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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Laura E. Headlee entitled "Dual Frames: A Content Analysis of WBIR-TV's 6 p.m. Coverage of the Christian-Newsom Murder Trials." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication and Information.

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Dual Frames:
A Content Analysis of
WBIR-TV's 6 p.m. Coverage
of the Christian-Newsom Murder Trials

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Science Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Laura Elizabeth Headlee
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Abstract

Early on the morning of January 7, 2007, University of Tennessee student Channon Christian and her boyfriend Christopher Newsom disappeared from the parking lot of a Knoxville apartment complex. According to police reports and court documents, the couple was carjacked, kidnapped, and subjected to hours of physical and mental torture before they were killed. Five people were arrested in the following weeks in connection with the crimes – four black men and one black woman. Both Christian and Newsom were white. The unusual circumstances of these crimes and the racial divisions between the victims and perpetrators drew a lot of attention from community members and local news media around Knox County.

This study used content analysis to examine how WBIR-TV, the highest-rated local television news station in the Knoxville market, presented its nightly 6 p.m. coverage of the murder trials of the three male perpetrators eventually convicted of murder – Letalvis Cobbins, Lemaricus Davidson and George Thomas. Individual news stories were coded for both components (video, sound, still images) and content (descriptive words and phrases). The findings determined that race played less of an explicit role in the daily news coverage than expected. However, WBIR presented viewers with dual frames in its coverage. The first, a narrative frame, concentrated on daily courtroom activities. Video used in the coverage showed viewers a second frame centered on the victims' families. These elements contributed to the construction of cognitive webs for newscast viewers, aided by WBIR's use of a template familiar in television news crime coverage.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements iii
Abstract iv
Chapter 1 Introduction 1
The Aftermath 1
Emmett Till 3
"Trial of the Century" 4
Media and the Trials 6
Research Questions 7
Chapter 2 Literature Review 8
The Public and Local News Viewing 8
Crime and the Newsroom 9
News Viewing and Race 10
Race and National News 10
Race and Framing 11
Stereotypes and News 14
Bias 16
Chapter 3 Methodology 20
Material to be Analyzed 20
WBIR-TV 23
The Newscasts 24
The Process 24
Chapter 4 Results and Discussion 27
Newscast Organization 27
Headlines 28
News Stories 30
Descriptive Language 34
Discussion 35
Chapter 5 Conclusions 47
Limitations and Future Research 53
Selected Bibliography 57
Appendix A: Code Book for Content Analysis of WBIR 6 p.m. Newscasts 67
Appendix B: Code Sheets for WBIR 6 p.m. Newscast Headlines 75
Appendix C: Code Sheets for WBIR 6 p.m. News Stories 78
Appendix D: Tables and Figures 82
Table 1. Headline Components 83
Figure 1. Headline Dominant Subjects 84
Figure 2. News Story Components 84
Figure 3. News Story Dominant Subjects 85
Figure 4. News Story Video 85
Figure 5. News Story Still Images 86
Figure 6. News Story Sound Sources 86
Table 2. Coded Terms Used in News Stories 87
Vita 88

Chapter 1

Introduction

Early on the morning of January 7, 2007, University of Tennessee student Channon Christian and her boyfriend Christopher Newsom disappeared from the parking lot of a Knoxville apartment complex. According to police reports and court documents, the couple was carjacked and taken to a home on Chipman Street in East Knoxville. While there, the couple was subjected to hours of physical, mental and emotional torture. Evidence indicated both Christian and Newsom were repeatedly and violently sexually violated with a variety of objects as well as forced to endure other forms of abuse.

Newsom's body was found later that afternoon near railroad tracks not far from the house where the couple was held. He had been shot three times in the back and the head, then set on fire. His burnt body was spotted on the ground by a railroad engineer on board a passing train. Days later Christian's body was found stuffed inside a trashcan in the house. The Knox County medical examiner found evidence Christian was alive when she was forced to drink bleach, wrapped in several trash bags, then pushed into the container in the fetal position and left to slowly suffocate. Five people were arrested in the following weeks in connection with the crimes – four black men and one black woman. Both Christian and Newsom were white.

The Aftermath

The kidnappings and murders, followed by subsequent memorials and court cases, were featured prominently in Knoxville-area news across various media outlets – television, newspapers, radio and internet. The lengthy process from discovering the

bodies to arresting suspects to eventual trials kept references to this case fresh in the public's mind for several years. By the time the final defendant's murder trial began, the process moved more quickly with a notable media "event" every few months. The trials and their media coverage produced strong feelings from the viewing public, as evidenced in casual conversations, comments communicated to the media outlets, and even the presence of various protestors, including members of the Ku Klux Klan, who made appearances in downtown Knoxville.

The actual crimes were grisly and shocking, but the circumstances surrounding the aftermath were also unusual in many ways. The violence inflicted on the victims and the apparent tortures they endured were without precedent in the area. Details that emerged about the crimes indicated a level of cruelty unparalleled in any recent murders. These factors led to an unusually high level of media coverage across the local news market. Local television, newspapers, radio and online sites were flooded with daily trial updates. This was accompanied by remarkably high public interest in the day-to-day trial events.

The Christian and Newsom murder case also brought up questions about local attitudes towards race. It called to mind many of the mediated fears and stereotypes that are woven into the fabric of Southern history and culture. Chief among these are concerns about the aggression and sexuality of young black men and the dangers of innocent white women being defiled by black criminals.[1] Oral and written accounts dating from the

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[1] Dennis Rome, "The Social Construction of the African American Criminal Stereotype," in *Images of Color, Images of Crime*, 3rd ed., by Coramae Richey Mann, Marjorie Zatz, and Nancy Rodriguez (Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Company, 2006), 78-87.

Reconstruction-era and beyond containing warnings about the "animal, sexual aggressiveness" of African Americans circulated for decades, especially around the South. Stories asserted that "the black man is a 'damned black beast' who will rape and kill and destroy Anglo-Saxon racial purity."[2] Recent research has also shown prejudicial views of African Americans are reinforced by depictions of group members as aggressive, criminal, and unintelligent.[3] This "threat" had been at the center of intense media coverage before, in cases familiar to many of the same Knoxville-area viewers who watched the Christian-Newsom murder trials unfold.

Emmett Till

On August 28, 1955, black Chicago teenager Emmett Louis Till was viciously beaten, shot and killed while visiting relatives in Mississippi. His body was dumped into a river and found, unrecognizable, a few days later. His alleged crime was speaking to, and possibly whistling at, a white woman. The woman's husband and his brother were later charged with the murder but were found innocent by an all-white, all-male jury. The initial encounter between Till and the woman, as well as the heinous acts that followed, were presented very differently in Mississippi and Chicago-area newspapers, in mainstream and minority media. Despite variations in the frames used to report this case, one concept clearly illustrated was the deeply rooted fear and anger perpetuated among

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[2] James Kinney, "The Rhetoric of Racism: Thomas Dixon and the 'Damned Black Beast,'" *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 15, no.2 (1982): 145-154.
[3] Srividya Ramasubramanian, "Media-Based Strategies to Reduce Racial Stereotypes Activated by News Stories," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no.2 (2007): 249-264.

many in the South at the idea of a black male making social and sexual advances to a white female, feelings not that far removed from the present day. [4]

"Trial of the Century"

Even greater media attention was paid to another case with similar elements of a "dangerous" black man and the violation of a white woman. That was the murder trial of black former professional football player Orenthal James "O.J." Simpson. He was accused of stabbing to death his ex-wife and her male friend - both white - in Los Angeles on the night of June 13, 1994. The case gained even more notoriety and media interest with Simpson's refusal to turn himself in to police and the subsequent pursuit of his white Ford Bronco by law enforcement vehicles down Interstate 5 through L.A.[5] Black author Earl Ofaru Hutchinson wrote that "many black men cringed when O.J. became a suspect in the murder of his wife… Many of us were reminded of Bigger Thomas, the character in Richard Wright's *Native Son* who murdered a white woman, reinforcing the ancient white fears of black men as hypersexual and dangerous." [6]

Many books and articles have examined the media coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial and its influence on American culture. While racism on the part of law enforcement was mentioned throughout the trial by the defense, the dread of the violent and criminal black man was not addressed. However, it was still present in many media reports on the

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[4] Margaret Spratt, Cathy Bullock, Gerald Baldasty, Fiona Clark, Alex Halavais, Michael McCluskey, and Susan Schrenk, "News, Race, and the Status Quo: The Case of Emmett Louis Till," *Howard Journal of Communications* 18, no.2 (2007): 169-192.
[5] Darnell Hunt, *O.J. Simpson Facts and Fictions: News Rituals in the Construction of Reality* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[6] Paul Thaler, *The Spectacle: Media and the Making of the O.J. Simpson Story* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997), 69.

