11-2003

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Recommended Citation

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ABSTRACT

Viewers of local television newscasts across the United States are regularly exposed to crime news stories. Crime coverage by local television stations is studied with an interest in how live reporting, dramatic video, and timeliness influence perceptions of race in the United States. Crime coverage did not always identify the race of a suspect because that information often was not available from police. However, when violent criminals or suspects were identified, race normally was shown through a mug shot, photograph, or video from the scene. When an African-American suspect was shown in police custody, the images tended to reinforce existing racial stereotypes about African-Americans as dangerous criminals.

Media images may be seen as representations that contribute to the social construction of race in the United States (Gray, 1995). Historically, for example, network television used Black characters and themes, despite the fact that Whites tended to control programming. Positive and negative representations in media may reflect ideology and attempts to encode meanings for audience members (McQuail, 2000). Representation of race also may lead to discussion of social class and structure in the United States. Mass media portrayals construct social reality for individuals and groups. Surette (1992) argued that our collective view of crime is shaped by entertainment portrayals and that news coverage appeals to voyeurism. Ultimately, such a portrait supports law-and-order policies and becomes an accepted version of social reality.

The imagery of television news may contribute to racism and discrimination through promotion of various stereotypes (Campbell, 1995). Viewers of local television newscasts from across the country are regularly exposed to crime news stories. In the present article, crime coverage was studied with an interest in how live reporting, dramatic video clips, and timeliness influence perceptions of race in the United States.

Television News, Society, and Newsworthiness

Television, in general, and local television (TV) news broadcasts in particular, are a part of everyday life. According to a Roper survey, 56% of Americans considered television to be their primary source for news (Roper, 1999b). Respondents who said they received most of their news about national and international issues from television identified three main sources: cable; local; and network TV news. Surprisingly, 39% said they turned to local TV news for national and international stories – second only to cable news (Roper, 1999a). However, only 16% said local TV news was doing the best job of covering the news, behind cable and network TV (Roper, 1999c).

The criticism of local TV news has not turned viewers away from it. Local TV news is, of course, a local production that emphasizes what newsrooms perceive as interesting for themselves and their viewers. So-called "hard news" emphasizes "ongoing" events during the past day, and crime stories fit this model (Jamieson & Campbell, 2001, pp. 40–41). Violent crimes such as murders, robberies, and rapes are newsworthy because of identifiable elements. These elements are ideal for the art of story telling: definable events between individuals are concrete rather than abstract; dramatic, conflict-filled and intense stories are seen as interesting; crime is seen as disrupting order and threatening the community; TV news emphasizes short, simple and verifiable stories; and crime is visual and may be easily videotaped (Jamieson & Campbell, 2001).

By definition, society defines crime as those serious behaviors that violate public laws. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provides crime statistics in its Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). The government defines violent crime as murder/manslaughter, rape, robbery, assault, burglary, large theft, and, in some cases, arson (Brownstein, 2000). The concept of violent crime is not clear because, like crime itself, violence can be recognized without an explicit definition: "This is true in part because violence is not just one thing but rather many things, making it easier to give examples of violence than to say exactly what it is" (Brownstein, 2000, p. 6).

Public opinion polls consistently found during the 1990s that a majority of Americans worried that crime was getting worse (Gallup, 2000). Network television newscasts' coverage of murders increased by about 600%, even though the national murder rate dropped by 20% in the period 1990–1998 (Westfeldt & Wicker, 1998) and the violent crime rate dropped by a record 10.4% in 1999 from the previous year (Associated Press, 2000). No data exist for comparing local television news coverage of crime and local crime rates. For more than 40 years, the Gallup Poll has found that Americans identify crime as either the first or second problem facing their local community. In the 2000 poll, 27% mentioned crime (including drugs, guns, and gangs) as "the worst problem" (Gallup, 2000).

Crime news, by one estimate, accounts for about 14% of local news coverage, and the lion's share of that coverage focuses on sensational events (Graber, 1993). Graber argued that the public has an interest in exciting crime news. It is not clear whether or not media organizations cultivate the apparent demand for crime coverage. Jamieson and Campbell (2001) reduce the crime story to five characteristics: (1) personalized through perpetrators and victims; (2) dramatic, conflict-filled, controversial and violent; (3) actual and concrete; (4) novel or deviant; and (5) linked to issues of ongoing concern to media (p. 41). The emphasis on breaking news, live shots, and sensational video tends to place a premium on crime reporting (Westin, 2000).

