The Changing Misrepresentation of Race and Crime on Network and Cable News

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Prior research found that stereotypical media content shapes the perception of racial groups and social policy. Using the UCLA Communication Studies Digital News Archive, we sampled 146 cable and network news programs aired between 2008 and 2012. Findings revealed that Blacks were actually “invisible” on network news, being underrepresented as both violent perpetrators and victims of crime. However, Whites were accurately represented as criminals. Moreover, Latinos were greatly overrepresented as undocumented immigrants while Muslims were greatly overrepresented as terrorists on network and cable news programs. The implications of these findings are contextualized using the “guard dog” media coverage theory, structural limitations/economic interest of media, ethnic blame discourse, and the community philanthropy perspective.

Keywords: News, Race, African Americans, Muslims, Latinos, Immigration, Terrorism, Crime.

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Past research has documented that news programs overrepresent African Americans as criminals and overrepresent Whites as victims and officers (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). However, little prior research has been done on whether these distorted portrayals occur on network news shows and what has been done is largely dated. In addition, few prior studies have content analyzed the 24-hour cable news stations that have come to dominate national television news coverage (Pew Research Center, 2007). Finally, prior research exclusively focused on Blacks and violent crime and did not expand to other racialized groups or crime issues. The current study attempts to address these shortcomings.

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We undertake a content analysis of network and cable programming drawn over the last 5 years to examine race and crime-related issues. In addition to crimes associated with African Americans, we also assess undocumented immigration and terrorist activities, two crimes linked with Latinos and Muslims (Das, Bushman, Bezemer, Kerkhof, & Vermeulen, 2009; de Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012). Below, we discuss prior research on network news and race. Afterward, we discuss the need to assess additional social groups and media outlets. Finally, we offer some research questions and hypotheses that drive the current research inquiry.

Network news race and crime portrayals
A study undertaken by Dixon, Azocar, and Casas (2003) demonstrated that Whites were overrepresented as victims and officers. At the same time African Americans were underrepresented in these same crime roles. However, the data from this study came from the 1990s, prior to the September 11 attacks and the immigration reform debate. Dixon et al.’s (2003) research is further complimented and extended by the more recent work of Owens (2008), who found that Whites dominated network news coverage, often appearing as sources and experts. Owens’ study remains useful, but neither Dixon et al. nor Owens examine cable news outlets. The current study attempts to address these shortcomings.

The need to examine cable
Scholars as of late have turned much of their attention to the role of cable news in furthering partisanship, political divide, and stereotyping (Holbert, Hmielowski, & Weeks, 2012; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Morris, 2007; Stroud & Lee, 2013; Turner, 2007). This research collectively makes several conclusions. First, liberals and conservatives assume that the content of various cable news outlets will either align with their political views or diverge from them. They therefore selectively expose themselves to news that will align with their beliefs and avoid outlets that will diverge (e.g., conservatives watch FOX news) (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Second, conservatives have a particularly strong allegiance to FOX news (Morris, 2007). Third, credibility judgments are influenced by partisanship and cable news outlet consumption (Stroud & Lee, 2013). In fact, the ideological perception of various cable outlets is so strong that simply labeling a news outlet as FOX or CNN affects perceived bias (Turner, 2007). These prior studies all suggest that there are perceived effects of exposure to cable news due to bias. However, few content analyses of cable news programming have been designed to understand the extent of the potential bias. The current study seeks to address this issue by including cable programs in a systematic content analysis.

Latinos, news, and immigration as racialized policy
Much of the discussion regarding racial stereotyping has focused on African Americans or Blacks. However, Latinos are an ethnic group comprised of Blacks, Asians, Whites, and Native Americans that is the single largest ethnic category tracked by the U.S. census and the fastest growing demographic in the United States (Mastro
& Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Given this growing category of people, it is important to investigate how the media may be representing them (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

Although there is much less academic research on this ethnic group, scholars have found evidence that Latinos are often linked with “problem issues” such as undocumented immigration in the news (Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao, 2003). For instance, prior research suggests that Latinos appeared in stories that dealt with social problems at a rate almost twice that of Whites in local newspapers. However, we could locate no studies that directly assessed network or cable news representations of Latinos and immigration and much of this prior research is extremely dated. The current study seeks to directly address this issue.