trial, serving to widen the racial divisions over Simpson's guilt or innocence.[7] Media coverage of the Simpson murder trial was often split between those outlets that sought to avoid stirring the pot of race relations and those that, in the words of Thaler, were "ready to pounce on and tear into any and all revelations coming out of the case." [8] Author Linda Williams describes the dual-personality of press considerations of the racial issues at play in the trial:

> Simpson's case – now haunted both by the unrecognized "Tom" scenario of police brutality and racism and by the "anti-Tom" scenario of the "black beast" lusting after white woman – could be read both ways. The scenario of black victimization was spoken directly by the defense. The scenario of the "black beast" was rarely spoken directly. But if it was not speakable, it was acutely visible in all the images of the Simpson marriage and its once-glamorous, now demonized, interracial couple.[9]

The O.J. Simpson trial also introduced the concept of watching a dramatic criminal trial, with all of its sordid details and headline-making moments, to a larger portion of the American viewing public than ever before. Average citizens began devoting more time to watching and discussing the ins-and-outs of courtroom procedures. This rampant fascination with the trial and the surrounding media machine that supported such curiosity still lingers in news coverage of extraordinary court cases. Williams contends that while fictional productions about black and white courtroom procedures

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[7] Maria Grabe, "Narratives of Guilt: Television News Magazine Coverage of the O. J. Simpson Criminal Trial," *Howard Journal of Communications* 11, no.1 (2000): 35-48.
[8] Thaler, *The Spectacle*, 69.
[9] Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 266.

remain popular, they "would be entirely eclipsed by the more compelling unfolding of a real trial, broadcast 'live' into the living rooms, bedrooms, sports bars, and waiting rooms of America." [10]

The media attention for cases such as those of Emmett Till and O.J. Simpson are contemporary enough phenomena to help form reference points for East Tennessee local television news viewers. The conditions of each trial were very different – one focused on the guilt or innocence of white men accused of exacting revenge for a supposed transgression, while the other involved a black defendant who was a popular sports and entertainment figure accused of killing his white wife and her companion. However, both cases dealt with the broader concept of white innocence threatened by black aggression. The Christian-Newsom murders - like the Till and Simpson cases before them - provided a stereotypical narrative for media to use and the community to access.

Media and the Trials

Even though it has been generations since slavery was abolished, and great strides have been made in civil rights and equality, the memory of warnings about the dangers of black aggression still lies beneath the surface in many communities, especially in the South. Media coverage of both the Till and Simpson cases touched on fears about crime, danger and race relations. Those same issues may have been brought to mind for some when three young black men were charged in the tortures and murders of a young white couple in Knoxville. Local discussions about the case, including increased activity both by groups working for civil rights and by those opposed to racial equality, demonstrated

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[10] Williams, *Playing the Race Card,* 259.

that issues of black and white relations were very much present. The question posed was to what extent local media would address these issues, if at all, in their coverage of these murder trials. The differences in the victims and perpetrators of the crimes in terms of race, economic status, geographic location, education, family backgrounds – all provided opportunities for journalists to fall back on established schemas.

Research Questions

This study seeks to determine how the Knoxville viewing area's top-rated television news station covered such a potentially divisive and prominent story. Through content analysis of the selected news stories and headlines, the following questions will be answered:

• How did WBIR's 6 p.m. news stories frame the trial proceedings and participants in the Christian-Newsom murder trials? Was the coverage of such extraordinary circumstances likewise unique?

• In what ways did media coverage concerning the defendants vary from that focusing on the victims? Was there any obvious bias, positive or negative, in the on-air coverage of these trials? What can be inferred from the selection of visual and audio components that comprise the stories and headlines?

• To what extent, if any, did race play a role in the media coverage? What aspects of the trials received the most prominent news coverage by WBIR?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Television news has become, over the past sixty-plus years, a standard fixture in most American households. The idea for television was born of existing technologies (photography, telephones, telegraphs, film, etc.) and has evolved into the current globe-spanning networks that provide access to information twenty-four hours a day, bringing sound and images from locations near and far into viewers' homes. Although broadcasts were initially aimed at entertaining audiences, informing viewers soon became a function of the medium. Today that line between information and entertainment may be more blurred, but the impetus to provide the latest news on numerous topics is very much alive.

The Public and Local News Viewing

A joint study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project and the Project for Excellence in Journalism concluded that news consumers still are turning to traditional media for the majority of their news. Seventy-eight percent of those surveyed stated they depend on their local television news for information. A survey conducted as part of this study during summer 2010 showed that television remains the dominant platform for news for Americans, especially those ages 65 and older. Seventy-five percent of respondents in that age group reported watching TV news on a typical day, while 58% of the total population surveyed said they got their news from the television on any given day.[11] Television also has the advantage of keeping viewers for longer periods of time

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[11] Pew Internet & American Life Project/Project for Excellence in Journalism, *Understanding the participatory news consumer* [report on-line] (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People & the

than the typical web or mobile news consumer stays on a particular site. TV watchers spend an average of 55 minutes getting news, while just 25% of online news consumers and 19% of newspaper readers spend an hour or more with their news.[12] These numbers illustrate that many Americans are still tuning in to familiar places and faces to get the news of the day.

Crime and the Newsroom

Producing stories about crime is part of the daily routine in most television newsrooms. Scholars have found a large percentage of typical news programming – up to half of the content in some cases - consists of stories about crime, and that this coverage favors violent or uncommon acts. These numbers are partially explained by the public's dependence on the news media for information about crime and criminal justice.[13] The types of crime being covered vary widely based on the level of violence, the nature of the offense, the demographics of both victim and perpetrator, and the importance assigned to the event by a particular news organization. Lipschultz and Hilt wrote:

> Violent crimes such as murders, robberies, and rapes are newsworthy because of identifiable elements. These elements are ideal for the art of story telling: definable events between individuals are concrete rather than abstract; dramatic, conflict-filled and intense stories are seen as interesting; crime is seen as disrupting order and

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Press, 1 March 2010, accessed 5 March 2011). Available from http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-News.aspx

[12] Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, *Survey Report: Americans spending more time following the news* [report on-line] (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 12 September 2010, accessed 7 March 2011) . Available from http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/americans-spending-more-time-following-the-news/

[13] Jeff Gruenewald, Jesenia Pizarro, and Steven Chermak, "Race, gender, and the newsworthiness of homicide incidents," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37, no.3 (2009): 262-272.

threatening the community; TV news emphasizes short, simple and verifiable stories; and crime is visual and may be easily videotaped.[14]

News Viewing and Race

The impact of news viewing on people's social judgments and perceptions of race has been a growing topic of research during the past few decades (Dixon, 2006; Dixon, 2008; Dixon & Johnson, 2008; Entman, 1990; Entman & Gross, 2008; Mastro et al, 2009; Poindexter, Smith & Heider, 2003; Waymer, 2009). Analyses of representations of African Americans, both in the local and national news, center on crime and criminalization. Several studies (Entman, 1992; Gilliam et al., 1996; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dixon, Azocar & Casas, 2003; Chiricos, Eschholz & Gertz, 1997; Tamborini et al., 2000) have shown that black males, in particular, are over-represented on television news as perpetrators of crimes. This strengthens the cognitive association for many news viewers between black men and criminal acts. Analyses also have shown African Americans are under-represented on the news as victims of crime and as authority figures, particularly law enforcement, when compared to statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor.[15]

Race and National News

This connection between blacks and criminality extends beyond local news to the national networks as well. When African Americans appear on network news broadcasts they are most frequently represented as perpetrators or in terms of negative stereotypes.

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[14] Jeremy Lipschultz and Michael Hilt, "Race and Local Television News Crime Coverage," *SIMILE: Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3, no.4 (2003): 1-10.
[15] Dana Mastro, Maria Knight Lapinski, Maria A. Kopacz, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, "The Influence of Exposure to Depictions of Race and Crime in TV News on Viewers' Social Judgments," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 53, no.4 (2003): 615-635.

