A Scripted Approach to Violent Crime Coverage: How News Media Strikes Fear and Facializes Political Discourse

Mackenzie Crosson

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Thesis Approval Form

Student Name: Mackenzie Crosson


Name Signature Date

Douglas Reckert-Powell, PhD 5/11/18
Thesis Director

Kenneth Daley
Program Director

Department Chair
A Scripted Approach to Violent Crime Coverage: How News Media Strikes Fear and Racializes Political Discourse

By

Mackenzie Crosson

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Cultural Studies Program
School of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Columbia College Chicago

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Abstract

This project analyzes the consolidation of crime coverage on the Chicago Tribune's digital platform with the aim to question the formulaic tendencies of news media as an institution. Specifically, the study examines the production of violent crime coverage in urban news media as following a particular “crime script” which, through the script’s reliance on racial imagery in the form of mug shots, proliferates toxic correlations between the concepts ‘black’ and ‘criminal.’ Paired with elements of a political economic analysis, the project argues that this templated production of crime news mixed with news corporations’ pursuit of profit ultimately works to racialize political discourse and marginalize communities of color. This problematization of the morally upstanding nature of truthful, objective journalism in a capitalist system calls into question how journalists today can more thoughtfully report on the communities they serve and help restore a sense of virtue in the work that they do.

Keywords: media studies, race studies, news media, crime script, political discourse
Introduction

There are times when working in journalism feels highly formulaic—the structure of stories from details of highest to lowest importance, crafting a leading sentence that grabs the reader’s attention, and sifting through countless noted details and interview transcriptions to find the facts that are waiting to be tied together in a cohesive form of ‘truthful’ storytelling. Even in photojournalism, picking up the camera to point and shoot without much thought or deliberation becomes a disappointingly easy approach to covering a story. Photographers know what they’re searching for: a wide shot of the entire scene, a close-up shot of an emotional or interesting character, the speakers at an event, something which conveys action, all of which should be presented in a visually pleasing format (which is, of course, another set of formulas guiding how a photographer should treat visually technical processes like composition). With strict deadlines and the high turnover of stories, it becomes increasingly tempting and effortless to fall into a pattern of fitting news into a designated template. This distanced, formulaic approach to journalism, however, contradicts the journalist’s very mission to act as a voice for the voiceless; communicate complicated issues and happenings to the wider public; and provide the platform on which the world is questioned, deconstructed and interpreted. Such a grand mission and purpose requires careful thought and analysis—a constant questioning of what news events, large and small, actually mean and how stories can be told to best communicate these meanings.

As a young, aspiring journalist, my work within cultural studies has allowed me to develop the tools to question the journalistic process. This inevitably has created pockets in which I feel discomfort in my work—especially with the claim that, as a journalist, I’m required to remain objective and unbiased. I’ve been forced to question if objectivity is even possible, which fundamentally problematizes a main component of journalistic virtue—and I do believe that being a journalist is a virtuous profession, which is why I’ve held such a deep passion for becoming one. With this virtue, however, comes great responsibility, and a journalist’s morally upstanding position in society must be constantly re-evaluated in
order to deconstruct how (and to what extent) journalists, as producers of highly consumed mass culture, impact daily life in an ideological way. How much of the news is an actual, unbiased, objective, and ‘truthful’ representation of the societal issues and topics that are reflected within news events? And with this, does the claim of objectivity somehow permit journalists from going deeper into the stories they tell?

It is with these questions that I approach my own analysis of news media coverage and its impact on the daily lives of its consumers. It’s not enough to simply write the news or supply an accompanying photograph or visual; as journalists, we must consider why we’re including certain details while omitting others, what the story we’re telling might be communicating about the world at large, and what danger exists in creating work in a formulaic way—or as it has always been done. Our approaches must shift, adapt, and ultimately work to tell stories that make the wider public question preconceived notions about the communities around us as well as potentially dangerous hegemonic ideals.

**Race, crime, fear and the media**

News media—just like its counterparts of film, television and commercials—is responsible for upholding, reiterating, challenging, or questioning the ideologies that permeate our society. However, this duty is particularly crucial and relevant for journalists, who take pride in their role in a democratic society, governed by their seemingly objective approach to everyday events and their dedication to the ethical, accurate and truthful depiction of facts and subjects within their stories. The correlation between the free press and a strong democracy is and has been a bedrock American value, though this seemingly established concept has become increasingly contested in the recent era of ‘fake news.’ Regardless of these contemporary debates, news has long been publicly and nationally perceived as a means of informing citizens and acting as a watchdog against the government, political agendas, and divisive hegemonic ideals. It is in this way that a journalist’s moral obligation is so often emphasized, as “in the
pure pursuit to produce informed citizens, news is a moral force and journalists act as moral agents” (Jackson 151).