Muslims, news, and terrorism as Islamophobia

Similarly, a number of scholars argued that news coverage both before and after 9/11 consistently linked Muslims with terrorism (Harris, 2009). However, cultural critics and other observers have consistently noted that since 9/11 the news has spent a substantial amount of time reporting on terrorist acts committed by Muslims (Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, & Garland, 2004; Nacos, 2003). In addition, the news has framed U.S. counterterrorism activities as a moral deterrent against “evil.” However, much of the research that we could locate analyzed newspapers, magazines, and advanced cultural criticism rather than systematic content analyses of network and cable news programs. The current study is designed to address this shortcoming and to extend our understanding of cable news.

Study overview and research questions

We undertake a rigorous content analysis of network (CBS, ABC, and NBC Nightly News) and cable news (FOX News, MSNBC, and CNN) that utilizes the interreality comparison advanced by Dixon and his colleagues (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Dixon et al., 2003) to understand whether various groups are underrepresented or overrepresented in various roles. The most effective way to do this is to compare the percentage of African Americans, Whites, Latinos, and Muslims appearing in network and cable news in various roles to the percentages contained in official reports. Our content analysis relies on a series of these interreality comparisons.

First, we compare the crime reports compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice to the proportion of African American and White perpetrators and victims appearing in the news. Second, the percentage of Latino immigrants and undocumented immigrants is contrasted with special reports authored by the Pew Center and the Department of Homeland Security. Third, the proportion of Muslim terrorists in the news is compared with the number of Muslim terrorists according to a report distributed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Using this methodology, we investigate three hypotheses. First, based on prior research (Dixon et al., 2003) we expect that Whites will tend to be overrepresented victims, while Blacks would be overrepresented as perpetrators. Second, based on prior research suggesting that Latinos are associated with problem issues, we expect
that they will be overrepresented as undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, we
expect that Muslims will be overrepresented as terrorists compared to official govern-
ment reports. Finally, we examine the question of whether cable news outlets differ
from network news outlets in their treatment of social category and crime portrayals.

Methods

We drew the sample in this study by relying on a number of procedures developed
by content analysis experts (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Dixon et al., 2003;
Potter et al., 1998). The equal probability of selection method (EPSEM) was the foun-
dation of this approach. By using this method one can argue that the sample drawn
is representative because every program has an approximately equal chance of being
included. This increases the chances that the news programs approximate the char-
acteristics of the population of network and cable stations under study. We drew our
sample from a population of news programs gathered as part of the UCLA Com-
munication Studies News Archive (Rosenthal & Steen, 2012). The archive boasts a
population of hundreds of thousands of news programs that have been digitally cap-
tured since 2006. The archive programs are accessible through a web search engine
that uses news program annotation.

In order to capture recent news programs we used a sampling frame that included
news shows aired between 2008 and 2012. Using the EPSEM method, we drew two
composite weeks of news programs. We choose two composite weeks for two reasons.
First, we were primarily interested in crime stories, and these kinds of stories are less
frequent than policy stories so we doubled our sample to increase our chances of cap-
turing these stories. Second, one might argue that the day of the week or time of year
might influence coverage of certain issues. By using a composite week in which any of
the 52 Mondays, Tuesdays, etc., might be sampled, we could address any systematic
variation because of time of year or day of the week.

We used a sampling without replacement technique to select each year between
2008 and 2012 to insure that all 5 years were represented in the sample. We first used
a random number generator to select one of the 5 years. Next we looked at the TV
schedule to determine what days that specific program airs (Sunday to Saturday or
Monday to Friday). We then tried to locate which day of the week (e.g., Monday) in
that year to sample by using the random number generator to randomly select one of
the 52 corresponding weekdays for the particular year selected. Once a weekday was
selected, we looked up the corresponding date and summoned that program in the
archive. We repeated this process until each representative weekday was selected and
populated with a different and/or minimally repeated year in the sample. This method
allowed us to generalize across all 5 years and to randomly include programs across
all of the various time periods throughout the year.