Blacks are also more likely than whites to be associated in the news with poverty, and black political interests are equated with special politics (as opposed to white political actions, which are most frequently equated with the public interest).[16] Research also has illustrated that African Americans infrequently are presented in positions of leadership within the political, social, or economic spheres. Black experts are also more likely to be interviewed primarily in connection with stories about black issues.[17] While whites are often seen on the news in positive or sympathetic roles, blacks are most often seen in socially negative roles. News media reinforce this perception that African Americans are more likely to be involved in undesirable or destructive events and behaviors. An over-representation of blacks as perpetrators means that the majority of African Americans on the news are depicted as criminals.[18]

Race and Framing

The above research suggests a frame in which crime often is a race issue, whether explicitly by virtue of being a "hate crime" or implicitly by virtue of simply showing a picture of a black person in the context of the story. Several of the mentioned scholars have examined the connection between news coverage of African Americans and viewer attitudes in terms of framing. Framing provides news consumers with context for what they are watching. What is included in a news story, what is emphasized, and what is

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[16] Travis Dixon, Cristina Azocar, and Michael Casas, "The Portrayal of Race and Crime on Television News," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 47, no.4 (2003): 498-523.
[17] Paula Poindexter, Laura Smith, and Don Heider, "Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News: Framing, Story Assignments, and Source Selections," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 47 no. 4 (2003): 524-536.
[18] Robert Entman and Kimberly Gross, "Race to Judgment: Stereotyping Media and Criminal Defendants," *Law & Contemporary Problems* 71 (2008): 93-133.

excluded all play a part in helping viewers understand what they are seeing and hearing.[19] Frames also suggest to viewers what they should be paying closer attention to and may also subtly indicate who or what is responsible for certain social realities.[20] Reporters, producers and others involved in the creation and distribution of television news must make choices as to what facets of the available information will be shared with viewers and how that information will be presented. The facts of a news story are less compelling to the public without context to help viewers interpret the data. Isolated facts, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, form a clearer and more memorable picture when joined together into a more recognizable paradigm – or "frame." Entman writes that framing involves selection and salience, and that it is a "process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation." [21]

Media scholars have not yet agreed on a universally accepted definition of framing. It can generally be described as a central organizing idea for news content. Media frames furnish a context and also suggest the main issues through selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration of information.[22] Thus, frames are able to simultaneously illuminate and shroud information as it is presented to media consumers. Edelman discusses this aspect of framing, writing that the "character, causes and

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[19] Poindexter, P., Smith, L., and Heider, D., "Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News," 524-536.
[20] Travis Dixon, "Network News and Racial Beliefs: Exploring the Connection Between National Television News Exposure and Stereotypical Perceptions of African Americans," *Journal of Communication* 58, no.2 (2008): 321-337.
[21] Robert Entman, "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power," *Journal of Communication* 57, no.1 (2007): 163-173.
[22] Em Griffin, *A First Look at Communication Theory,* 7th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 359-371.

consequences of any phenomenon become radically different as changes are made in what is prominently displayed, what is repressed and especially in how observations are classified." He describes the variety of possible combinations of information a media consumer may be presented with as a "kaleidoscope of potential realities" that appear depending on how that information is framed.[23] Frames help shape audience perceptions by introducing, in Entman's words, "the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way." Increased salience heightens the likelihood that a television news viewer will pay more attention to the given information as well as better retain that data.

Work on framing in television news has also shown that news coverage of African Americans can influence the way non-blacks perceive social issues such as equality, affirmative action or poverty.[24] People create, alter and maintain stereotypes based on first-hand experiences with individuals or groups and second-hand sources including family, associates and mass media.[25] Entman and Gross describe media stereotypes as made up of "recurring messages that associate persons of color with traits, behaviors, and values generally considered undesirable, inferior or dangerous." [26] Television news viewers produce stereotypes of African Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities based, at least partially, on what they see on the news.[27] These cognitive structures are constructed in the minds of the audience through the persistent

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[23] Murray Edelman, "Contestable categories and public opinion," *Political Communication* 10, no.3 (1993): 231-242.
[24] Poindexter et al., "Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News," 524-536.
[25] Ramasubramanian, "Media-Based Strategies to Reduce Racial Stereotypes," 249-264.
[26] Entman and Gross, "Race to Judgment," 93-133.
[27] Dixon, "Network News and Racial Beliefs," 321-337.

representation of blacks and other out-group members in stereotypically violent or criminal roles in newscasts over extended periods of time.[28]

Stereotypes and News

Stereotypes help form narratives through which viewers understand their environment and their fellow humans within it. Media consumers of all races therefore become more likely to draw on these established scripts than to form new ideas about characteristics and behaviors of certain groups.[29] The use of stereotypes and schemata are not restricted to local news programs. Network news and press outlets on the national level also fall into this trap, frequently portraying minorities (particularly African Americans) in stereotypical ways by associating them most often with stories on "…poverty, crime and violence, drugs and even complaining." [30] This is illustrated in Ben-Porath and Shaker's analysis of framing in news stories after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. They found that the frames used by news media following the disaster shifted white viewers' perceptions of accountability and increased belief in the culpability of (typically African American) individuals for their own misfortunes.[31]

Lynn Owens discussed the influence of television news on public perception in a 2008 study, saying "it is important to take a closer look at exactly how the powerful network news outlets are portraying racial minorities." [32] Other scholars have noted the

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[28] Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz, "Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news," *Journal of Communication* 50, no.2 (2000): 131-154.
[29] Entman and Gross, "Race to Judgment," 93-133.
[30] Dixon, "Network News and Racial Beliefs," 321-337.
[31] Eran Ben-Porath and Lee Shaker, "News Images, Race, and Attribution in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina," *Journal of Communication* 60, no.3 (2010): 466-490.
[32] Lynn Owens, "Network News: The Role of Race in Source Selection and Story Topic," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 19 (2008): 355-370.

social power of framing. According to Gamson, once a certain phrase or term – such as "affirmative action" – becomes widely accepted, use of a different term can lead media consumers to perceive a lack of credibility in a report. Using different language may even cause communication to be unsuccessful as audience members may fail to understand what the news report is about.[33]

Framing goes along with the argument that the media, while not telling viewers how to think, can to some extent influence how viewers think about certain issues. Walter Lippmann, working before television was a prominent feature in daily American life, wrote that what media consumers believe to be "a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself." [34] Television news viewers cannot experience most events first-hand, thereby leaving the public reliant on the media for information. The way in which the press frame a particular issue or story can affect the way consumers perceive that subject. Frames can help the media present comparatively complex problems or topics in a more accessible way to audiences by playing to previously formed cognitive schemas.[35] There is little difference, in some aspects, between the means prosecutors and defense attorneys use to present evidence to jurors and the approach news outlets use to communicate information. Williams describes a trial as "a place for law, reason, and fact. However, the adversarial structure of the American jury trial can often treat juries like audiences of

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[33] William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
[34] L. Paul Husselbee and Larry Elliott, "Looking Beyond Hate: How National and Regional Newspapers Framed Hate Crimes in Jasper, Texas, and Laramie, Wyoming," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 79, no.4 (2002): 833–52.
[35] Dietram Scheufele and David Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models," *Journal of Communication* 57, no.1 (2007): 9-20.

a melodrama. Moving them to sympathy is a necessary part of 'winning' a case." [36] Television news turns to some of the same concepts, intentionally or not, to "tell a story" with the information gathered about trials.

Bias

The previous section discussed ways in which narratives are formed. Bias is another factor that should be considered when looking at how journalists present information to the public. Bias within the American press, or the appearance of it, is hard to confine to one obvious category. It can be seen during a certain news report by one group of viewers while a different group sees nothing unfair in the way the information is conveyed. It is not always clearly demonstrated in the word selections or vocal inflections of reporters. It can be more subtly applied to things like story selection, persons quoted or consulted for stories, or placement of a story within a larger broadcast program or printed layout.

Numerous polls taken during the past decade all seem to draw the same conclusion: the majority of Americans believe the news media are biased at least some of the time. The content of the surveys varies from queries about generally perceived bias to questions of bias on specific issues or stories. However, the numbers consistently reflect the public's disbelief in the American news media's ability to present information accurately, truthfully, and without agendas or prejudice. The various polls also show that the public's perceptions of bias are not limited to one medium. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are all charged with partiality. The extent of the offenses may be

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[36] Williams, *Playing the Race Card,* 264.

minor to the eyes of journalists and reporters, but survey respondents clearly think there is a definite view expressed in at least a portion of news coverage.

The public's views on the credibility of the American press have become fundamentally linked with discussions of bias and newsgathering; trust of the news media is rooted in consumers' belief in the truth and accuracy of the stories being reported. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) conducted a survey on media credibility in April 1998 that included a question on media bias. More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) agreed there is bias in the news media.[37] This statistic is not an anomaly, but rather a response that has been reaffirmed throughout the past decade.

Gannett's First Amendment Center conducted a poll in July and August 2008 that found 54% of respondents disagreed with the idea that "the news media try to report the news without bias," and 66% agreed that "falsifying or making up of stories in the American news media" was a common occurrence.[38] Those numbers vary slightly from responses given in 2004, 2005 and 2006, but only by a few percentage points. A related poll in August 2007, Freedom Forum's *State of the First Amendment Survey*, found 21% of respondents "mildly disagreed" and 39% "strongly disagreed" that the "news media tries to report the news without bias." [39] While the results of these surveys may be less

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[37] The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *Survey by American Society of Newspaper Editors and Urban & Associates, April, 1998* [report on-line] (Storrs, CT: iPoll – University of Connecticut, 1998, accessed 18 February 2011). Available from http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html#.Tq3X3XLBL1U

[38] First Amendment Center, *State of the First Amendment Survey 2008, July 23-August 3, 2008* [report on-line] (Nashville,TN: Vanderbilt University, 2008, accessed 18 February 2011). Available from http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about.aspx?item=state_first_amendment_2008

[39] The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *Survey by Freedom Forum and New England Survey Research Associates, August 16-August 26, 2007* [report on-line] (Storrs, CT: iPoll – University of

shocking than the ASNE number, they still show a clear majority of Americans believe bias is evident in news coverage.

Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press in 2000, 2004 and 2007 turned a spotlight on the question of media bias. Respondents were asked each time to rate the extent to which they "see political bias in news coverage" – a great deal, a fair amount, not too much, not at all, or don't know. The results were remarkably consistent despite the seven years separating the first and last surveys. In January 2000, 32% of respondents said they saw "a great deal" of bias and 37% saw "a fair amount" of bias in news coverage.[40] Those numbers dropped slightly by 2004 to 30% and 35%, respectively.[41] By 2007 the percentages were tied at 31%.[42] The other response categories also maintained fairly consistent numbers. These results indicate there is little change, positive or negative, in the public's perception of bias in the news. It has become, in essence, a fact of life for news consumers. This could mean that news viewers, readers and listeners have accepted the presence of bias and either take it into account or

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Connecticut, 2007, accessed 19 February 2011). Available from http:// www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html#.Tq3X3XLBL1U

[40] The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *Survey by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Princeton Survey Research Associates, January 12-January 16, 2000* [database on-line] (Storrs, CT: iPoll – University of Connecticut, 2000, accessed 20 February 2011). Available from http://www.people-press.org/2000/02/05/political-bias-in-the-media/

[41] The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *Survey by Pew Internet & American Life Project, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Princeton Survey Research Associates, December 19-January 4, 2004* [database on-line] (Storrs, CT: iPoll – University of Connecticut, 2004, accessed 20 February 2011). Available from http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html#.Tq3X3XLBL1U

[42] The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, *Survey by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and Princeton Survey Research Associates International, December 19-December 30, 2007* [database on-line] (Storrs, CT: iPoll – University of Connecticut, 2007, accessed 18 February 2011) Available from http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html#.Tq3X3XLBL1U

disregard it. It could also suggest that the media are doing little to combat bias (either actual or perceived).

A study of media credibility released by Sacred Heart University in January 2008 also found a majority of Americans believe news media are biased. This survey concluded 87.6% of Americans believe "the news media attempts to influence opinion," up from 79.3% in agreement in 2003. National news media also were found to keep "any personal bias out of stories" by only 33.3% of respondents.[43] However, critics of Sacred Heart's findings point out that perception of bias is not necessarily proof that such bias exists in the work itself. Whether bias is truly present or not, some studies show that awareness of such bias does not necessarily pose a problem for media consumers. The ASNE released a report in 1999 that examined the credibility of the press. Their study was not limited to newspapers, but encompassed questions about news media in general and the public's views on American journalism. The report found that the public was not only aware of bias in the news, but also extended some forgiveness to journalists for its presence.[44] Since news is covered by humans, for humans, it is only natural that some of a journalist's own views will infiltrate even the most carefully presented stories.

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[43] Sacred Heart University, *Americans slam news media on believability* [report on-line] (Fairfield, CT: Sacred Heart University, 2008, accessed 21 February 2011). Available from http://www.sacredheart.edu/pages/27859_americans_slam_news_media_on_believability.cfm

[44] American Society of Newspaper Editors, *Examining Our Credibility: Perspectives of the Public and the Press* [article on-line] (Reston, VA: ASNE, 1999, accessed 17 February 2011). Available from http://www.asne.org/kiosk/reports/99reports/1999examiningourcredibility/p108_About.html

Chapter 3

Methodology

Material to be Analyzed

Content analysis is the means through which I examined both the language and visuals used in selected news coverage of the murder trials of defendants Lemaricus Davidson, George Thomas and Letalvis Cobbins (see Appendix A). The murder trials provided definitive timelines for analyzing the local television coverage of these events. Each murder trial was a specific event with beginning and end points clearly demarcated by court proceedings. I chose to narrow the scope of this study to one local television station, WBIR-TV, and one daily newscast. That station's 6 p.m. broadcast during the murder trials was the highest rated among the three Knoxville local news stations. Due to the typical hours of daily courtroom operations, the 6 p.m. newscast was also the show that aired closest to the end of each day's trial proceedings. This meant that the shows in this study habitually contained the newest and most complete information on each day's events relating to the trials. WBIR's 6 p.m. newscast could also be a first look at that day's trial coverage by viewers who were away from their televisions during regular daytime business hours, which added to the potential significance of that specific daily news program. My selection of WBIR's nightly newscasts was also due, in part, to the issue of access. During the Christian-Newsom trials I was employed as a morning news producer by that station. Confining this study to the 6 p.m. news was also a means of reducing the potential for subjectivity in this analysis. As a morning producer I not only never produced but never wrote for nor was involved in any aspect of the evening news. In fact, many days I was either likely to be either asleep or in class during the creation or

broadcasting of the 6 p.m. news. However, my employee status did allow me to obtain copies of the newscasts.

Focusing exclusively on WBIR's coverage of the Christian-Newsom case during the duration of the criminal trials was also an effective approach for eliminating incidental stories. This meant that some portions of the news coverage were not analyzed here, such as the initial days after the discovery of the crimes or stories that may have been reported during the intervening months between the defendants' arrests and the start of their murder trials. I analyzed news coverage beginning on the first day of each of the three black male defendant's capital murder trials. This study was confined to coverage of those defendants in the case who were found guilty of felony murder. The trial of the fourth indicted defendant, a black female, was excluded from this study.[45]

The units for analysis were the headlines and stories about the Christian-Newsom murders that aired throughout the three murder trials during 6 p.m. (EST) evening newscasts on WBIR-TV. Additionally, descriptive terms about trial participants or the crimes and courtroom proceedings used within each headline or news story were noted and coded. On any given night there could be several units to analyze within each newscast. I analyzed the entire population of headlines and stories that met these criteria. The total number of coded units was 28 headlines and 90 stories out of 30 newscasts. Two newscasts did not include headlines because they aired at delayed times due to televised sporting events. The Letalvis Cobbins murder trial took ten days during the

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[45] Removing the trial of Vanessa Coleman from this analysis eliminates several variables, allowing for a cleaner study. These include gender (she was the sole female defendant) and sentence (she was found guilty of lesser facilitation charges, unlike the male defendants). While worthy of future consideration, these aspects would add variables unnecessary for the scope of this project.

period of August 17th through August 26th, 2009, yielding 32 stories during the 6 p.m. newscasts. Lemaricus Davidson's trial lasted eleven days and produced 38 news stories for this study between October 19th and October 30th, 2009. The final defendant in this analysis, George Thomas, was tried between December 1st and December 10th, 2009. His trial took nine days and was the topic of 20 stories in this study.

WBIR's evening newscasts typically begin with headlines. This is a series of three brief statements of one or two sentences each. They are used along with accompanying visuals to indicate to viewers what stories will follow. The headlines in this study were coded separately from the stories within each qualifying newscast. The headlines that specifically referred to the murder trials were assessed for component parts, dominant subjects, and any specific mentions of race (see Appendix B). In addition to headlines each newscast was coded for separate stories pertaining to the Christian-Newsom murders (see Appendix C). Story length was determined by a change in dominant subject matter and/or a change in presenter (switches in anchors or reporters). Only those stories concerned with the trial were considered.

Each unit of analysis was coded for component parts, main topics, and descriptive language (see Appendix A). Components included video, soundbites, interviews, and still images. Relevant stories and headlines were also coded for dominant subjects: victims, defendant, friends and family, trial procedures, sentence or prison, or other. "Other" was a general category used for additional subjects that did not fall within any particular topic, including community reaction. Finally, coders noted words or short phrases used in each story to describe the trial, the crime, the victims and their friends and families, or the

defendants and their friends and families. Phrases could also be categorized as illustrative of the victims' or defendants' childhoods, education, economic status, or race.