The coverage of crime is an everyday occurrence in local television newsrooms. Crimes such as murder, while not the most frequent form of crime, get the most attention because of their seriousness. Local television news is seen as encoded to portray crime within a racial and economic context. By emphasizing crime in economically depressed neighborhoods, local newsrooms may reinforce stereotypes about minorities (Heider, 2000). This is all the more troubling, since local TV news broadcasts play a key role in formation of identities in cities across the United States (Kaniss, 1991).

News has typically been defined by criteria such as proximity, prominence, timeliness, impact, magnitude, conflict, and oddity (Ryan & Tankard, 1977). Not everyone agrees about the list. McManus (1994) included timeliness, proximity, consequence, human interest, prominence, unusualness, conflict, visual quality, amusement, and topicality. Often, news is dominated by "known" as opposed to "unknown" people (Gans, 1979, p. 9). When officials and politicians are not the principal sources of stories, the unknown sources often are victims: ". . .Unknowns are victims of natural or social disorders, most often of crime, and on television, of tornadoes, floods, fires, plane accidents, and other natural or technological disasters" (p. 14). News selection involves "frames" for stories and use of a few newsworthy items from many choices (Tuchman, 1978).

Race, Portrayal, and Local TV News

Local TV news coverage of crime inevitably raises issues of race. Race is considered a social rather than biological concept. The portrayal of African-American and Hispanic suspects may create an impression with viewers that reinforce stereotypes. Entman (1994b) offered the example of the murder of a child, allegedly by her mother, and a station's placing of the story in a "drug infested neighborhood" (p. 34). Likewise, the race of victims may also be important. Local TV news personalizes coverage by focusing on people and their emotions, including fear. The issue of media coverage of race has received renewed attention in the wake of former network television producer Av Westin's charge that "bias" is often present in newsrooms. Westin notes that "preconceived notions about race and ethnicity that can shape story selection and content. The conventional wisdom among many assignment editors is that

white viewers will tune out if blacks and Latinos are featured in segments. That view can influence the choice of the person who will provide the "expert" sound bite. There is no question that a lack of racial sensitivity affects news judgment. It is a problem that goes to the heart of fair and balanced presentation of the news on television (Westin, 2000, p. 21). Westin provides anecdotal evidence from interviews with newsroom employees. He claims that the television news business uses code words, such as "It's not good television," to exclude minority experts from newscasts. One employee told Westin: "My bosses have essentially made it clear: 'We do not feature black people.' Period. I mean, it's said. Actually, they whisper it, 'Is she white?'" No data are available that would suggest how pervasive this bias might be in local TV news. While Westin leaps to some conclusions about local television news practices, the present study relies upon media content—some of which clearly portrays minorities in positive ways.

In American mass media, African-Americans have been portrayed stereotypically. The Missouri School of Journalism (2000) outlined four criticisms of news coverage of minorities: (1) Stories do not show minorities in context. Most stories picture minorities as criminals or victims, or they emphasize conflict; (2) There is too much focus on atypical behavior, both good and bad, on crisis, or, on the other hand, of "colorful" festivals, holidays, and other "exotic" aspects of non-majority life; (3) There is too much focus on entertainment figures and on minorities who are "firsts" in their disciplines; and (4) There is not enough coverage showing minority people participating in the day-to-day life of their communities (p. 133).

On the one hand, there is the stereotype of African-Americans as "dangerous criminals" (Oliver, 1999, p. 46). On the other hand, there may be the stereotype of African-Americans as successful entertainers and athletes (Campbell, 1995). In one experiment conducted to test Caucasian viewers' memory of a criminal suspect in a television newscast, participants who had seen a Caucasian suspect in the news story were more likely to mistakenly identify him as an African-American (Oliver, 1999). Viewer memories may sustain racial stereotyping, regardless of content. However, cognitive theories have yet to fully explain how information processing is distorted over time.

