

"Media Effects" Paradigms for the Analysis of Local Television News

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In the modern era, it is common knowledge that people learn about the larger world beyond their immediate experience primarily through television news presentations. Scholars from every discipline have weighed in at length on the meaning and significance of the shift from print media to television as the news medium of choice.

Although television is still the dominant source, in recent years the public's consumption of news programming has shifted noticeably. While formerly audiences tuned in to the networks' national newscasts with regularity, today more people rely on local news programs than on network news. Opinion surveys recorded this shift as early as 1993 when the Roper Organization's annual survey of television viewing noted that a plurality of Americans cited local news on television as their major source of information.

More compelling evidence than media use surveys is the relative share of the viewing audience commanded by network and local news programs. Based on Nielsen audience ratings from the country's two largest media markets (Los Angeles and New York), it is clear that the number of Americans who tune in to local news programs on a daily basis far exceeds those who watch national newscasts. Averaging across both markets, the cumulative audience for evening local news easily surpasses the cumulative audience for national news (See Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming).

The huge audiences for local news reflect fundamental changes in television programming. In most areas today, local news programs air during the morning, afternoon, evening, prime time, and late night. Between 1991 and 1996, the amount (expressed in hours) of weekly local news programming available in Los Angeles increased from 80 to 97. For New York, the weekly total rose from 85 to 91. During the

same period, the total amount of network news programming remained stagnant at less than twelve hours per week. In terms of the volume and availability of news programming, local news dominates the broadcast day.

When the local news turns to serious subjects, the focus is invariably on crime or other threats to public safety. This comparative advantage in programming actually means that local news fares well when it competes head- to-head with national news. One study examined twenty-two media markets; for eighteen of them, the local programs attracted more viewers by an average margin of four gross ratings points (see Hess, 1991). Of course, when the comparison is made between the total number of viewers who watch local news on any given day and the number who tune in to network news, the results are even more one-sided. The daily audience for local news in Los Angeles and New York exceeds the audience for network news by a margin of 3:1. Even when we ignore the huge differences between national and local news in the length and availability of programming and focus on the average audience for a thirty minute local newscast, local news enjoys the statistical edge. That is, on any given day, the average number of people watching a thirty minute local newscast is greater than the average audience for the three national newscasts. In short, no matter how one measures broadcast audiences, local news is the undisputed leader (for a more detailed analysis of these data, see Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming).

The dominance of local news has important consequences for the viewing audience and American society at large. Local news is defined by a distinctive perspective on public issues and events, that is, by its emphasis on (and frequent exaggeration of) drama, conflict, and violence. Every effort is made to appeal to the public's appetite for "blood and guts." All local broadcasters are well aware that if local news is to be economically successful, it must emphasize violent crime. Simultaneously, the demand for personalized news means, more often than not, that a suspected perpetrator occupies center stage in news stories about crime. This script means that viewers' attention is directed at salient and visible attributes of criminal suspects, such as their race and ethnicity. In the course of watching the news, the audience inevitably notices that criminal suspects are non-white males.

The prominence of violent crime in local news and the tendency of crime reports to feature non-white perpetrators cry out for research into two broad classes of media effects. The first -- media agenda-setting -- refers to shifts in the public's political priorities induced by the amount of news coverage accorded particular issues. In the case of local news, the obvious prediction is that the unrelenting attention to violent crime has boosted the centrality of crime in viewers' political consciousness. In addition to changes in the salience of crime, the agenda-setting paradigm predicts further that viewers across the nation have become more dependent upon their crime-related beliefs and opinions when formulating more general political attitudes.