WBIR-TV

WBIR is an NBC affiliate station and is the highest-rated local television news station in the Knoxville Designated Market Area (DMA), according to Nielsen Company ratings. The Nielsen Company measures ratings for cable and broadcast television, broken down into fifteen minute increments, as well as providing networks and stations with daily and weekly averages. Ratings are the number of homes with televisions that are tuned in to a particular station at a given time. Market ranking is determined by the number of homes with televisions served by broadcasters in that area. Nielsen is also responsible for devising DMAs – the geographic grouping of cities and counties that make up a station's television viewing area. No county is listed in more than one DMA, although people living near the borders of a station's broadcast reach may receive programming from more than one market area. The continental United States, Hawaii and Alaska are all covered by the 210 DMAs.[46]

WBIR has been broadcasting in East Tennessee and sections of southern Kentucky for more than fifty years. Viewers first tuned in to Channel 10 in August 1956, when WBIR was a CBS affiliate. It changed its affiliation to NBC in September 1988. WBIR's North Knoxville studios were completed in May 1957 and, while the technology and design have changed, the station continues to broadcast from that same location

[46] The Nielsen Company www.nielsen.com/us/en.html

today.[47] This illustrates the long relationship WBIR has with Knox County viewers, many of whom grew up watching the Channel 10 news programs. It also demonstrates what an established presence this news product is in Knoxville and the surrounding communities as well as within the local media culture.

The Newscasts

WBIR's nightly 6 p.m. newscasts were selected for several reasons. First, following courtroom hours, this program typically aired shortly after court recessed for the day. That meant the majority of information related in the broadcast's stories was relatively new, especially to the viewing audience. Other newscasts that aired in the late evening (11 p.m.) or earlier in the day (morning, noon, 4 p.m.) consisted of a proportionally larger amount of information recapitulated from the previous 6 p.m. newscast or previews of anticipated actions and testimonies during the following day's court action. And although local media is changing in many ways, including embracing new technologies, the daily news cycle still is geared towards 6 p.m. evening newscasts as the news "show of record." The daily ratings also reflect a consistently high number of viewers watching the 6 p.m. newscast. This substantiates the notion that a diverse and wide-spread population within the Knoxville media market receives at least a portion of its daily information from these newscasts.

The Process

My first step was to establish a timeline for each of the three murder trials. I then gathered DVDs of the appropriate 6 p.m. newscasts from WBIR. I prepared preliminary

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[47] Gannett Co., Inc., WBIR-TV, *Employee Handbook: WBIR-TV Straight from the Heart* (Knoxville, TN: WBIR, 2003), 7.

versions of my code sheets (one version for headlines only, one for news stories) and wrote a code book to define the terminology used during the coding. Two volunteers and I coded a selection of several of the pertinent news segments during the pre-testing phase. The volunteers were instructed as to how to categorize the various components of the stories and any descriptive phrases they heard during the coverage. Calculations using Holsti's method[48] revealed an intercoder reliability of 87.5% for headlines and 74.52% for news stories during this initial coding phase. The greatest discrepancies between coders were regarding the dominant subjects of both headlines and stories and the descriptive phrases from the news stories. This knowledge allowed me to modify the code book (see Appendix A) and code sheets (see Appendixes B and C) before full coding commenced, making minor corrections to improve clarity and simplicity for the coding group. I also devised a completely new third page for the news story coding sheets, replacing generalized requests for descriptors with more specific categories to be assigned to words and phrases. This also provided coders with a more definitive idea of the terms that were considered of note for this study.

Once this was complete, I coded all newscasts according to the parameters I assigned. I then recruited a group of four volunteers to code the headlines and news stories. Each coder was assigned a number to be used for the duration of the study. I instructed the group in the coding process, giving each member a copy of the code book to read before we commenced. When they indicated they all understood the project they were shown the relevant headlines and news stories in the order of their original air dates.

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[48] Holsti's method for determining intercoder reliability is the number of agreed upon items divided by the total number of items coded.

When the results of the full coding were analyzed, I found the level of divergence was markedly improved from the pre-testing phase. Again, I determined intercoder reliability through use of Holsti's method. I also removed the descriptive language section of the code sheets since those entries were qualitative as opposed to quantitative and therefore could not be accurately gauged in terms of coder agreement. These modifications improved intercoder reliability to 99.40% for headlines and 99.95% for news stories.

Once the data were collected I compiled the results utilizing two separate computer programs. The values from the headline coding sheets and the first two pages of the story coding sheets were assembled into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for comparison. The descriptive phrases, as recorded on the third page of the coding sheets for each story, were documented in Provalis Research's QDA Miner program. This is a software package for coding, annotating and categorizing information that is used for mixed-model qualitative data analysis. Each trial was given its own section in the document to enable analysis of terms used during stories that aired within a particular defendant's case or across all three trials. The descriptors then were further categorized into "Characteristics," "Narrative," or "Emotions." Characteristics referred to those words and phrases used to indicate traits of the victims or defendants in positive, negative or neutral terms. Narrative entries denoted the tragedy of the trials, the brutality of the crimes, or the attention the trials attracted. Entries marked as emotions indicated the positive, negative or neutral emotional states of the victims and their family members, the defendants and their relatives, or others involved in the story (including court personnel, law officials and community members).

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

I endeavored to answer a series of research questions through analysis of the headlines and news stories in this study. How did WBIR's 6 p.m. news stories frame the trial proceedings and participants in the Christian-Newsom murder trials? Was the coverage of such extraordinary circumstances likewise unique? In what ways did media coverage concerning the defendants vary from that focusing on the victims? Was there any obvious bias, positive or negative, in the on-air coverage of these trials? What can be inferred from the selection of visual and audio components that comprise the stories and headlines? To what extent, if any, did race play a role in the media coverage? What aspects of the trials received the most prominent news coverage by WBIR? The following sections look at the results of this study and consider the findings in terms of these queries.

Newscast Organization

Regularly scheduled local evening newscasts typically follow a set organizational formula. This pattern allows viewers to learn approximately where in the newscast, and when on the clock, they can see the day's news, weather and sports information. It also sends signals to viewers about the relative importance of content based on its location within the newscast. McQuail wrote that the typical news form indicates significance "by the sequencing of content and by the relative amount of space or time allocated…it will

be understood that first-appearing items in television news are most 'important' and that, generally, items receiving more time are also more important." [49]

Headlines

Headlines serve as the viewers' introduction to the major stories of the day. Their purpose before a newscast is to convince the audience outside the news organization to continue watching. Due to the short length of the average headline (ten seconds or less), there is rarely time for more than one topic or scene to be covered. Television journalists are taught to keep the language concise and the visuals cohesive to ensure headlines indicate what about the following story is important and interesting for viewers. There are typically three headlines at the beginning of every 6 p.m. newscast. The majority of WBIR 6 p.m. newscasts during each of the three defendants' murder trials began with a headline about the trial. The Christian-Newsom case was mentioned first in 26 of the 28 headlines analyzed.[50] The prominence of such headlines indicated that the producers, anchors and reporters believed the trial coverage to be the most noteworthy portion of the day's news. Such placement also cued viewers to the fact that this is a story of significance, while simultaneously acknowledging the amount of public interest in this information.

One hundred percent (28 out of 28) of the coded headlines included video. This is not unexpected, since the majority of WBIR newscast headlines in general include video.

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[49] Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory,* 5th ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2005), 380-381.

[50] Note: Thirty newscasts were analyzed but headlines were only available for 28 of these. The other two newscasts had delayed start times due to weekend sporting events. Those newscasts began with the show open, skipping headlines to increase the amount of time available for news stories.

Photographs were used in five headlines, but no instances of other components (soundbites, live reporter shots, graphics, or mug shots) were noted (see Table 1). Out of 28 headlines, 27 showed video from the courtroom while only one headline included video from the crime scene. One quarter of the headlines showed members of the Christian and Newsom families, while only two included video of friends or family of the defendants. Five headlines included still images, out of which four were photographs of the victims and one was a non-mug shot image of the defendant.

More than half of the headlines (60.7%) were coded as having "trial procedures" as the main subject. Just over 10% were coded as emphasizing sentencing, and another 10% centered on friends and family members of those involved in the cases. The defendants themselves were the main topic in four of the 28 headlines (14.3%), and the jury was marked as the subject in one headline. Surprisingly, the victims were not selected as the main subject of any headlines by any coders, despite their images being used in just over 14% of the headlines (see Figure 1).[51] The percentage breakdown of headline subjects revealed that WBIR's producers typically selected general recaps about each day's courtroom activities as the primary topic used to introduce their daily news coverage to viewers. This consistency could be construed as a means of assisting WBIR's nightly newscast viewers in constructing schemata about the information to follow. It can be reasonably concluded that regular viewers would develop an expectation about the type of stories about the trial that would appear in each newscast and the form the newscasters would use to deliver the information.

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[51] All tables and figures are located in Appendix D.

News Stories

Headlines serve as viewers' introduction to the newscast about to begin, but it is the longer stories within the program that contain the bulk of the material presented by the journalists. Stories are organized within each newscast by the producers and newsroom managers, based on a number of factors. Importance and immediacy of the information plays a significant role in the ordering of newscasts. Therefore, the closer to the beginning of the show a story airs, the more crucial it is considered by the news station. Developing or breaking news is an exception to this rule, since those types of stories are often delayed in order to confirm facts or allow new information to be received and processed by the newsroom.