In a content analysis of Los Angeles and Orange County local television news in 1995 and 1996, Dixon and Linz (2000) found that Blacks and Latinos are significantly more likely than Whites to be portrayed as lawbreakers: (1) Whites were significantly more likely to be portrayed as law defenders than law breakers; (2) in comparison with data from California crime statistics, there was an overrepresentation in the portrayal of African-Americans as lawbreakers while Latinos and Whites were underrepresented; and (3) in comparison with data from county employment records, there was an overrepresentation of White police officers, an under-representation of Latino police officers, and an accurate representation of African-American police officers portrayed in local TV news. However, another study in 1993–94 of one station in Los Angeles found that non-whites "were not substantially overrepresented" in violent crime news coverage (Gilliam, Jr., Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996, p. 10). In a yearlong study of the Los Angeles television station, the local news averaged three crime stories per day, and crime stories led half of the broadcasts. Media coverage produces an image that over-represents black violent crime.

Local news coverage, where individuals obtain much of their information about crime, feed a complex social environment in which stereotyping and crime may interact (Oliver, 1999). Local television news media may thus participate in what has been termed a form of "modern racism" (Entman, 1994b, p. 33). Entman's (1992) limited study of local television news found that "crime reporting made blacks look particularly threatening" (p. 342). A content analysis of the evening news on four Chicago television stations in 1989 and 1990 found evidence of indirect racism (Entman, 1992). Entman contends that the hiring of Black reporters and anchors masks the problem of racism. The portrayal of African-Americans in networks news also appeared to be stereotypical in that these images involved a narrow range of roles (Entman, 1994a). The issue focuses on the degree to which local television news portrayals, whether purposefully or not, create images that promote racial fears in a community. News coverage that portrays Black criminals may feed modern racist stereotypes. Coverage of minorities

may be seen as a "parable of poor and minority violent offenders" in society: "On a personal level, the ways we choose to distinguish ourselves from others can serve as a basis for fear, hatred, and even violence" (Brownstein, 2000, p. 133).

Media portrayals of criminals and victims, which inevitably display racial traits, may offer people a racial explanation rather than a social reason for crime. Brownstein (2000) reported that in 1995 there were more than 600,000 arrests for violent crime, and 54% were White. Yet Americans tend to jump to the conclusion that people of color are violent. The United States Department of Justice found that the number of arrests for violent crime dropped to 500,621 by 1997. At the same time, the percentage of Whites arrested increased to 56.8% (*Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1998, pp. 342–344). It has been argued that, although African-Americans comprise about 14% of the population in the United States, they represented more than 40% of arrests for violent crimes. Figures such as this may help drive negative stereotypes.

The emphasis on violent crime coverage in local television news means that the stereotype is imprinted on viewers' minds through the daily deluge of images. As has been stated earlier, local TV news crime coverage typically identifies suspects by mug shots, which identify race (Campbell, 1995). Likewise, surveillance camera video (such as that recorded in a convenience store armed robbery) typically shows race. The existence of video, of course, increases the value of the story to the local television newsroom. To some extent, news people should not be faulted for use of interesting video, given that television is a visual medium. No matter how trivial the event, existence of videotape is seen as exciting (Campbell, 1995; MacNeil, 1968).

Methodology

The present study of local television news content was part of a larger examination of reporting practices and content production across the United States. The exploratory study sought to build upon previous work, which tended to look at a single market or a handful of markets. In this study media markets across the nation were selected with an eye toward sampling a diverse cross-section of market sizes and network affiliations.

We arbitrarily selected the week of October 11–15, 1999, for extensive analysis. A day-by-day review of transcripts and tapes was treated as a snapshot of television crime coverage across the United States. Only by comparing station coverage throughout the nation on the same day can one see the similarities and differences in news selection, emphasis, and presentation. A "purposive" sample (Babbie, 1998, p. 195) of television markets from around the country was selected. Television professionals, academics, and others in key markets were contacted by e-mail and telephone to participate in taping late-evening newscasts during the week. A network-affiliated station (ABC, CBS, FOX, and NBC) was randomly assigned to each person who agreed to tape. The goal was to obtain a wide range of markets and affiliates across the United States. In the end, 17 respondents sent usable tapes for analysis. The tapes contained five newscasts from each night of the week (Monday–Friday) sampled, for a total of 82 newscasts (one tape did not contain all five broadcasts).