Our goal was to include the flagship breaking news programs at each of the
broadcast and cable networks. In addition, we were limited to the breaking news
programs contained in the archive from which we derived our sample. The following
Table 1  Breakdown of Sample Target Composite Weeks and Channels Showing at Least a Single Crime Story of Interest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Cable or Network</th>
<th>Air Times of Various Shows</th>
<th>Number of Programs Sampled</th>
<th>Number of Programs Containing Crime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Sunday–Saturday</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Sunday–Saturday</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Monday–Saturday</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBS</td>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Monday–Friday</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>Cable</td>
<td>Sunday–Saturday</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOX</td>
<td>Cable</td>
<td>Monday–Friday</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSNBC</td>
<td>Cable</td>
<td>Monday–Friday</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Univision</td>
<td>Cable</td>
<td>Sunday–Saturday</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>146</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

nightly network news programs were included in the sample: ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, and the NBC Nightly News. These evening programs are the major broadcast networks’ primary news shows. In addition, we sampled the breaking news programs aired on each of the cable news stations that were included as part of the archive from which we drew our sample: Univision (Univision Ultimate Hora & Noticero Univision), Fox Cable News (Fox News Live & On the Record With Greta Van Sustren), Cable News Network CNN (Anderson Cooper/Anderson Cooper 360, CNN Newsroom Live, Situation Room), and MSNBC (MSNBC Live). The final sample included 146 programs. Out of these programs, about 90 of them contained at least one crime story. Please see Table 1 for a description of the final sample.

Coding and reliability

Seven undergraduates worked as coders on this study. The coders were 14% African American, 14% Latino, 42% Asian American, and 30% White. After 30 hours of training, each of the 146 news programs was randomly assigned to a coder from the UCLA Communication Studies News Archive web site (Rosenthal & Steen, 2012). In order to assess reliability, all coders were asked to code the same 10% of the news programs during the coding process. The reliability programs were included in the final sample.

We used two reliability assessments in the current study, Krippendorff’s alpha and the revised version of Cohen’s kappa. Both allow for the assessment of multiple coders, and both have been hailed as relatively strong measures of reliability assessment (Krippendorff, 2004). For Cohen’s kappa, the reliability on the variables was high based on the overall agreement that ranged from .76 to .99. The average \( \kappa \) was .90. The coefficients for Krippendorff’s alpha were not as high but still reached acceptable levels of reliability. The overall agreement ranged from .60 to .90 for Krippendorff’s alpha. The average \( \alpha \) was .72. The specific measures utilized in the study are described below.
Level of analysis

News programs contain several segments or crime stories. We used the following conceptual definition to detect crime stories: “A news program is composed of several news stories. News stories are narratives about a particular topic which can contain one or more of the following components: Background Slide and Title, Anchor Overview, Anchor Report, Field Reporter Overview, Prerecorded Field Report, Spontaneous Field Report, Live Interviews, and Anchor Wrap-Up. A change in background slide and title ALWAYS indicates that a different news story has begun.” Coders were asked to code crime stories located in the breaking news section of the newscasts or the sports section of the newscasts. Weather stories were not coded. Only stories about law-breaking were coded.

Contained within many but not all of the crime stories were perpetrators and victims of crime. We defined perpetrators as: “... the person(s) identified in the article as the alleged perpetrator of the crime (including person[s] apprehended as well as at large).” We defined victims as the actual people shown who suffered loss or injury, including people subject to mental terror or potential physical danger, such as those at a shooting spree, bombed building, or armed bank robbery. We coded the following variables at the perpetrator level of analysis: (a) the race (e.g., African American, White, or other) of perpetrators (α = .90, κ = .88), (b) the crime committed (α = .60, κ = .80) (e.g., murder, robbery, undocumented immigration), (c) the race of victims (α = .70, κ = .83), (d) the religion of suspects (e.g., Muslim) (α = .71, κ = .90), whether the suspect was a terrorist (α = .70, κ = .97), and whether the suspect was an immigrant (α = .63, κ = .97).