For the purposes of this analysis, the total length of time after the headlines devoted to the Christian-Newsom murder trials in each selected newscast was separated into stories. Changes in either presenter or subject matter were used to determine the end of one story and the beginning of the next. Ninety stories were coded out of the population of 30 newscasts. Each story was timed and coded on an individual basis. The stories varied in length and number for each newscast. However, there was consistency in the organization of the stories that emerged during the analysis. Anchors appeared in 100% of coded stories. The primary anchors in these stories were WBIR's nightly news anchors, John Becker and Robin Wilhoit. The weekend newscasts were anchored by Sean Dreher, who reported during the week. The anchors' level of involvement in each segment fluctuated, depending on whether they were presenting the material in its

entirety or introducing one of the station's reporters, who in turn communicated the story to viewers.

"Live reporters" were present in almost 45% of the coded stories. Typical stories including a live reporter began with the anchors inside the WBIR studios introducing the reporter who was live (not pre-recorded) from a secondary location. Throughout the trial, the reporters were live from outside the courtroom in the City County Building in downtown Knoxville. This was of two-fold benefit: the location allowed reporters to stay in court longer to ensure they had the most recent information to share, and also provided a visual clue to viewers about the story's importance because WBIR was expending time and resources to bring the story to television as it happened. Reporters on tape were marked in nine of the 90 coded stories, or 10%. These instances are when reporters were shown onscreen within their story at a relevant location but were not live on-air at the time.

Video was, as expected, used in 92% of the coded stories. Television newscasts are by their nature heavily reliant on video, making its use in 83 out of 90 stories unexceptional. Soundbites were used in 83% of stories about the Christian-Newsom murders. Again, using statements either given in court by officials and trial participants or shared with journalists outside the courtroom as reaction to trial events is characteristic of media trial coverage. The ability to present moving images and to allow audiences to hear what people involved in the story are saying is what sets television news apart from traditional print media. Only four interviews were utilized during the analyzed set of 6 p.m. newscasts. Interviews, for the purposes of this study, included both the interviewer

and the interviewee to allow viewers to see and hear the back-and-forth of journalist and source. Defendant mug shots were shown in 28.8% of stories, and non-mug shot photos of either victims or defendants were recorded in 63.3% of stories (see Figure 2).

News stories also were coded for dominant subject matter. This contributed to the formation of a clearer picture of where WBIR's coverage was focused. Coders found that just under half (49%) of the stories centered on trial procedures. As with the headlines, this was not an unanticipated finding. The daily developments inside the courtroom provided the basis for each day's reports, which resulted in daily summations being presented to the viewing audiences in a total of 44 news stories. The remaining 51% of news stories were coded as follows for dominant subject matter: 16% (14 stories) for sentencing and/or punishment of defendants; 10% (nine stories) for friends and family members of the victims; 3% (three stories) for friends and family of the defendants; 4% (four stories) for the victims; 11% (10 stories) for the defendants; 7% (six stories) for other.[52] I believe it is telling that there was only a single story difference between the total number of reports concentrated on those charged with the crimes and ones that emphasized those people who were closest to the victims (see Figure 3).

These numbers were supported by the video chosen for each story. Courtroom video appeared in 84% of the stories, while 39% of the video showed family members or friends of the victims. Family members or friends of the defendants were shown in 16% of the video and 13% included shots coded as "other" (person-on-the-street interviews, scenes in the community, etc.). Just over 4% of the video showed tributes or memorials

[52] The "other" category was applied to those new stories about community reaction or public opinion of the crimes or trials.

for the victims. Two categories of video were never shown in any story across all three trials: home videos of the victims or home video of the defendants (see Figure 4). The victims were solely seen in photographs; the defendants were either shown in person inside the courtroom or in photographs and mug shots. The coding process revealed photographs were shown in 63% of the stories, either as part of larger graphics or on their own. Mug shots appeared in 29% of the coded stories, either standing alone or as part of an on-screen graphic. Graphics containing either photographs or mug shots were used in just over 52% of the coded news segments. The photographs were further divided into categories by subject and one or more photographs from each category might appear in any given story. Photographs of one or both victims were used in 48% of coded stories, photographs of one or more defendants appeared in 22% of stories, mug shots appear 29%, evidence in 6%, and images of the crime scene in 3% (see Figure 5).

Sound is another vital component of television news stories. Soundbites were used in 84% of the stories in this analysis and interviews were shown in another 4%. Out of the sources viewers heard from, slightly more than 54% were coded as justice or law officials. This category included the judge, attorneys, jurors, law enforcement officers, and investigators involved in the Christian-Newsom murder cases. Family members of the victims accounted for 27% of the soundbites used in WBIR's coverage of the three murder trials. In 17% of the stories, soundbites were used from members of the public, local business owners and people not directly affiliated with the trial (coded as "others"). Supporters of the defendants were heard in 9% of the stories, while 8% of the soundbites were from experts not testifying in the cases. Family members of the defendants and

witnesses were two categories of soundbites that were each marked in 4% of the stories (see Figure 6). Those marked as "witnesses" were people testifying in the trials who were not considered friends or family of the victims or defendants.

Descriptive Language

Coders were asked to record words or phrases in each story that described various aspects of the crime and trial, the victims, defendants, or the families involved (see Appendix C). Not every category was found in every story, and some were noted in very few. These expressions could be voiced by journalists, attorneys, community members or trial participants during the course of news stories. Terms used to negatively describe the character or actions of the defendants ("guilty," "killer," "liar," "animals," etc.) were recognized in 23% of the coded phrases (411 total coded occurrences). The next highest percentage was recorded for words referencing the tragedy of the crimes. Descriptors such as "heartbreaking," "loss," "tragic" and "murdered children" were indicated 17% (307 times) across all three murder trials. Phrases referring to the brutality of the crimes occurred almost as frequently as those denoting tragedy. "Brutal," "horrific," "graphic images" and similar phrases were marked as 15% of the total phrases coded (274 instances) across all three cases.

Descriptors referencing the amount of public interest in the trials were perceived in 7% of coded terms (119 times). Positive character traits of the victims were found in 4% (79) of coded phrases. That is only slightly more often than mentions of positive traits of the defendants – 4% (64) - but double the 2% (40) of negative references to the victims' characters. In addition to characteristics of the victims and defendants, WBIR journalists and trial participants made several references to the emotional quality of the

trial proceedings over the course of the three murder trials. Positive emotions like joy and happiness were indicated in 3% (61) of coded phrases about the victims and their families, 0.10% (2) about defendants and their families, and 1% (21) about others (including community members and court officials). Negative emotions like anger or sadness were noted in 8% (148) of coded terms about the victims and their families, 4% (79) about the defendants and their families, and 4% (79) of remarks about the emotions of others (see Table 2).

Discussion

Based upon the extraordinary circumstances of the Christian-Newsom murder cases, I anticipated that news coverage of the trials of those charged with the crimes would be atypical. A closer look at the components that comprised WBIR's stories and headlines vis-à-vis the three murder trials in this study indicated that WBIR's coverage was unique in terms of volume but not necessarily in the method. The total amount of time in each newscast devoted to the trial was dictated by the events of that day and the amount of new information chosen by the journalists to share with television viewers. However, on average stories about the trials were limited to two minutes or less, with total daily coverage in the 6 p.m. newscast falling in the four to six minute range. This is a considerable portion of the broadcast's allotted time to be devoted to a single topic. Each thirty minute program includes more than twelve minutes of weather forecasts, sports highlights and commercial breaks. Taking that into account, stories about these particular murder trials added up to a significant amount of news coverage per broadcast.

The quantity of reporting on the Christian-Newsom murder trials by WBIR reinforced the unusual nature of the crimes. Yet despite the extent of the coverage, this

study suggested there was little variation in the means and methods used to report on these trials compared to conventional television news treatment of crime. Gilliam and Iyengar wrote that local crime news reporting typically follows a standard script of statements about the violence of crime, episodic coverage, and the presence of non-white male perpetrators.[53] The stories analyzed for this study fell into this heuristic. WBIR's coverage concentrated on day-to-day trial procedures and related actions like verdicts and sentencing. This is a familiar forum for news media and allowed WBIR's producers, reporters, photographers and anchors to establish a template for stories about these trials. The formula that emerged is as follows: viewers heard a soundbite from the day's courtroom actions before seeing the WBIR anchors on camera. The anchors summarized that day's proceedings accompanied by graphics with images of the two victims or the defendant currently on trial. This was followed by a reporter, live outside the courtroom, who explained the day's events in greater detail. There may or may not have been additional stories related to the trial after the main story, but the trial coverage regularly concluded with a reminder from the anchors to visit the station's website for more information. This pattern was one that both those producing the news and the news audience could follow without difficulty.