Even in this pursuit, divisive ideals are rooted in topics of news coverage. Crime news has long been a key player in the development and maintenance of the commercial press in the United States, and therefore “an industry staple” from the 1830s to the present day (Stabile 3). As such a highly-produced theme of news content, patterns have formed around how the subject of violent crime is approached by local news outlets—and these patterns surround issues of race and race relations. It is not coincidental “that from the 1980s onward, the only way that blacks made the news in the U.S. was as the subjects of crime news, for this is a role that was historically carved out for them and that has over the past three hundred years been reproduced, resanctioned, and reinforced” (Stabile 4). Extensive scholarship within the academic world of cultural studies surrounds issues of race and violence (and racism as a broader concept) as portrayed in news media from various points in history. Much of this work has been completed around the trivialization of violence and subsequent criminalization of black communities that is present in contemporary news media, as well as consideration of how the media’s heavy attention toward and framing of crime influences the everyday fear of crime. The question becomes, though, what specific role news media play in upholding everyday associations between the concepts ‘black’ and ‘criminal’ and how these associations come to fruition. According to Carol A. Stabile, “Blackness more than any other type of identity has lain at the center of threat constructions...Representations of African-Americans as threats...bore no relation to the size of their population or the probability of any threat” (7). My argument is not that news reports of violent crime merely reflect the already-existent racial stereotypes of the public, but rather that news media is a key player in the construction and maintenance of these stereotypes that exist among news consumers. News, then, is just one of the institutions proliferating ideals that have increasingly racialized the world around us, inexplicably tying
race to how communities of color are perceived, urban spaces are navigated, and political agendas are pushed.

This topic can be approached from many angles and address any number of crucial areas of thought surrounding news media, violent crime, race and fear. There are three main questions that merit extensive analysis but which I will not be focusing on in my own approach: how the diversity of voices in a newsroom may impact how stories surrounding issues of race and ethnicity are covered; how “official” journalistic codes of ethics, both within journalistic organizations and those specific to each newsroom, govern how topics of race and ethnicity are covered, if at all; and how the political economy of news media impacts the coverage of news in relation to profit. Although I will be incorporating elements of a political economic analysis in my work, this is not, ultimately, the main goal of this analysis. Instead, I address how a formulaic approach to crime news production almost invisibly reproduces stereotypical notions surrounding race and criminality.

The consensus of past scholarship provides a few main concepts that I use as a foundation for my own study: the crimes for which viewers are exposed to a black perpetrator are more often violent crimes than they are nonviolent crimes\(^1\); whites are underrepresented and blacks are starkly overrepresented as perpetrators and lawbreakers on news programs\(^2\), meaning that local crime news does not accurately reflect the reality of crime patterns\(^3\); and a news outlet’s attention to crime news, and consequently the attention to crime news performed by the audience, significantly impacts the fear of crime and, as a result, the fear of black people\(^4\). Additionally, most of these analyses used local broadcast television news at the

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\(^3\) Daniel Romer, Kathleen Jamieson, and Nicole de Coteau (see Works Cited) attribute over and underrepresentation to coverage of intergroup versus intragroup crime.

core of its objects of study. Though this differs from my own case study, which focuses on digital news platforms, the same conclusions prove valid and useful.

These substantiated arguments made within previous research will be further bolstered by critically deconstructing the normalized contexts within which today’s news media operates. Jackson says that when there is a general consensus regarding acceptable behavior in a society, “journalists uncompromisingly uphold these moral judgements,” but when there is controversy in a society or community, “journalists generally strive to maintain an impartial approach to covering an issue or event” (152). Though violent criminal behavior is labeled as ‘criminal’ because it is outside the popular consensus of what is acceptable in our society, the issue of moral judgement is much more nuanced. For the body of scholarly research and material surrounding news media and violent crime in cultural studies to be complete, the fear of crime that news reinforces in the public must be investigated within the context of crime as a racialized news issue that exists in an always-already racialized context. Through this correlation, the fear of crime has become almost equivalent to the fear of non-white, specifically black, and low-income communities in today’s American society. News media, through the ways in which it reports on and tells stories surrounding crime, proliferates these fear-inducing racial rifts and, in doing so, fails in facilitating a public discourse in which communities of color have a significant voice. I also argue that this equation between violent crime and race means that if the general consensus is that violent crime is outside the realm of acceptable behavior, then the minority communities most commonly attached to this criminal behavior are consequently framed as the deviant ‘Other.’

But why do local news media cover stories of violent crime with such intensity, and how do these motives pose a challenge to a journalist’s responsibility to act morally and objectively? According to past scholarship on this topic, the tendency to focus on violent crime in urban news media is largely influenced by a news organization’s pursuit of larger audiences, a pull for potential advertisers, and the ultimate quest for profit. To achieve these goals, “market-driven news managers often seek news that has more of an
entertainment value" (Jackson 155). This point is reinforced by Gilliam and Iyengar, who state that “stories about crime provide several necessary ingredients for the successful marketing of news” including “concrete events with powerful impact on ordinary people, drama and emotion, and, above all, attention-getting visuals” (560). Not only this, but crime is typically easy to find (especially in highly populated urban areas) and cheap to produce, making it an ideal vehicle for news publications increasingly faced with highly “competitive commercial pressures” (Gilliam et al. 758). In Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky explore these competitive pressures that arise through a publication’s need for advertisers to invest in their content and the ways in which this influences the news being produced. They state that “entertainment has the merit not only of being better suited to helping sell goods; it is an effective vehicle for hidden ideological messages” (xviii).