Comparative data and conceptual definitions of crime, race/ethnicity, and religion

We only coded those indexed crimes (e.g., murder) tracked by the U.S. Department of Justice so that we could compare news’ crime portrayals to crime data. We utilized the Uniform Crime Reports that provided data on the race of criminal suspects arrested between 2008 and 2012 and the race of homicide victims over the same years (U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). We defined law breaking as “behavior or information either dealing with the commission of a particular crime, or social and/or legal reaction to crime problems more generally.”

In order to compare the ethnicity of immigrant suspects on network and cable news to the ethnicity/national origin of immigrants to the United States, we utilized a special report from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2013). In order to compare the ethnicity of undocumented immigrants in the United States to those who are depicted as undocumented immigrants on network and cable news, we utilized a special study undertaken by the Pew Foundation (Passel, 2005). We also used the most recently released supplemental reports on terrorism authored by the FBI (2006) to compare the religion of terrorists on network and cable news to the religion of terrorists identified by the U.S. government.

Race/ethnicity included African Americans, Whites, Latinos, and others. Although Latinos are an ethnic group with multiple racial identities, we assessed them
separately to compare them with depictions of African Americans and Whites who had no Latino ancestry. This is similar to the procedures utilized in previous content analyses (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). When doing the comparisons with data compiled by the U.S. Department of Justice “Latinos” and “Others” were combined into a single “Other” group in order to make the comparisons consistent with the way the data is compiled by the government.

The following variables were used to determine the race/ethnicity and religion of perpetrators and victims: (a) shown on videotape ($\alpha=.90$, $\kappa=.91$) and (b) photo shown ($\alpha=.70$, $\kappa=.86$). In this sense, we relied exclusively on apparent race indicators instead of the inferred race indicators used in prior studies (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). Coders were told to use any and all evidence presented in the videos and photos to determine the race/ethnicity/religion of characters, including reporter descriptions, clothes indicating religious preference, and visual likeness of the race/ethnicity/religion being categorized.

**Results**

As we stated above, we utilized only those indexed crimes that were tracked by the U.S. Department of Justice in the first part of our analysis. Below, we describe the types of indexed crimes committed by perpetrators on network and cable programs. Afterwards, we report the results according to the order the hypotheses were posed.

**Law-breaking and comparisons with an earlier study of network news**

The last major content analysis of network news found that 98% of the news programs sampled contained at least one perpetrator accused of an indexed crime according to the Justice Department (Dixon et al., 2003). This research also found that half of all the indexed crimes that appeared on network news were violent crimes. When we examined the pattern of criminal portrayals in our own data set, we found the incidents of indexed crime reporting much less prominent. Only about 60% of network and cable news programs contained at least one perpetrator accused of committing an indexed crime. However, the indexed crimes discussed tended to again emphasize violent crime (47%).

In reality the vast majority of crime actually involves nonviolent offenses, therefore we focused our attention on this overly emphasized violent criminal behavior in the rest of the analysis (Dixon et al., 2003; Oliver, 1994). When we just analyzed network portrayals, we noted there were relatively more White violent perpetrators (57 vs. 48%) and fewer Black perpetrators (13%) in the current study compared to the prior Dixon et al. (2003) study (38%). In addition, there were more White homicide victims on network news (64%) versus White homicide victims in the previous study (51%). However, the percentage of Black victims in the current study plummeted to 7% compared with the earlier study (30%). These results buttress the justification for the current study, reminding us that content analyses are only snapshots of mediated depictions that need to be periodicially updated. Below, we provide data on the hypotheses that are at the center of this study.
Table 2  Percentage of Violent Perpetrators by Race Contained in Crime Reports Compared With the Percentage of Violent Perpetrators by Race Depicted on Network and Cable News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Arrest Rate(^a) (%)</th>
<th>TV Perp(^b) (%)</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential(^c)</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>±12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-20(^d)</td>
<td>±10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>+23(^d)</td>
<td>±11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(\chi^2 = 17.20\ (2, N = 35), p < .001\).
\(^a\)Percentage of Whites, Blacks, and Asians who were arrested according to the U.S. Department of Justice Uniform Crime Reports 2008–2012: http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr-publications#Crime.
\(^b\)Percentage of Whites, Blacks, and Asians who appeared as perpetrators on network television news.
\(^c\)Difference between the television percentage and the arrest rate percentage for each racial group (TV % – Arrest %).
\(^d\)Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