Local news coverage of crime may also be examined as a particular case of framing -- "subtle alterations in the definition or presentation of judgment or choice problems and the changes in decision outcomes resulting from these alterations" (Iyengar, 1991, p. 11). It is well known that broadcast news outlets rely on an "episodic" frame for public affairs in which political issues are depicted in terms of concrete instances. Thus, in the case of crime, the focus of the typical local news report is directed at a particular act of violence by a specific (usually non-white) perpetrator. Prior research suggests that episodic framing of issues of public order (crime and terrorism in particular) encourages viewers to advocate a more punitive approach to criminal justice (see Iyengar, 1991). The evidence also indicates that episodic framing of crime, when accompanied by racial imagery, evokes racial stereotypes and race-based reasoning about policy issues (Iyengar, 1991; Mendelberg, 1997). Based on this evidence, it can be anticipated that exposure to local news will strengthen public support for punitive approaches to crime

and encourage the expression of racist attitudes.

In summary, local news has emerged as the ordinary citizen's major source of information. The content of local news programming is marked by two themes: crime is violent and those who engage in crime tend to be nonwhite males. As described below, these themes are likely to make their presence felt in the minds of viewers.

Agenda-Setting and Priming Effects

More than any other issue, Americans consider crime to be the "most important problem facing this country today." The Gallup Poll has asked this question twelve times since January 1994; in eleven of the surveys, crime has dominated all other problems. What role has the media played in fanning public fear of crime? The fact that the rate of crime -- and violent crime in particular -- has dropped dramatically over the past decade would seem to suggest that the public's beliefs about crime are based not on some personal experience as a crime victim, but rather, on what they see in the news media, namely, that violent crime is a frequent daily occurrence. In the Los Angeles area, a report on violent crime airs every three minutes during local newscasts. Murder accounts for less than one percent of all crime in Los Angeles but makes up twenty percent of all local news reports on crime (see Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming). In the sheer frequency of crime news, Los Angeles is no outlier; violent crime accounted for two-thirds of all local news in a recent study of news programming in fifty-six different U.S. cities (Klite et al., 1997).

In keeping with the notion of media agenda-setting, the research evidence suggests that exposure to news coverage of crime contributes to the perception that crime is a serious problem. Iyengar and Kinder included illegal drugs as a "target" in one of their experiments on network news coverage. Examining various indicators, they found that viewers exposed to news coverage accorded significantly greater importance to drug abuse (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, Ch. 3). In a series of similar experiments, this time manipulating the amount of local news coverage, Gilliam and Iyengar found that exposure to a single crime-related story heightened viewers' fear of being victimized (Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming). Comparable results have been obtained in studies of newspaper coverage. Erbring and his colleagues, for instance (Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller, 1980), found that crime was the only issue for which the amount of news nationwide correlated with the level of audience concern. This body of experimental and correlational evidence thus helps explain the paradox of continued high levels of public concern for crime in the face of declining rates of criminal activity. Crime may be declining overall; information about specific acts of crime is all too visible.

In addition to estimating the net impact of news coverage on issue salience, agenda-setting researchers have attempted to identify the factors that moderate the effects of the news. Do people differ in their susceptibility to coverage of particular issues? Iyengar and Kinder hypothesized that agenda-setting would be enhanced when the target issue was personally consequential for the audience. They yoked their manipulation of news coverage to specific personal characteristics of their participants so that the issue under investigation would be especially compelling to one group of viewers. For instance, news reports about the financial difficulties facing the social security system were shown to elderly and young participants. In general, their results revealed a significant interaction between personal relevance and news coverage -- the impact of the news was greatest for viewers personally affected by the issue. The identical pattern was uncovered in the Erbring et al. study of newspapers. Readers most likely to be "at risk" -- women and the elderly -- were especially receptive to news stories dealing with crime.

The evidence on the individual-level moderators of agenda-setting suggests that the impact of local news will be conditioned by viewers' personal experience with crime. In addition to factors known to be correlated with exposure to crime (such as gender, race and age), we might expect the news to exert greater influence among viewers who live in relatively high-crime areas. In addition to such experiential factors, several other potential moderators are worth considering. These include patterns of media use (people who rely exclusively on local news versus those who watch a variety of news shows), evaluations of the credibility of local news, level of political involvement and expertise, and so on.

In summary, spiralling coverage of crime by local news has contributed significantly to the current furor over crime. Most Americans do not experience crime directly. They do, however, receive huge doses of crime news. With increasing numbers of Americans tuning in to local news, crime occupies a privileged position on the public agenda.