These factors work to further complicate the challenges a journalist faces in their coverage of urban crime, as the reasons for focusing on crime coverage in urban areas has shifted more from journalistic merit to ease, accessibility, entertainment, audience numbers and ultimately financial gain. This positions journalists and the news media organizations they work for in a conflict with the larger capitalistic system within which the democratic free press operates, as “the amorality of capitalism clashes with journalism’s moral agency as defender of the public interest” (Jackson 147). The present lack of moral quality within capitalism demonstrates why news media and the capitalist system are so often left at a crossroads of interest, as journalists are constantly confronted with and must digest questions concerning what is right and what is wrong. With the lack of the same discretion in the system within which news media operates, a tension is developed between the journalist’s pursuit of facts and truth and the perceived need to reproduce the hegemonic ideals that uphold the capitalistic structure. Such a commitment to informative storytelling on behalf of the journalist is further complicated by the fact that news media outlets are businesses and do require a level of profit in order to achieve its mission of
informing the public and sharing the news—and it is not unusual for a news outlet to be owned by a larger media corporation, a level further removed from the point of informational transaction between journalist and public. Here, it may become easier to lose sight of a media company’s responsibility and mission as focus shifts from content creation to business logistics.

Without operating within this capitalist structure, however, news media organizations would not be able to support its staff of journalists; the production of print, broadcast, audio and digital news; or provide any kind of coverage to the consuming public who rely on news as a way to interpret and understand the world. For example, the Chicago Tribune is owned by tronc, Inc., a Chicago-based media company that oversees newsroom operations in a total of ten markets including (in addition to the Tribune) the Los Angeles Times, New York Daily News and The Baltimore Sun (“About Us”). The page refers to these media outlets as tronc’s “legacy of brands” and, in addition to mentioning these brands’ commitment to informing and engaging the local public they serve, it’s also highlighted that they offer “integrated marketing, media, and business services to consumers and advertisers, including digital solutions and advertising opportunities” (“About Us”). As a corporation that oversees several news outlets in a variety of major U.S. cities, its commitment to informing the public through the creation of news content appears to weigh equally in importance to providing marketing and advertising opportunities for consumers, embodying the idea that news media outlets are still businesses which require a means of profit accumulation. How corporations like tronc obtain this profit, then, is determined by the services it provides to advertisers and consumers, which includes the stories it chooses to tell and how many readers, viewers or watchers those stories draw to its outlets; in other words, the pursuit of profit can certainly influence what news is covered or what stories are told. Herman and Chomsky’s analysis rely on what they call the “propaganda model,” which “traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (2). It must be noted that their theory is not intending to suggest
that dissent or the “coverage of inconvenient facts” is not at all present in news media; however, the propaganda model holds “that such dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so that while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda” (xii).

This agenda also helps to explain how crime, violence, and violent crime as a concept is defined and perceived, especially in relation to the race or ethnicity of the perpetrator. Just as it must be considered who has the power to shape public perceptions of violent crime through journalistic crime coverage, it must also be questioned who has the power to define what constitutes both “crime” and “violence.” According to Stabile, “In the USA, various institutions and agents have waged long, bitter struggles over the power to define crime—to criminalize various acts to the exclusion of others...These decisions are in turn influenced by the relationship between institutions of policing (local, state, and federal) and funding sources” (3). This power to criminalize certain acts to the exclusion of others has opened the door to criminalizing certain social groups to the exclusion of other communities. Further complicating these questions surrounding the definitions of crime and violence, Stabile says “Not all crimes are violent and...not all violence is considered criminal, particularly when perpetrated by privileged white men and the state” (3). In this analysis, crime is considered “violent” when it involves a considerable level of force or assault against a victim. In the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program, four offenses fall under the umbrella of violent crime, all which “involve force or the threat of force”: murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (U.S. Department of Justice). Beyond the definition of the crime, however, there are multiple levels of violence at play in the ways in which violent crime is covered by news media, as well as how the suspects of such crimes are approached and framed.
The crime script and propaganda model: A new understanding of crime reporting