WBIR's coverage of the Cobbins, Davidson and Thomas trials was consistent but it neglected potential opportunities to delve deeper. The crimes and subsequent trials generated strong public interest. While the amount of attention paid to the proceedings was referenced several times during news stories, what was missing was actual coverage

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[53] Franklin Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no.3 (2000): 560-573.

of it. Community reaction was sought after the first day in Letalvis Cobbins' ten-day trial and again during the final stages. Coverage of Lemaricus Davidson's eleven-day trial followed a similar configuration. There was little mention of public opinion during the George Thomas trial. This can partially be explained by the amount of interest in each case. Cobbins was tried first, making coverage of his trial the one through which WBIR's framework was established. Davidson was the alleged ringleader of the crimes and many considered him most culpable for the events, generating more public interest in the proceedings and outcome. The Thomas trial came last and had the least amount of coverage out of the three trials despite his also facing charges of murder, rape and torture. It was also the shortest of the three trials, taking nine days from opening arguments to sentencing.

Perhaps what was most revealing was what elements of coverage these trials appeared to be missing. One element that was prevalent in pre-trial discussions of the trials but negligible in WBIR's coverage was race. Mentions of race relations, especially in the American South, carry a minefield of historical stereotypes, hypersensitivity, and opportunities for deliberate or accidental misunderstandings. Reactions across East Tennessee to the Christian-Newsom murders became so vitriolic in some instances that local media venues, including the Knoxville News Sentinel and WBIR, removed the public comments sections from many stories concerning the crimes or trials. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Knox County has a population of 432,226. Of that number, 85.6% is identified as white (83.9% as "white persons not Hispanic") and 8.8% as

black.[54] The revelation that four black people were charged in connection with the carjackings, rapes, tortures and murders of two young white people served as a justification for some people to vent their frustrations about issues of race in general. Members of white supremacist groups called on like-minded individuals to picket in downtown Knoxville and outside local media offices. The anonymity afforded by online forums encouraged some commenters to publicly share views about race relations and draw conclusions based on stereotypes that they may have been disinclined to share under other circumstances. However, the seemingly significant issue of race in the Christian-Newsom case was largely disregarded in WBIR's coverage of the murder trials.

Each of the few community reaction stories largely focused on the opinions of white, middle-class citizens who fell into the same demographics as the victims and their families. The stories were shot in downtown Knoxville and West Knoxville, areas frequented by the victims, their families, and those of similar economic and social backgrounds. Areas of Knoxville with larger black populations did not appear in any of the stories unless video or images of the crime scene were shown. One black man was asked about his thoughts on the case during a "man on the street" interview; the remaining nine commentaries all came from white men and women. Feelings about the crimes or trials may not have differed between racial and economic groups in Knoxville, but this possibility was never really explored by WBIR. Beyond that, viewers received no

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[54] U.S. Census Bureau, *Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010 / 2010 Demographic Profile Data – Knox County, Tennessee* [database on-line] (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2010, accessed 4 September 2011). Available from http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_DP_DPDP1&prodType=table

commentary from experts about the implications of the crimes for race relations in Knox County. There were no interviews with leaders in Knox County's black community or from members of predominantly black organizations. There were no interviews with anyone who personally knew the defendants, with the exception of brief soundbites from Letalvis Cobbins' sisters during the sentencing phase of his trial. Audiences did not receive information about the historical perspective on such crimes, about the rarity of this type of case, or about the toll the trials took on local law enforcement and justice officials.

It is worth noting that the very nature of television news is based first on visuals and sound first and foremost, followed by the writing that goes into producing the news broadcasts. Emphasis on images made explicit mention of race concerning either victims or defendants unnecessary. Audiences could clearly see the race of those most prominently involved in the cases, making such verbal descriptions redundant. Yet the choices of video segments and photographs could be viewed as constructing a narrative that incorporated stereotypical ideas about race and social roles. The black male defendants were presented as frightening, dangerous, unemotional outsiders. Viewers did not see them interacting with friends and family, nor did they hear many comments in support of the perpetrators. In contrast, the victims were shown as happy, social, innocent members of the Knox County community despite no video of them while living was used in WBIR's coverage. This concept of scary criminals and virtuous victims was illustrated most clearly through comparing still images used throughout WBIR's stories. The defendants were all shown multiple times in their police mug shots, except for Lemaricus

Davidson. WBIR switched early in his trial to a still image of Davidson taken from courtroom footage. Davidson was the only defendant for whom a second still image was consistently used.

In contrast, the victims were shown smiling and laughing in candid photographs. Channon Christian and Chris Newsom were frequently shown in photos together or with friends and family members. Viewers saw Chris rounding the bases during a baseball game and Channon cheering on the University of Tennessee football team with friends. These images had an entirely opposite effect from those of the defendants. They illustrated what happy, active lives the victims had before they were taken away. They also helped viewers connect to the "good kids," as they were often referred to during the trials. Coding of these news segments suggested WBIR was not trying to challenge conventional trial reporting through the use of such conflicting imagery. Rather, the video and still image selections enabled the reporters to more easily steer viewers through the narrative conventions established by WBIR. The use of both the defendants' mug shots and the courtroom picture of Davidson - combined with video segments showing the defendants hunched over, either scowling or blankly staring ahead - presented the trial stories within the frame of dangerous black criminals, innocent white victims.

The racial component of this framework may have been incidental to the basic good versus evil or victim versus perpetrator concept. Yet there were subtle allusions to historical Southern attitudes about race presented within the coded news stories. James Kinney wrote about "the Southern rape complex," where "the idolatrizing of white women in the South led to the identification of white womanhood with the South itself.

Thus the rape of a white Southern woman [by a black man] becomes a powerful symbol of what white Southern men perceived as the rape of the South by black freedmen and carpetbaggers during Reconstruction."[55] Channon Christian's sexual purity was referenced, as was the idea that she and Chris Newsom were "kids" or "children" despite being young adults. This youthful image contributes to the notion of innocence destroyed by the brutality the white couple experienced at the hands of black predators.

Findings in this study also pointed to a slight shift in how each defendant was framed during WBIR's coverage of the murder trials. Soundbite and visual components reflected the frameworks used by attorneys during courtroom arguments. Cobbins was presented by his defense team as a coward who feared his half-brother Davidson too much to prevent the murders. All coders recorded occurrences of phrases including "coward," "liar," "cried like a little girl," "never stood up to big brother," and "scared of big brother" in both defense and prosecution statements about Cobbins. Coders marked frequent use of terms during Davidson's trial indicating the defendant's role as the driving force behind the tortures and killings. These terms included "ringleader," "animal," "emotionless," "violent," and "killer." The third defendant was presented as an indifferent participant unwilling either to stop the crimes or to refuse to take part. All coders noted terms describing Thomas as "passive," "indifferent," "detached" and "failed to act." The reiteration of descriptive phrases about each defendant facilitated the creation of viewers' cognitive webs about the case. Each defendant was given a distinct personality or set of characteristics, all negative. This in turn likely made it easier for

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[55] Kinney, "The Rhetoric of Racism," 145-154.

members of the WBIR audience to more quickly understand the trial proceedings and distinguish the three cases from one another.

The editorial structure of criminals versus victims was reinforced by WBIR's choices of story components. Viewers heard emotional soundbites from the victims' family members about their grief and loss and saw the victims' mothers crying on the witness stand. Viewers were also shown the victims' families crying as they sat in court during parts of the testimony, and at other times they are shown visibly upset or angry. This was in direct contrast to shots of the defendants sitting in the courtroom, faces devoid of emotion. Despite references in the texts of the stories to the emotions displayed by the defendants in court, viewers rarely saw anything besides their mug shots or video showing them "emotionless" or "stoic" (as described repeatedly in the coded stories). The reporters verbally referenced testimony about the brutality of the crimes and how the victims pleaded for their lives, or the stories showed portions of police interviews with the defendants conducted shortly after their arrests being played in court. As WBIR viewers heard these terrible details about the ordeal the victims suffered, they were shown the defendant scowling or calmly sitting next to his attorneys. Thus WBIR's news stories repeatedly showed viewers "proof" of just how impervious the defendants were to the evidence of their crimes.

This narrative pattern of passive or unremorseful criminals also corresponded to the tragedy narrative of these trials. The victims in these crimes, Channon Christian and Christopher Newsom, may be construed as innocents overtaken and destroyed by an "overpowering force" – the defendants. The terms "tragic" and "tragedy" are used rather

liberally these days to describe unhappy circumstances. However, I would argue that their application to these stories was both appropriate and effective. It was the Christian and Newsom families who became the main reference point for viewers in WBIR's coverage of these trials. Grieving, angry parents forced to repeatedly relive the horrors suffered by their children during their last hours alive were easy for audiences to sympathize with. They also provided most of the reaction soundbites during the trial coverage, speaking to the media on a regular basis about the defendants, the trials, and their children. Out of 76 news stories with soundbites, 24 included statements from one or both sets of victims' parents. They were given substantial time during WBIR's coverage in terms of video appearances and opportunities to speak on camera. The victims' families were also shown inside the courtroom, on the witness stand, outside the courtroom, and at public events honoring their children.