In this study, crime was defined as a known or alleged violation or serious offense of public law. The types of crimes were coded in the following categories: murder; assault; rape; drugs; theft; fraud; child abuse; sexual harassment; white collar; arson; threats; kidnapping; and other (Klite & Bardwell, 1997). A post-hoc check using Holsti's (1969) formula revealed intercoder reliability of 85.7%. Cresswell's (1994) qualitative research techniques were used to study common images and language found in the crime stories. The images that appeared most included "scene of the crime" footage, shots of crowds and media gathered at the crime scene, courtroom footage, and police searching for suspects and investigating the crime scene. Other images not shown as frequently, but still regularly appearing in the newscasts were: home videos of the victim; still photos of the murdered victim; still photos of the criminal; police sketches of the criminal; damaged police cars; damaged criminals' cars; and paramedics transporting injured people.

Results

A total of 138 crime stories aired in the first segment of the newscasts, and 31% were presented as either packages or a combination of a live/package report (14.4% package; 16.6% live/package). (According to Papper (2002), a package is a pre-recorded report with reporter narration over video, a stand-up in front of the camera, and sound bites. A voice-over is a story, which begins with a news anchor on camera reading the first line or two, and then continues with the anchor reading over video. A reader is when the anchor appears on the screen reading the story without video.) The percentage of crime stories as voice-overs was the greatest (37.6%), followed by voice-over/sound-on-tape (22.4%), readers (5%), and live reports (4%). The analysis was limited to the first segment of each broadcast. Twenty-seven out of the 82 lead stories (32.9%) were crime-related. This percentage was higher than for any other type of story: 17.1% concerned the courts; 9.8% were government or public affairs stories; 9.8% were weather/natural disasters; 8.5% were human interest stories; 7.3% were accidents; 6.1% were education issues; 2.4% were environmental issues; 1.2% were political coverage; 1.2% were health issues, and there were no lead stories about public moral problems or business/ economy. An additional 3.7% of "other" stories fit none of the established categories. Among lead crime stories, assaults and a jail escape (other category) received the most coverage. Only two types of crimes were recorded in the "other" section: two stories about criminals violating court orders and six stories about a criminal who escaped while he was being transported from one jail to another.

Several common language devices emerged. First, many adjectives and descriptive terms were used. These included: "a dangerous chase," "dramatic car crash," "violent takeover robbery," "terrifying ordeal," and "heartbreaking call." Other adjectives and words commonly used were "nightmare," "tragedy," "brutal," "terror," "desperate," "terrorized," and "disturbing." Many reporters used a narrative open with words or phrases that contrasted with each other. For example, upon telling her audience that police caught a kidnapper, one reporter stated: "In the heavy brush alongside the calm river lies the metro's most wanted man." Another reporter went to great lengths to set the scene of a terrible incident happening in a peaceful neighborhood. One can see that the following narrative accentuates the contrasting device mentioned above: "Sixteen houses make up this neighborhood. A close community where next weekend neighbors will gather for the annual fall festival. This evening, they gathered in concern, as word quickly spread that a teenager had been shot inside this home. Police carried out bags full of evidence. Neighbors were full of questions. The Monday afternoon quiet was pierced with screams. Apparently, one teen shot another teen with a 9-millimeter automatic pistol. Three hours after the screams and the gunshot rang out, police took away the crime scene tape, but not the questions."

Reporters and anchors used active tense in their writing. This came in the form of phrases such as "this just in," "we have breaking news," and "police tell us." Several stations used consultant phrases such as "tonight's big story," "this just in," and "breaking news" to convey a sense of urgency or importance. This was often followed by graphic details of the crime: ". . . her clothes were ripped off, she was repeatedly raped, with both her hands and feet bound, and then left here. . . ." The reporter made a gesture of her hands being bound as she gave her stand-up.

A final characteristic emerging from the language in local lead TV crime stories came from the selection of sound bites. Many of the sources made claims about some element of the story being covered, but gave no basis or evidence for those claims. For example, one police officer was speaking about a criminal who escaped from prison when he said: "It's just a matter of time before he hurts someone else." Daly and Chasteen's (1996) found that, in 90% of the crime stories they studied, sources offered no evidence to support their claims. In fairness to these sources, however, perhaps the evidence they gave was edited out of the story.

Crime coverage often did not identify the race of a suspect because that information was not always available from police. When violent criminals or suspects were identified, race normally was shown through a mug shot, photograph, or video from the scene. When a suspect was shown in police

custody, the images tended to reinforce existing stereotypes about African-Americans as dangerous criminals. In order to elaborate how local television news deals with race, three examples from the videotapes were examined. They are instructive because these were cases where African-Americans were explicitly identified and portrayed.