Although members of the public are ultimately the ones consuming and reacting to notions of violence and crime in their local news media, “The public is not sovereign over the media—the owners and managers, seeking ads, decide what is to be offered, and the public must choose among these” (Herman and Chomsky xix). How much agency the news consumer possesses in order to make these ‘choices’ of content consumption is thus a crucial question—and for this analysis, I examine how methodically stories of violent urban crime are told and how much room for interpretation is left for the consumer to navigate. According to Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, the high volume of coverage on violent crime stories in local news outlets has formulated a kind of “crime narrative or ‘script’” which is made up of two main elements: a particular suspect who is, more often than not, a non-white male and the perception of crime as violent (560). In their study of television crime coverage in Los Angeles from 1996-1997, Gilliam and Iyengar found that over 50 percent of all crime reports—whether violent or nonviolent—made an explicit reference to the race or ethnicity of the perpetrator, and “minorities accounted for 56 percent of all suspects and 59 percent of suspects in violent crime cases;” within these numbers, black perpetrators represented the largest group and were framed as the suspect in 29 percent of violent crime stories and 36 percent of murder stories (562). The idea of such a script suggests that, just as media consumers may be able to predict the plot of a film based off of its corresponding genre, consumers of crime news may anticipate that they understand not only the narrative qualities of a crime but who represents the perpetrator and the victim. This is especially dangerous when considering the everyday implications of crime news in relation to race because “given the visual nature of the medium, the importance of the suspect to the script means that crime news is often accompanied by racial imagery” (Gilliam and Iyengar 560). More often than not, what consumers learn about suspects and perpetrators is “limited to visual attributes, most notably their race or ethnicity” which substantiates associations between criminal behavior and communities of color (Gilliam and Iyengar 561). It is in this
way that “the crime script is no mere journalistic device; instead, it is a powerful filter for observing daily
events” (Gilliam and Iyengar 564).

Because news consumers are more likely to gravitate toward media coverage that aligns with
previously held beliefs, those who possess stereotypical notions of race—likely developed through
exposure to not only media, including news, but other exterior forces—are unlikely to consume news that
counters these predispositions; additionally, “The likelihood of a consumer choosing a particular news
product is proportional to the amount or intensity of some expected reward—being informed and/or
entertained—relative to the effort or cost thought to be required to gain the reward” (McManus 31).
Consuming news that challenges one’s ideals is likely to be seen as requiring more effort or constituting a
greater cost than gravitating toward news that feels familiar and solidifying; people consume crime news
because it’s easy and predictable thanks to news’ adherence to the crime script. This is, again, incredibly
dangerous when considering news media’s effect on everyday life, as “most people get their information
about crime from the media, not from personal experience” (Gilliam and Iyengar 562). The crime script
thus creates a particular cycle of notions surrounding race and criminality; consumers can anticipate what
news coverage on a violent crime in their area will communicate, making it increasingly difficult to
challenge destructive, socially-embedded impressions of race. In using both the notion of the crime script
and the propaganda model, the template-like structure of crime story production allows a neatly tailored
method by which news outlets, as one faction of hegemonic institutions in today’s society, communicate
dominant messages to the public. By combining these two theories, we will be able to understand how
violent crime news is structured in its production and how this formulaic school of journalistic thought
influences public opinion, placing a high level of responsibility on the journalist and corresponding news
outlet.

With their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky are not focusing on the effect that media has
on the public, but rather how media is structured and performed (xii). They say that “Certainly, the
The media's adherence to an official agenda with little dissent is likely to influence public opinion in the desired direction, but this is a matter of degree, and where the public's interests diverge sharply from that of the elite, and where they have their own independent sources of information, the official line may be widely doubted" (xii). The media's adherence to this particular agenda manifests itself through the journalist's adherence to a certain script of production, allowing the preferred messages to be transmitted to the consumer in an almost mechanical way. Though Herman and Chomsky may not be attempting to address the degree to which the propaganda model influences public thought or opinion, examining the impact of scripted crime news stories is key to measuring the success of news outlets in communicating racialized messages to its consumers. Because the messages being transmitted by a media institution can only be successful if the hegemonic meanings are instilled in the consumer, I question how negative associations between communities of color and violent criminality as portrayed in today's news affects the racialization of everyday life and political discourse. This use of the propaganda model--as "theory in the area of reception research argues that audience members are not passive [consumers], but rather actively interact with media messages to produce meaning"--differentiates the political stakes of this analysis from Herman and Chomsky's (Eschholz 44). Though I am using elements of a political economic approach by examining the relationship between news and the capitalist economic structure, I'm adding in a crucial racial component and question of the corresponding impact that the propaganda model does not explicitly address. Nonetheless, a focus on the formulaic structure of crime news production rather than its consumption shifts the focus to the journalist and news media corporations who create the messages being received by consumers, thus questioning the responsibility of news members to communicate more elaborative images of communities of color, rather than considering the responsibility of consumers to question the information they're being given. How does keeping violent crime coverage formulaic in following a specific script allow today's journalists and news media outlets to communicate assumed
associations between communities of color and violent criminality—even if they don’t realize they’re doing so?

Case Study: The crime script as seen on the Chicago Tribune’s digital platform

With such a disposition toward imagery, many studies of violent crime news in relation to race and ethnicity has focused on television news which, unlike its textual print counterpart, allows for connections between race and crime to form at a rapid rate. However, if racial imagery is a key component of the crime script’s ability to influence news consumers, it should be considered how crime photography and its relationship to the surrounding text play a similar role in forming associations between race and criminality. If television news reports of crime follow a particular script, it is extremely likely that news staffs and photojournalists have developed a similar scripted structure when photographing the scene of a crime and its key characters, including the victim, witnesses, mourning family members, and police or medical respondents. Just as a television broadcast may gravitate toward violent crime news for its gripping, dramatic and emotional visuals and storyline, photojournalists are trained and inclined to capture such decisive, visceral and reactive moments.