Interreality comparisons of race and crime on cable and network news

Our first hypothesis suggested that Whites will tend to be overrepresented as victims, while Blacks would be overrepresented as perpetrators. As Table 2 shows, Whites were just as likely to be depicted as violent perpetrators of crime on network and cable news (57%) than to be arrested for violent crimes according to crime reports (59%). Similarly, according to Table 3, Whites were just as likely to be portrayed as homicide victims (47%) as to be victimized in the “real world” according to crime reports (36%). We considered these proportions equated because a 12-percentage-point difference is required to be statistically significant.

As Table 2 shows, African Americans were significantly much less likely to be depicted as violent crime perpetrators on network and cable news (19%) than to be arrested according to crime reports (39%). Similarly, as displayed in Table 3, African Americans were less likely to be portrayed as homicide victims (22%) than to be homicide victims according to crime reports (48%).

Interreality comparisons of immigration

Our second hypothesis was that Latinos would be overrepresented as undocumented immigrants. In order to test this hypothesis, we dichotomized our race variable to indicate whether or not the perpetrator was Latino. We also examined the race of perpetrators identified as immigrants and we assessed which racial groups were accused of undocumented immigration. Table 4 reveals that Latino perpetrators were significantly more likely to be seen as immigrants (97%) on network and cable news than to actually be immigrants in U.S. society (47%) according to official reports. Similarly, Table 5 also reveals that 99% of the undocumented immigrant perpetrators are Latino, while 75% of undocumented immigrants in society can be characterized as Latino according to official reports. These results suggest strong support for Hypothesis 2.
Table 3 Percentage of Homicide Victims by Race Portrayed on Network and Cable News Compared With the Percentage of Victims by Race Contained in National Homicide Reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Vic. Rate a (%)</th>
<th>TV Vic. (%)</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>+11</td>
<td>±12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>−26d</td>
<td>±10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>+14d</td>
<td>±10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 8.58 (2, N = 31), p < .01.$

aPercentage of Whites, Blacks, and Others who were victimized according to the U.S. Department of Justice Uniform Crime Reports 2008–2012: http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/ucr-publications#Crime.
bPercentage of Whites, Blacks, and Others who appeared as victims on network television news.
cDifference between the television percentage and the victimization rate percentage for each racial group (TV % – Arrest %).
dPercentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

Table 4 Percentage of Latino Immigrant Suspects in the United States Compared With the Percentage of Latino Immigrant Suspects Appearing on Network and Cable News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Report a (%)</th>
<th>TV Perp. b (%)</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential c</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>+50d</td>
<td>±6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Latino</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>−50d</td>
<td>±19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 23.51 (1, N = 31), p < .001.$

bPercentage Latino versus non-Latino immigrants who appeared as perpetrators on network an cable television news.
cDifference between the television percentage and the report rate percentage for each racial group (TV % – Arrest %).
dPercentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

Interreality comparisons of terrorist Muslims

Our final comparison tested whether Muslims would be overrepresented as terrorists compared to official government reports. Again we examined the religion of perpetrators identified as Muslims, and we assessed which religious groups were accused of terrorism according to official reports. Table 6 reveals that Muslim perpetrators were much more likely to be portrayed as terrorists (81%) than to actually be terrorists in U.S. society (6%) according to official reports. Conversely, non-Muslims were underrepresented as terrorists on network and cable news (19%) compared to how often they appear as terrorists in society (94%). This offers strong support for Hypothesis 3.
Table 5 Percentage of Latino Undocumented Immigrants in the United States Compared With the Percentage of Latino Undocumented Immigrant Perpetrators Appearing on Network and Cable News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Report (%)</th>
<th>TV Perp. (%)</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>+24d</td>
<td>±4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Latino</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>−24d</td>
<td>±4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( \chi^2 = 25.57 \) (1, \( N = 26 \), \( p < .001 \)).