The first example comes from WTOK-TV in Meridian, Mississippi. Throughout the week, there was a mixture of positive and negative stories showing African-Americans. Positive stories included parental involvement in school activities, black state legislators actively participating in debate over term limits and a state lottery, and a Yale law professor commenting on prayer in school. On the negative side, there were stories in which African-Americans were accused of committing crimes. This small market station came out of ABC's "Monday Night Football" with the following preview "bump" as a lead-in to the newscast: "A dangerous chase in Meridian has left one law enforcement officer hurt." The African-American suspect was shown being led away in handcuffs. The white anchor said the chase started as a robbery, and a reporter package followed. The African-American reporter stood in front of a shoe store where viewers were told the suspect had shown a gun, taken three pairs of shoes, and $100. Police quickly began a chase to a nearby Interstate highway. An African-American highway trooper involved in the chase was interviewed. Several damaged police cars were shown, as well as the arrest scene along the Interstate. The reporter said the man was traveling at speeds of more than 100 miles per hour. The station showed the suspect restrained inside a cruiser, and the reporter noted that he had resisted arrest. The 39-year-old suspect was shown as being wild and disorderly. The reporter noted: "It took several officers to control him." As the suspect was led to the jailhouse, there was a close-up of the white sheriff's bandaged hand.

The second example comes from KMBC-TV in Kansas City, Missouri. In Kansas City, African-Americans were frequently pictured in the news and on the set. The station had an African-American weathercaster and sportscaster. The station frequently featured Black athletes in stories during the sample week. Additionally, there were local and national crime stories. In one story about a bank robbery, a security camera image captured a Black male suspect. Following "Monday Night Football" on this ABC affiliate, viewers saw videotape of the aftermath of an early morning fatal accident involving police. A sound bite from a daughter of one of the African-American victims is heard: "There wasn't a siren. I'll take that one to court. No apology, no nothing. I mean, you need to tell me something if you killed my daddy." A White anchor read: "Shock and anger for two Kansas City families tonight, and they want answers." A White reporter live in the newsroom was following the investigation of the deaths of two people in a car hit by the police car. A Black witness said the police cruiser entered the intersection without lights and siren, as officers rushed to help other officers on a stolen car chase. The African-American family was shown as being loud and vocal. The report discredited allegations made by the family that rescue workers treated police first.

Our final example comes from WKYT-TV in Lexington, Kentucky. In Lexington, African-Americans were shown only a few times on the news during sample week. There were no African-American reporters or anchors shown on the station. In a story about the school budget, an African-American board member was seen, but not used as a source. In a story about an anthrax scare, an African-American professional, referred to as a "concerned citizen," was interviewed. The station also aired a syndicated story about Global Positioning Technology in which an African-American expert was interviewed. In a story about University of Kentucky student football tickets, the station interviewed an African-American intramural flag football supervisor. A story about a rat-infested low-income apartment building featured an African-American man describing the conditions. Coverage of crime during the week did not seem to focus on race. The lead preview story and second story in the late evening news Monday was a voice over. It began with the anchor reading and an over-the-shoulder graphic of a gun barrel and two bullet holes labeled "LEXINGTON SHOOTING." The video showed yellow crime scene tape, police investigators, and flashing lights. Police were shown looking inside the car. The anchor said police were investigating a shooting of a man in the passenger seat of a car on the city's North side:

"Police say he was hit by two or three bullets, but was conscious when taken to U.K. hospital. Police are looking for three suspects." There was no explicit mention of race in the story.

Discussion

Race is a complex issue in the study of local television news. For example, it is difficult to study the degree to which African-Americans are simply omitted from local news coverage. However, the present study did not find as many examples of racial stereotypes as other examples of research literature would suggest. Stereotyping of African-American suspects and criminals exists in some cases but not others. Viewers also are exposed to images of dangerous White suspects on the loose. Furthermore, local news reports are sometimes framed by African-American reporters. Despite the overwhelming literature to the contrary, the present study found numerous examples of positive coverage. It would seem that local market conditions, station employment practices, and news events in a community may drive the degree to which race is a positive or negative factor in the news.