The most important characteristic of crime photography for this particular analysis, however, is its ability to present the audience with a basic, racially-accentuated visual representation of the suspect in question for a particular crime. Local television news is frequently limited in their visual coverage of crime because of a lack of availability of images other than mug shots (Lipschultz and Hilt 31). This is also true for digital news in urban spaces where crime is covered at a rapid rate, even with multiple crime stories being released per day. The Chicago Tribune, one of the top daily newspapers in the country, has formulated its own kind of crime news script in its digital archives. After typing “crime” into the search bar at the top of the Tribune’s website, I was taken to a page within which sat several groupings of
materials related to and/or covering crime: all, stories, videos, galleries, and photos. Under the “photos” section, many of the images were presented as mug shots of suspects provided by a local police department either in Chicago or its surrounding suburbs. The low-quality photograph is paired with three sets of written text: the section of the publication within which the story falls (most often “News” or “Suburbs”), the date the image was published, and the name of the suspect. The suspect’s name is the largest text on the page, and becomes even more enlarged when you click on the name or image to open the barely more expansive ‘story overview.’

Figure 1. A digital screenshot taken from the Chicago Tribune’s website on March 11, 2018 after navigating to its crime topics page. The different categories of crime coverage can be seen running across the very top of the image on the dark blue bar.

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5 See Figure 1.
6 See Figure 2.
Figure 2. Digital screenshot taken March 11, 2018 and what this project refers to as the ‘story overview.’ The thumbnail of this image can be seen in the top right corner of Figure 1.

In this enlarged version of the image, the name of the suspect acts as a kind of headline for the image and text, which is not a ‘story’ but rather an overview of what the author considers to be the most important parts of the full coverage, presented to the reader in a concise, digestible format. Again, three main sources of textual information are given: the enlarged name of the suspect, a list of the charges made against them, and a disclaimer that accompanies the provided mug shot. Because of this, the reader is only provided with enough information to attach oneself to the general location of the crime (based on which police department is credited for the image), its level of perceived violence, and the visual appearance of the suspect. The format itself makes it appear as though these three pieces of information were inserted into a literal template; and within this template, as pictured above, each of the disclaimers follow this same format:
(Chicago Police Department photo. Arrest does not imply guilt, and criminal charges are merely accusations. A defendant is presumed innocent unless proven guilty and convicted.)\(^7\)

From this, what effect the language choices and usage of such a disclaimer has must be evaluated. Firstly, the arrest of a suspect is subsequently going to imply guilt; a police officer or authority member would not take an individual into custody if guilt was not suspected, which would consequently ‘imply’ the suspect’s guilt upon his or her arrest. The disclaimer reads that the listed charges “are merely accusations,” but these accusations should not be treated lightly nor seen as only such (“Crime”). These claims are exactly what create and help proliferate toxic associations between communities of color—black men in particular—and criminality. This suggests that the CPD and corresponding suburban police departments—or the Chicago Tribune, as it is not made clear which institution is providing or authoring the statement—may be guilty of assuming the same associations between black men and criminality that the public develops through its consumption of violent urban crime news. Not only is the Tribune providing direct associations between men of color and violent acts of crime in a uniform format for its readers to digest, but the news outlet is including a highly problematic statement as part of its crime news template and discourse. In a country and city where relations between police authorities and black communities are highly tense and dangerous, the reader is subconsciously inclined to take the side of the disclaimer and the dominant institutions it’s attached to. Reduced to just another character placed within an identical layout, the defendant is not ‘presumed innocent’ when situated in this template; rather, they’re presumed guilty before any tangible evidence is provided of such guilt. These individuals are no longer seen as unique beings—rather, they’re minimized to the associations between violence, crime and skin color that plagues their existence as black men in an urban setting.

\(^7\) Though the Chicago Police Department is credited for the image in this particular example, the credit varies based on whether or not the crime was committed in the city or its surrounding suburbs.
Man accused of attempted murder, robbery after Lawndale shooting

A man accused of attempted murder, robbery after Lawndale shooting

Figure 3. Digital screenshot taken March 11, 2018. This is the 'full story' the reader is taken to after clicking the "Read more>>" tab as seen in Figure 2.

The questions surrounding the consumer's level of agency in drawing their own conclusions from the crime script, as well as the success of the news institution in communicating and solidifying hegemonic messages, merit the inclusion of another significant portion of this 'story overview,' which is the link that states "Read more" provided at the end of the list of charges. When clicked, this link takes the reader to the full account of the crime that the pictured individual is accused of--however, this leaves it up to the reader, not the journalist, to actively pursue the entire story. Some questions arise from this: Who creates the 'story overview' and subsequently decides that the name and mug shot of the individual, the list of charges, and disclaimer are the most important details to provide? How often does a reader actually click the "Read more" link to consume the entire story, and is it even necessary for this to be done?
According to Gilliam and Iyengar, "...the crime script generates strong expectations about crime, allowing viewers to fill in gaps in the script" (564). Because of this, it is likely that—with a 'guilty until proven innocent' mentality—viewers are able to fill in missing information, such as a final verdict on the suspect's criminal status, even if this verdict does not prove to be accurate or truthful.