The fact that crime is a salient issue has important ramifications for public opinion. The so-called priming effect refers to changes in the weight individuals assign to their specific opinions on issues when they make political evaluations and choices as a result of the amount of news coverage accorded issues. The basic finding -- which has been replicated extensively -- is that the more prominent an issue in the news stream, the greater the impact of that issue on political attitudes (for reviews, see Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, Ch. 7, Krosnick and Brannon, 1995; Miller and Krosnick, 1997).

In the context of election campaigns, the core implication of priming is that issues in the news become the principal talking points for voters. In 1980, for instance, the media's sudden preoccupation with the Iranian hostages in the closing days of the campaign caused voters to consider the candidates' credentials on the issue of terrorism when choosing between Carter and Reagan. Naturally, this logic proved disadvantageous to President Carter. More recently, the fact that news of the economy drowned out news of the Gulf War at the time of the 1992 election cost President Bush dearly. Had the media played up military or security issues, of course, the tables would have been turned given Bush's reputational advantage over Clinton on matters of national defense. (See Iyengar and Simon, 1993; Krosnick and Brannon, 1993).

The perennial newsworthiness of crime has forced all candidates for elective office -- no matter what their political leanings -- to address the issue. Given the state of public opinion (with large majorities favoring a "tough" approach to crime), it is no coincidence that increasing numbers of public officials advocate the death penalty and stringent law enforcement. While the "law and order" posture was previously associated with Republican and conservative candidates, today the position is consensual; to be on the other side of this issue is generally considered politically fatal. Thus, the impact of the news media on the audience's political agenda has resulted in a substantial shift in the policy positions of political elites.

Framing Effects

Not only is violent crime central to local newscasts, the episodic or personalized style of reporting means that the news is typically about specific crimes and perpetrators. In Los Angeles local newscasts, the ratio of episodic to thematic crime stories exceeds 4:1 (for details, see Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming). Nearly sixty percent of the crime reports provide some information about a suspect.

Research into the framing effects of news coverage suggests that the episodic frame draws viewers' attention to the actions of particular individuals rather than societal conditions (see Iyengar, 1996). Poverty is understood as a consequence of insufficient effort and motivation, crime and terrorism as a

consequence of lawlessness and disregard for human life. Confronted with news coverage describing particular instances of complex issues, people reason accordingly: poverty and crime are caused not by deep-seated economic conditions, but by dysfunctional behavior. The appropriate remedy for crime is not improved job training programs and economic opportunity, but harsh and unconditional punishment. By shaping viewers' attributions of causal and treatment responsibility for crime, the episodic frame indirectly influences crime-related attitudes. People who subscribe to individualistic accounts of crime, for example, are more likely to favor greater spending on law enforcement and to express greater support for the police (see Iyengar, 1991; 1996). By influencing attributions of responsibility, episodic framing of crime also shapes attitudes towards the criminal justice process.

What is especially striking about the episodic news frame for crime is the frequency with which it conveys explicit racial cues. The focus on a particular perpetrator and the visual emphasis of television mean that as depicted in the news, the principal antecedent of criminal behavior is race (see Gilliam and Iyengar, forthcoming, Entman, 1992).

By associating crime and race, local news necessarily interjects racial stereotypes into the public's understanding of crime. Viewers are compelled to evaluate their racial beliefs in light of what seem to be empirical realities. Iyengar's framing experiments suggested that news of crime in black neighborhoods made viewers more likely to offer either individualistic (e.g. character flaws) or punitive (e.g. insufficient retribution) attributions of responsibility for crime (Iyengar, 1991). Because attributions of causal and treatment responsibility for crime and poverty proved to be significant attitude cues, the racial component of crime news also contributed to opinionation more generally.