Heider (2000) contends that the nightly mention of murders and robberies in specific parts of town leads the audience to see those locations as unsafe. Thus, the reinforcement of stereotypical assumptions about race may be driven by local TV news coverage: ". . . crime coverage may be reinforcing hegemony by reinforcing inscribed ideas about who commits crime (people of color), where most crimes occur (communities of color), and where crimes should not occur (White, affluent neighborhoods)" (p. 43). Even when news coverage focuses on a White suspect, White viewers may misidentify the suspect months later as an African-American: "This finding is consistent with the idea that stereotypes are maintained not only by attending to and remembering information that is consistent, but also by discounting information that is inconsistent" (Oliver, 1999, p. 56).

In other words, viewers who associate crime with minorities because of racist beliefs will misperceive news in order to remain consistent (Campbell, 1995). The challenge for local television journalists is to recognize and understand different ethnic and socio-economic groups, and also be open to treating African-Americans as unique individuals. An emphasis on black suspects in crime coverage tends to reinforce stereotypes for viewers. As Westfeldt and Wicker (1998) explain, "Blacks often are identified in these reports, particularly in arrest scenes on local television, as 'perps' (police shorthand for "perpetrators"); but it's not always explained that statistics show most 'black crime' to be committed not against whites but against other blacks in the black ghettoes common to major American cities. . . . It may be, therefore, that the public fears crime not so much as a personal threat but more as a destructive social force—and, worse that the heavy and unfair burden a get-tough imprisonment policy imposes on the black community also is seen as from a distance—as if it were happening elsewhere, of no personal concern to unaffected whites" (p. 51).

Local television news is often limited in crime coverage by the availability of visuals other than mug shots, and these may feed racial stereotypes. Still, newsrooms must be careful to portray crime in all parts of a city on an equal basis. Beyond this, racial stereotypes of viewers might be challenged by everyday coverage of African-American men and women as routine sources in news stories. It is not much of a leap, then, to suggest that the day-to-day coverage of crime news in this way may influence public opinion about the importance of the crime issue and possible solutions to it.

Heider (2000) suggests that there are two remedies to the problem: (1) more reporters in the field covering community issues; and (2) education of viewers and news people. Local TV news faces increasing competition from new technologies, and Heider contends that, in order to survive, a station must "convince viewers that it is in touch with the local community" (p. 95). Coverage of minorities will become increasingly important as the racial composition of each local television market becomes more diverse. In fact, minorities and women appear to be more visible on television news than ever before (Newkirk, 2000). Nevertheless, the view of White America that equality has been achieved is tempered by cultural concerns. Therefore, it is likely that criticisms about how local television newsrooms cover minorities will continue.

Media representations, which contribute to the social construction of race in the United States, involve characters and themes. Positive and negative representations in media may reflect ideology, meanings, and division of social class and structure in the United States. Mass media portrayals construct social reality for individuals and groups. The accepted version of social reality as seen through local television newscasts across the United States may favor stereotypical interpretations by some viewers.

Crime has been a staple in the definition of news for more than a century. It will continue to be considered newsworthy. In the foreseeable future, it is likely that crime coverage will continue to be important for local television news. The presentation of crime news, including the use of dramatic and violent video, will continue to be an ongoing issue in the study of race in the United States. The framing of race and treatment of social inequality (Gandy, 1994; Gandy & Baron, 1998) remains central to co-cultural communication practices (Orbe, 1998), as well as interethnic communication from an African-American research perspective (Orbe, 1995). Local television news has the potential to contribute to or mitigate modern racism through the images portrayed to the public. The framing of stories through language and pictures contributes to the beliefs people hold about their communities, including how they view people of different races. Ongoing social and racial inequality – reflected, for example, in the composition of newsroom managers – continues to constrain social change within media organizations and the society they influence through stereotypical coverage. Future media research may help advance efforts to promote racial progress toward a world based upon equality.

This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Central States Communication Association Annual Conference (Omaha, Nebraska, April 12, 2003), where it received the designation of "Top 3 Paper," Political Communication Interest Group.

COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: HUMANITIES STYLE
Lipschultz, Jeremy H., and Hilt, Michael L. "Race and Local Television News Crime Coverage." *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3.4 (2003).
http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile (insert access date here).

COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: SCIENTIFIC STYLE
Lipschultz, J.H., & Hilt, M.L. (2003). Race and local television news crime coverage. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education,* 3(4).
http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile (insert access date here).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE
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