The brief 'story overview' provided by the Tribune, though it does not arguably constitute full story coverage, still possesses the two main elements of the crime script: a particular suspect who is typically a non-white male and the perception of crime as violent. If the mug shot of the suspect was not provided, however, it could be argued that the 'story overview' does not fit the crime script; as noted earlier in this essay, much of what a reader or viewer learns about a suspect, including their race or ethnicity, comes from imagery. Though it is true that most readers of the Tribune's digital platform are likely not consuming crime reports in the cleanly organized way the outlet's topic archives are compiled, it is also made accessible to readers who have not intentionally searched stories related to crime. Because crime is often treated as a breaking news topic, I've found that crime news and the identification of violent crime suspects are treated in a similar way on the Tribune's more accessible breaking news page. After clicking "BREAKING" on the top bar of the Tribune's web page and scrolling through the story headlines—including several that involve topics of violent crime and city shootings—a bar is reached that says "Photos." Here, an entire category labeled "Mugs in the news" interrupts the thread of breaking news stories.

Within this slideshow collection of images, the same mug shot style photographs provided by local police departments supply the reader with the same informational components as listed above: the image of the suspect accompanied by their name, a list of charges, the disclaimer, and a "Read more" link to the corresponding story. The Tribune's highly formulaic production of violent crime news stories, then, does reach the more consumable areas of the web platform—the ones which consumers are more likely to stumble upon in their consumption of the latest Chicago news.
Figure 4. Digital screenshot taken April 17, 2018 from the Tribune's breaking news page.
Figure 5. Digital screenshot taken April 24, 2018. This is one of the slideshow images and ‘story overviews’ readers see after clicking on the “Mugs in the news” link as seen in Figure 4.
With the crime script, we see that the details a journalist decides to omit from a story are just as significant—or, arguably, even more significant—than the details they choose to include. It is through this editorial process that “the raw material of news must pass through successive filters, leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print. [News institutions] fix the premises of discourse and interpretation, and the definition of what is newsworthy in the first place…” (Herman and Chomsky 2). Framing the Tribune case study in the context of Gilliam and Iyengar’s crime script concept, consumers of crime news may feel as though they understand the narrative of the story that lies beyond the “Read more” tab, making them feel uninclined to gather whatever extra information the full story may provide. The reader’s exposure to the crime script, I argue, leaves them feeling able to connect the dots—even if there are significant gaps in between. The picture these connections create, however, are not representative of the reality of race and crime—which is why the crime script is so troublesome.

Reality is problematic not only because news stories inevitably select only some aspects of reality and leave out others. More important, over time the specific realities depicted in single stories may accumulate to form a summary message that distorts social reality. Each in a series of news stories may be accurate, yet the combination may yield false cognitions within audiences (Entman 509).

Entman’s observation is incredibly applicable to this case study. Each individual criminal act may depict a single reality of a black male suspect in an instance of violent criminal behavior; however, persistent imagery of black perpetrators in the crime story collections of the Tribune paints a misleading image of black communities, and particularly black men, as violent and dangerous. Though journalists may feel as though they are “representing a single newsworthy event in which a black happens to be involved,” this generalization of people of color begins to represent an entire “category of ‘black Americans’” (Entman 8).

There is a general scholarly consensus that news crime coverage is not representative of reality because of the stark overrepresentation of black perpetrators and underrepresentation of white perpetrators in news reports as compared to local violent crime data, as discussed on page 6.
Creating a classification of an entire racial community based upon one aspect of urban news events like violent crime occurrences creates a highly monolithic and unrepresentative view of what it means to be a black man in America—and this toxic community image has a tangible impact on everyday life in an increasingly racialized world.

The impact of violent crime news on daily urban life and national political discourse

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society (Herman and Chomsky 1).

Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated—transformed, again—into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no ‘consumption.’ If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect (Hall 235).

As described in the above quote from Stuart Hall’s famous “Encoding/Decoding,” a focus on the production end of violent crime news and its inscribed hegemonic ideals surrounding race and criminality requires an analysis of how these messages are being received by news consumers. Hall suggests that news can only be properly consumed if a level of meaning is both taken and practiced—otherwise, the producers of such meaning have not been successful in their discursive communication. News media like the Tribune, then, have not been successful in their coverage of violent urban crime if a certain consensus has not been reached by news consumers and translated again into the social practices of their everyday
lives. Bringing attention to this final step in the cycle of news production allows for an understanding of how the entire process is structured and why such toxic notions surrounding race and criminality are able to thrive in and uphold the structures of modern society. When aligning with Herman and Chomsky's notion that the mass media's responsibility to inform is laced with various codes of behavior meant to socialize news consumers into the hegemonic structures of society at large, we can make the equation that the racial codes communicated through violent crime news will manifest themselves in our daily lives. Because consumers often gravitate toward news that validates their preexisting worldview, the process becomes cyclical—and news outlets continue to frame, produce and archive stories and details of violent urban crime to maintain high numbers of consumers.