The most unequivocal evidence concerning the racial element of the crime news script has been provided by Gilliam and Iyengar (see Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998, 1997). Their experiments demonstrate that the presence of a black rather than white perpetrator in local news reports is meaningful to viewers. Specifically, the skin color of the alleged perpetrator matters to viewers' opinions concerning both race and crime. Using computer-based editing techniques, the researchers present the same individual as either a white or African-American male. The results show that when the suspect in the news was African-American, significantly more viewers endorsed punitive criminal justice policies (the death penalty, "three strikes," increased funding for prisons). In addition, the racial manipulation strengthened viewers' racial stereotypes (ratings of blacks as lazy and unintelligent) and lowered evaluations of black leaders such as Jesse Jackson (Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998). However, Gilliam and Iyengar found that the racial element of crime news was overshadowed by any exposure to crime news as an antecedent of racial attitudes. That is, viewers' tendency to stereotype African-Americans and their negative evaluations of black leaders became more pronounced in response to the crime-no crime rather than the white perpetrator-black perpetrator manipulation (see Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998). This result suggests that viewers have internalized the racial element of crime news, so much so that any reference to crime is sufficient to trigger negative racial attitudes.

Not only does exposure to crime news influence viewers' attitudes, we can expect that it will also serve to increase the relevance of racial stereotypes as a basis for judging the performance of elected officials or for choosing between candidates for elective office. In effect, local news programming "racializes" public discourse by making policy choices increasingly intertwined with questions of race. A recent study by Mendelberg is revealing (Mendelberg, 1997). Mendelberg found significant priming effects of exposure to the 1988 "Willie Horton" advertisement used by the Bush campaign. Among participants exposed to the Horton ad., racial prejudice was a stronger predictor of support for particular social welfare and civil rights policies than among control participants who did not view the ad. (Mendelberg,

1997). Race-based news coverage of crime primed racial stereotypes. Of course (as the use of the Horton ad by the Bush campaign itself reveals), the audience's exquisite sensitivity to matters of race is grist for vote-seeking public officials. We can only anticipate that racial appeals -- either explicit or coded -- will become even more frequent during political campaigns. In short, the prominence of local news makes race an even more central component of American public life.

Conclusions

The political implications of agenda-setting and framing effects with respect to crime are all too clear. Elected officials must, of course, take heed of their constituents' political concerns. In response to the media-induced public outcry over crime, elected officials -- Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, running for executive and legislative office -- have endorsed "law and order" as an immediate policy goal. Heightened attention to the issue of crime necessarily means reduced attention to other pressing problems. In California, for instance, the annual budget for the Department of Corrections has increased at a significantly faster rate than the annual budget for the Department of Education.

The frequent association of crime with race in the news also means that exposure to the news will trigger racial identity and the resulting "in-group" bias (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1986). It is well-documented that people categorize themselves into groups instinctively and that group identity exerts powerful attitudinal consequences including the expression of discriminatory affect for in-group and out-group members. The current journalistic paradigm thus does not bode well for the state of race relations; white viewers of the news will only become more likely to stigmatize black Americans, while black viewers will increasingly malign the motives of a "hostile" media.

The psychological implications of agenda-setting and framing effects are no less significant. The fact that a mere three second insertion of a photograph into a fifteen minute news segment significantly alters viewers' racial attitudes and their views about the appropriate means of controlling crime suggests that there is much more to race relations and political attitudes than acculturation and one's formative experiences. No doubt racial prejudice is deeply rooted in American culture, and there is considerable evidence suggesting that racial and other group-related sentiments are acquired early in life. Moreover, core values such as individualism and the work ethic encourage citizens to hold individuals rather than societal factors responsible for issues such as poverty or crime. The research summarized above, however, suggests that despite the "drag" provided by such life-long socialization processes, the daily flow of news can provide significant added value. People seem to resort to a more dynamic process of reasoning about racial groups in which the frequency of particular actions by individual group members is taken as revealing about the group as a whole. In this sense, people are Bayesian, "updating" their stereotypes to correspond to the latest round of "evidence." Therefore, models of racial attitudes that grant dominant status to stable personal influences (most notably, party identification and political ideology) must be revised to allow for circumstantial influence.

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