other individuals (more often than not whites) as victims.

African Americans (black people in our analysis) frequently complain that they are consistently portrayed in a negative fashion by the media. Against this, the media often reply simply that they report what happens. Because black people, according to law enforcement data, commit more crimes per capita than other races, they therefore are going to be featured in news reports more often. The solution to this problem, they say (but seldom in public), is to commit fewer crimes.

Nevertheless, our analysis reveals that so-called positive stories involving black residents were a small percentage compared to those involving crime. Several of our local stations consistently thrust microphones in front of alleged criminals, who either sulk or boast, and distraught victims, who emote and wail. Yes, this does give a human touch to their news reporting, but at the same time it clearly does very little to combat stereotypical representations of African Americans in Hampton Roads.

Whoever it is that commits crimes in our region, are all of these crimes, or even most of them, truly newsworthy? And, should crimes consistently be treated as lead stories on the local evening news, replete with teasers (“Exclusive Report on Alleged Rape at 6 p.m.”) and news flashes? **Are our local television stations actually telling viewers what’s really going on, and what they really need to worry about, or are they instead distorting the images we have of each other and our region, and thereby poisoning the well?**

Ultimately, television ratings are crucially important. A few months ago, The Virginian-Pilot reported that three major individuals involved with news broadcasts at WTKR were “no longer employed at WTKR effective immediately” (Virginian-Pilot, June 22, 2008). The Pilot commented that WTKR had “lagged in news ratings” and that specific individuals had been hired to improve this situation, but desired progress had not occurred.

We found that those who choose to watch the local news encounter coverage that is heavy on crime stories. By and large, local evening newscasts don’t emphasize good deeds. If they did, perhaps we wouldn’t watch. Local television reporters and news managers chose not to react to these findings. Even though we made several contacts with each of the four regional network television stations (by telephone and multiple e-mails) and even though we provided them with preliminary copies of our data, as well as Internet links to previous State of the Region reports, they declined to talk with us about any of these issues.² Readers may draw their own conclusions about this “hunker down” behavior because it is something that television news broadcasts often expose and criticize. It is sufficient for us to record that we were disappointed. We suspect that Newton Minow would have had the same reaction.

² Two of the stations acknowledged our queries, but then declined to talk further.