By supplementing negative stereotypes surrounding race, news media may be “reinforcing hegemony” by fortifying “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)” (Lipschultz and Hilt 29). This means that news media images of violent African-American perpetrators and the fear this induces assists in shaping how urban spaces like Chicago are demographically divided, composed and interpreted. For Chicago in particular, these material consequences manifested by fear are best observed in the city’s demographic makeup denoted most often by the division between “North” and “South.” The creation of such spatial boundaries makes it seem as though the city and its news media is somehow trying to contain the phenomena of criminality within such specific geographic spaces; however, to say that the phenomena of criminality is being contained within spatial boundaries is also to say that criminality is contained within an area’s demographic makeup, meaning in groups of societal classifications such as race, class or gender. This containment only furthers the issue, as “racially isolated whites, with no experience to fall back on, are more likely to rely heavily on media messages to make inferences about blacks” (Gilliam et al. 760). Chicago is not an entirely racially isolated city, and its history of racial isolation and integration is intricate; however, associations between blackness and
criminality have a physically observable impact on how urban spaces are composed and how its residents spatially interact with the city.

As stated by Stabile, “Representation of crime and criminals may be representations, but these have all too real material consequences”—and these consequences are often triggered by feelings of fear. The proliferating images of black men as criminals have a real impact on the ways in which urban residents of different races interact with one another, as well as how these residents interact with the various spatial boundaries of a city like Chicago. As multiple studies and analyses done on racial representation in crime news and its impact suggest, “News is not an accurate reflection of the real world of crime” (Gilliam 561). It is, however, so often treated as such by consumers of local news. This misinterpretation of the world of violent crime which news media communicates has a direct impact on the ways in which urban spaces are consumed, treated and utilized—and this, in turn, affects how everyday people may distance themselves from people of color in urban settings or from a particular area of a city. According to Smolej and Kivivuori, “A person can start avoiding certain areas because he or she over emphasizes the possibility to become victimized there” (214). Much of this apprehension of victimization can be attributed to feelings of fear. The connection is quite simple: “If African-Americans have, in fact, become symbols of crime in our society, the relative frequency of viewing their images, compared to white offenders, on television should be related to higher levels of crime fear, particularly among white viewers” (Eschholz 43). Eschholz definitively finds that for white news consumers, “the racial composition of television offenders significantly increased fear of crime” (53). Though Eschholz is referring specifically to the viewing of television news, similar conclusions can be drawn due to the visual nature of both television news and news which utilizes the crime script.

But this fear strikes impact that goes far beyond daily urban life and resident interactions, reaching into the realm of political discourse. Because the fear of violent crime racializes the hegemonic political sector of society—which is highly responsible for the proliferation of ideologies—I argue that
images of violent crime *do violence* unto communities of color and black men in particular. Gilliam and Iyengar state “that the effects of the crime script extend well beyond the views of ordinary citizens,” meaning that violent crime news can contribute to issues which possess much more material political consequences (572). The evidence provided by their crime script studies indicates that local news programming intertwines policy opinions with questions of race, thus racializing political discourse (572). The study further revealed that for white viewers of violent crime news, a mere five-second exposure to a black perpetrator was enough to prompt a slight increase in “the percentage of people who believe crime is caused by individual failings”—rather than considering the broader societal issues and shortcomings surrounding class or economic disparity that may create crime as a byproduct (573). These individuals are also more likely to support punitive crime policies, as the exposure to a black perpetrator promotes the idea “that African-Americans are out of step with the cultural mainstream” (573). Eschholz mirrors this conclusion, stating that if news viewers are generally more fearful of crime, and the criminal fear of white viewers in particular is triggered by black offenders, “then voters may be more supportive of policies that are tough on crime, particularly crime associated in the public mind with minorities (e.g. crack cocaine, juvenile violence)” (53). African-American men and minority communities at large have long been framed as criminals, dangerous, or takers from—rather than givers to—society, and this is a historic role and characterization tendency that reaches into our political and social climate in present day. This position ties into the notion of the “ethnic blame discourse,” in which problematic behavior is framed as a source of “intergroup conflict” where the behavior is committed by an ethnic “Other” and its harmful effects on the outgroup (in this case, white communities) are accentuated (Romer et al.).