\( a \)Percentage of Latinos versus Non-Latinos who were arrested for undocumented immigration according to Pew Foundation: http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/44.pdf.

\( b \)Percentage of Latinos versus Non-Latinos who appeared as undocumented immigrants on network and cable television news.

\( c \)Difference between the television percentage and the report percentage for each racial group (TV % − Report %).

\( d \)Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

Table 6 Percentage of Muslim Terror Suspects in the United States Compared to the Percentage of Muslim Terror Suspects on Network and Cable News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Report (%)</th>
<th>TV Perp. (%)</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>+75d</td>
<td>±19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Muslim</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>−75d</td>
<td>±19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( \chi^2 = 4.26 \) (1, \( N = 14 \), \( p < .05 \)).


\( b \)Percentage of Muslims who appeared as terrorists on network and cable news.

\( c \)Difference between the television percentage and the report rate percentage for each group (TV % − Report %).

\( d \)Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

Cable versus noncable comparisons

Our research question asked whether any differences would emerge between content that derives from different sources. We ran a series of chi-square analyses designed to assess differences between cable and noncable outlets. We tested whether immigrant perpetrators were more or less likely to appear as Latino on cable and network. We found that there were no differences, \( \chi^2 = 0.00 \) (1, \( N = 22 \), \( p > .99 \). There were also no differences between cable and noncable in the depiction of Muslim suspects of terror, \( p > .28 \). Similarly, there were no differences between cable and noncable in the depiction of Black perpetrators (\( p > .71 \)), White perpetrators (\( p > .29 \)), or Other perpetrators (\( p > .47 \)). The only difference that we observed was that Black homicide victims were more likely to appear on cable than on noncable shows, \( \chi^2 = 4.50 \).
(1, N = 8), p < .05. We interpreted this last result to be reflective of excessive cable coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting (Feeney, 2013). However, overall our results indicate very little difference in the depiction of race between cable and noncable outlets.

Discussion

In the current study we assessed both network and cable news portrayals of race and crime, utilizing Dixon and his colleagues’ interreality comparison of content (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Dixon et al., 2003). This study offered two innovations over past content analysis studies. First, we included cable programs in our analysis. Second, we assessed two new groups and issues that have not received much attention in the media content area: (a) Latinos and immigration and (b) Muslims and terrorism.

There are three notable findings from this study. First, there was an accurate representation of Whites and an underrepresentation of Blacks as both violent perpetrators and homicide victims. Second, Latinos are severely overrepresented as being both legal and undocumented immigrants. Third, Muslims are greatly overrepresented as terrorist suspects on these news programs. Below the implications of these findings are discussed. Afterward we provide an overview of how these findings instruct us on the potential effects of this content. We conclude with the limitations of this research and a call for future investigations of this topic.

Ethnic blame discourse, structural limitations, and the guard dog perspective

Prior researchers interested in issues of race/ethnicity and news have argued that news media tends to produce biased content because of two complimentary processes. First, journalists are constrained by the values, ethics, professional standards, and specific goals of their news organizations (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Dixon et al., 2003; Gans, 2003, 2004; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Second, journalists are influenced by the unconscious bias that tends to favor certain racial/ethnic/religious groups over others (Dixon et al., 2003; Gans, 2004; Heider, 2000).