It is because of this blame discourse that crime news is one of many modes of media consumption that encourages the solidification of real social policies that disproportionately target black communities. Stabile says that “[Crime news] is a particularly grim and hopeless form of storytelling that brooks no alternatives and has a single chilling conclusion: the prison-industrial complex, the death penalty, and an
even harsher and more punitive response to oppressed communities” (10). Again looking to an analysis of
the crime script, the reliance on such a formula means that news “infuses the issue of crime with racial
significance, simultaneously reinforcing racial stereotypes while it increases support for a punitive crime
policy agenda” (Gilliam et al 759). Expanding upon this theoretical argument, Eschholz speculates that
these punitive policies may target black communities in a way that seriously obstructs their ability “to
compete economically and live peacefully in the United States” (54). Issues concerning crime, just like
other issues such as welfare or drug abuse, may be described as “race-coded,” alluding to and spreading
negative depictions of African-Americans at a higher volume than whites because of racial perceptions
which populate various forms of media--news included (Gilliam et al 759). Studies have found that heavy
attention to crime news leads to an increased fear of crime in the consumer, which means we can conclude
that fear is a racially-coded issue of crime and support the argument some scholars have made that “fear is
a new form of racism, and as such is a powerful mechanism of social control” (Eschholz 42). It is through
this social control, the push for more punitive crime policies, and the embedding of racialized messages in
political discourse that impedes upon the ability of communities of color to exist equally in American
society, even today—and therefore it is through this continued racism and the naturalized racial messages
of news media that news as an institution, and the journalists which make up the newsrooms, are doing
violence unto the communities on which they report.

Toward a more thoughtful approach to crime coverage

“...the news rarely presents nonracial attributes of criminal suspects--educational
attainment, age, employment status, family background, and so on. Information about
race is conveyed automatically, due to the visual nature of the medium; other
individuating characteristics are seemingly not newsworthy. While reporters cannot be
expected to compile detailed bibliographies of suspects ... they can consider other ways of reporting on crime” (Gilliam and Iyengar 572).

In urban areas that experience high crime rates, it becomes difficult to not follow a script of production for stories and events which are repetitive and seemingly mundane in their production. However, in order to fulfill their virtuous responsibility of informing the public with fairness and in-depth reporting, “...journalists need to rethink their reliance on the crime script” (Gilliam and Iyengar 572). It may be tempting for news to follow a script with such a high volume of news production and the daunting nature of strict and short deadlines, but this is not an ethical or moral method of framing the world for the masses to consume. Journalists today must move toward a more thoughtful approach to the coverage of violent crime in urban areas. This, however, raises a series of questions “about the ability and responsibilities of...news to represent the reality of black America” (Entman 509). Though this analysis is not meant to argue that a ‘true’ representation of black America can come to fruition in contemporary news media--as this requires an in-depth conversation surrounding what exactly the problematized notions of ‘representation’ and ‘reality’ suggest--there are certainly steps that journalists and news corporations can take to frame a more well-rounded image of black communities in today’s urban spaces.

The argument that crime coverage and its mechanical production is necessary due to crime’s factual makeup--after all, the job of a journalist is to report the facts and thus act ‘objectively’--falls short when we consider past studies which have shown that the news starkly overrepresents black men as criminals. This leaves room to suggest that news outlets should actively and consciously pursue stories that would provide more positive images of black communities, because “…as whites are repeatedly exposed to blacks in non-violent, law abiding social roles, we might expect these alternate schemas to serve as a buffer against the negative effects of stereotypical crime news” (Gilliam et al 759). In addition to actively pursuing stories of positive reinforcement, efforts must be made to situate communities of
color and their demographic locations—especially in highly segregated cities like Chicago—into a more nuanced role in the urban landscape. While pursuing stories in black communities that represent positive imagery, news coverage must “deemphasize reporting on particular episodes of violent crime while providing more substantive, thematic coverage of local communities” (Gilliam and Iyengar 572). Lipschultz and Hilt share this view, proposing a challenge to local broadcast journalists not only to recognize but also to understand the differing ethnic and socio-economic groups in their reported community (30).

This understanding is precisely why a cultural studies approach to questions of journalistic integrity and ethics is so useful. While journalists may get extensive training around the technicalities of story production and the ethics surrounding interactions with sources and the usage of obtained information, the real ethical question becomes whether or not journalists have worked to develop a more ‘unbiased’ approach to the communities they report on. The social and cultural ramifications of placing the same acts of violent crime into the same template with the same mug shot style photo—all of which work together to create a highly mechanical, almost automatic process—on the journalist’s own perspective regarding race and criminality must be deconstructed, and this is up to each individual journalist to dedicatedly address. As a journalist, if you’re simply filling a template or checking the boxes, what’s the point in doing work that’s considered to be so virtuous? Acting and creating without careful questioning and evaluation, especially when creating culture that is to be consumed by the masses, is not a sign of objectivity or an unbiased approach: rather, it appears thoughtless. We must work toward a better understanding of the limitations of our reporting, the ingrained biases that impede our ability to act objectively, and the wider political and socioeconomic factors that have shaped the American society in which we report. In a time of tension between journalist and news consumer, it is through these efforts that we may help to restore the public’s faith in the press, a staple of our democracy, and our own faith in the work we consider to be virtuous, critical and empowering.
Works Cited


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