For example, news programmers constantly pursue higher ratings to increase their profits. Therefore, accurate representations of the real world are not the first goals of many news decision-makers. Editors may instead attempt to air images that emphasize coverage that is most likely to draw in and keep audiences for long periods of time (Dixon & Linz, 2000b). This may involve highlighting controversial interracial, interethnic, or interfaith conflict as exemplified in the overrepresentation of Latinos as undocumented immigrants or the overrepresentation of Muslims as terrorists. It may also involve unusual or unique stories to fill the “symbolic arena” of mediated content (Gans, 2004; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). In addition, all journalists and news editors may succumb to “everyday racism” and unconscious bias, which leads them to associate social problems with race, ethnicity, or religion (particularly those social categories to which they do not belong) (Heider, 2000). Heider describes this phenomenon as incognizant racism—journalistic practices that are unconsciously influenced by stereotypical bias.
The guard dog perspective contains aspects of both the constraints of journalism and unconscious bias perspectives. It argues that the media behave like a “sentry” for the power structure within society. This perspective argues that news stories get greater attention if they identify a phenomenon as an intruder or threat (e.g., Muslim extremists threaten national security). According to this perspective, those with the least power in the system (e.g., immigrants) receive the most bias in news coverage. The guard dog perspective aligns very well with the findings in this study regarding Latino overrepresentation as undocumented immigrants and Muslim overrepresentation as terrorist.

However, the guard dog perspective of media bias goes on to suggest that when the media are concerned with an external threat, that will be the focus, while internal threats will be the focus at other times. This last point may offer a clue as to why there was no overrepresentation of Black criminality and overrepresentation of Whites in positive crime roles in the current study compared to prior work. As the national crime rate declines, so has the crime coverage on network programs. This “internal” threat of crime has been replaced by interparty bickering on social issues such as healthcare, and the “external threats” of terrorism and undocumented immigration. Our own data suggest that crime has declined as an area of interest for network news since Dixon and his colleagues reported on this topic in the late ‘90s and early 2000s (Dixon et al., 2003). Other recent reports back up this conclusion (Pew Research Center, 2013). Below we discuss the potential stereotypical impact of these findings and the limitations of the research.

The effects of biased content
Many of the prior studies of news and race effects have relied on the priming paradigm (Berkowitz, 1984, 2012; Dixon, 2006). The idea is that frequently or recently activated constructs are highly accessible and can be used to make future judgments. Dixon (2008) speculated that priming explained how consumption of network news led to higher levels of racial prejudice, perceptions of Blacks as poor, and perceptions of Blacks as intimidating. Our current results suggest that there is not much difference between the content on the various stations in terms of their breaking news shows. Therefore, as people make their news selections based on perceived content, they may nonetheless have the stereotypical link between certain racialized issues (e.g., immigration) and particular social groups (e.g., Latinos) reinforced (Dixon, 2006, 2007; Dixon & Azocar, 2007). However, future research will need to be undertaken to assess whether this is the case.

Limitations and future work
Although we have provided a relatively large data set of 146 programs, 10% higher than the last major study of network news and crime (Dixon et al., 2003), the sample is still small. The decline in indexed crimes reported heightens this limitation. Future studies should attempt to utilize larger samples. We also did not find many differences between cable and network television in the current study. This may be because of our
small population of programs that only contained the breaking news content aired on those programs (e.g., Fox News Live) and not the more polarizing on-air magazine personalities (e.g., Bill O’Reilly, Rachel Maddow). As opinion becomes more intertwined with initial news delivery, future studies should focus on this content in race and media studies in more expansive content analyses. Similarly, because of time and resources we could only focus on crime and criminal behavior in the current study. However, there is reason to believe that the racialization of politics — especially with the ascension of the first African American to the Presidency, Barack Obama — might be a notable area of inquiry.

Future effects studies should also be commissioned to examine this biased content across various regions of the country and different age groups with a specific emphasis on the American South where historical seeds of institutional racism persist (Center on Community Philanthropy, 2013). More data collection specific to local news in the region can help future researchers laser their focus to uncover potential regional differences or similarities based on geographic location.

As young people rely more on online media and avoid the news in general, does this make them less susceptible to biased content than older news audiences? Are there differences in regions, such as the South, that contain fewer numbers of Latinos and Muslims, which might cause TV viewers in these regions to embrace more of the stereotypes aired on these shows? Future research should investigate these issues.

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References


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