The defendants' families, on the other hand, were rarely seen in the coverage and when they did appear it was often brief. Audiences heard from members of the Cobbins/Davidson or Thomas families only four times over the course of the three trials. Even on the day Cobbins' sisters gave emotional testimony in an effort to sway the jury away from the death penalty, the coverage hinged on the responses of the victims' families to the day's courtroom proceedings. One of the newscast headlines showed the defendant's sister crying, but we did not see or hear from her until nearly three minutes into the newscast. Headlines are used to intrigue viewers with what revelations may come from each day's news coverage, which is why viewers saw dramatic images such as a defendant's sister weeping on the witness stand. However, the majority of coverage for

that day was what the victims' families thought about the defendant's family members and the progress of the trial.

WBIR's coverage of the families on both sides of the case may not have been intentionally disparate, but two incongruent definitions of "family" emerged over the course of the three trials. Viewers were presented with accounts of the victims' families as coherent units expressing similar viewpoints and sharing emotions through the news stories. The circumstances surrounding this group of people may have been terrible but they presented a united front, sticking together through adversity. At the opposite end of the scale were the few glimpses the news audience had of the defendants' families. They were largely absent from the coverage due to either availability or desire. There were repeated references to the dysfunctions in each of the defendants' families and the histories of poverty, drug use, absent parental figures, and abuse. This fell in line with media stereotypes of the state of black and white families. Entman and Gross (2008) discussed some of the implications of this type of widespread media attention divided along economic and racial lines. They wrote:

> …aside from crime, perhaps the most frequent and disproportionate association made with persons of color in the news media is poverty... In this way, not only do media encode poverty as an especially black trait, but they undermine potential sympathy, especially among the white majority, for antipoverty programs. Poverty can be portrayed as a condition that merits sympathy, but it more often appears associated with threats in the form of crime, violence, drugs, gangs, and aimless activity.[56]

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[56] Entman and Gross, "Race to Judgment," 93-133.

WBIR's coverage may not have proposed to deliver commentary on the condition of the American family along race lines, but the implications could still be discerned.

The differences in the families on either side of the Christian-Newsom murder trials also served to highlight the path where most of the news media's, and therefore the television audience's, attention was concentrated. The victims' families became a touchstone for viewers. The Christian and Newsom families, particularly the parents, were established throughout WBIR's coverage as sympathetic, familiar faces. Importance was given to their comments during each phase of the trials through both the amount of time allotted per story for their statements and the frequency with which their comments were made. Courtroom video made up the majority of the news stories, and as part of those segments the audience was shown the victims' families on a daily basis. As previously stated, video and sound from the defendants' families were practically nonexistent during the trial coverage until the sentencing phase was reached. During some of the news stories the actual defendant, whether it was Cobbins, Davidson, or Thomas, was scarcely seen apart from his mug shot and a few seconds of video showing him seated with his attorneys. But during those same stories, viewers typically were not only shown the Christians and Newsoms as they sat in the courtroom but they also heard their opinions about the day's proceedings through additional soundbites. This study suggested, when all three trials were examined together, that the overarching pattern to WBIR's coverage was really the journey of the victims' families as they sought justice for their children. Again, this was compatible with the concept of these trials as tragedies

in the oldest sense of the word. The victims' families were on their quest for closure, for justice, and to restore honor to their offspring.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

The kidnappings, tortures and murders of Channon Christian and Chris Newsom caught the attention of a broad section of East Tennesseans, particularly in and around Knoxville. The crimes were highly unusual in both the sheer brutality inflicted and the racial makeup of the victims and perpetrators. What this study revealed is that editorial decisions resulted in the construction of not one but two frames in WBIR's nightly 6 p.m. coverage of the murder trials of the three male defendants. The highest-rated local television news station in the Knoxville market used a narrative frame of courtroom procedure, but the video selections created a second frame that focused on the victims' families.

The day-to-day coverage of the murder trials relied primarily on courtroom video and news stories on court proceedings. This allowed those responsible for producing and reporting the news to quickly establish a template that could be utilized throughout all three trials. While this assisted viewers in understanding the salient points of WBIR's chosen approach, it may also have made it all too easy for journalists to ignore deeper implications of the crimes and trials within the community. On one hand, this could be considered a failing by WBIR in terms of delving deeper into controversial situations and subjects occurring locally. Coders in this study noted repeated references to public interest in the case during newscasts. This, combined with the considerable amount of time devoted to the trials, lead me to anticipate news stories on a broader range of issues associated with this case. If one story was deemed important enough to lead almost all of

WBIR's 6 p.m. newscasts for a combined six weeks in five months, it seemed logical to expect to see new aspects of the topic presented in a journalistic fashion. However, this is one area where the broadcasts in this study fell short of expectancies.

On the other hand, employing a narrative structure of trial proceedings helped WBIR maintain journalistic integrity through episodic reporting rather than commentary on extraneous factors. The crimes were the crux of the cases, and thus they were logically the main focus of the news coverage. Coverage during the 6 p.m. newscasts consistently provided information about each day's trial developments. More wide-ranging news stories were used most frequently during the early stages and near the end of each of the three murder trials. The question of whether to commend or chastise WBIR for this approach may have no single answer. I think it largely rests with how we define the mission of a local news organization. If it is to provide context and interpretation as well as to explain events of note, then I believe WBIR should have probed further into the fallout from these murder trials. But if the job of local television news is to report on the facts of incidents and leave commentary to editorial pieces and community members, then WBIR did a creditable job with its emphasis on day-to-day trial procedures.

During the course of this study a second frame emerged based on the visual facets of WBIR's newscasts. The victims' families were the focus of the video segments, resulting in the Christians and Newsoms becoming the people viewers would have observed most often. This video frame differed from the established courtroom narrative but was not necessarily contradictory. The families' journey through the trials served as an emotional counterpoint to the in-court portions of the coverage. They added humanity

to the story elements and put faces on the tragedy at very little additional effort from the journalists. The Christians and Newsoms appeared in courtroom video in the majority of WBIR's news stories and their soundbites were selected by reporters on a regular basis. Through WBIR's coverage audiences became privy to the emotions of the grieving families and were subtly encouraged to identify with them. These dual frames are significant because they illustrate how newscasts can simultaneously operate on multiple levels of communication. Viewers are given the information selected by journalists, in the manner of the news outlet's choosing. In this instance, the facts of daily trial proceedings are the guiding principle of the coverage. Yet underneath this first frame lies the second, where viewers see and hear from the families of the victims. A question for further study is whether the second frame is merely a by-product of the first, or if recurring appearances of the victims' families was a deliberate editorial decision in WBIR's coverage.

The choice of video and sound segments also ties in to the use of descriptive language during the news stories and headlines. The visual nature of television news gives priority to video over considerations of written and even spoken words. But much like the visuals used in these newscasts, a closer examination of the descriptors applied to trial participants and to the trial itself yields more information. Terms applied to the defendants like "animals" and "brutal" or even "abused" and "fatherless" support stereotypes of black criminals and dysfunctional black families. Conversely, the white victims are referred to as "pure," "innocent," and as "kids" or "children." While stereotypes are perpetuated through some of these word choices, the tragedy video frame

is also bolstered. Viewers are shown angry or tearful family members of the victims and even on rare occasion the defendants. During these same segments viewers hear phrases like “tragedy,” “loss,” and “justice.”

Bias in favor of the victims’ families was revealed by the seemingly disproportionate coverage of the two sides of these trials – the defendants and the victims. In contrast to the emotional quest for justice by the parents of the murdered couple, the defendants often appeared as silent, emotionless figures and their family members were largely absent from news stories. I found that this outward appearance of bias in favor of the victims’ families actually spoke to WBIR’s lack of sensationalism in their coverage. The facts of the families involved have not been manufactured to either increase drama or foster artificially balanced video and sound. The victims’ families were more vocal during the trials, as they had been in the months leading up to court. They had openly spoken about their intention to be present in court every day of the trials, and their presence in the courtroom attested to this commitment. The defendants, on the other hand, did not address the community at large nor were they made available for additional video opportunities. They were expected to sit quietly with their attorneys during the trial procedures, which is what WBIR’s video showed. The lack of commentary from or about the defendants’ families spoke directly to the fact that the men charged with these murders had unstable or highly dysfunctional home lives. The newscasts in this study did not show WBIR actively seeking out people with connections to either the victims or defendants. Rather, the journalists reported each day on those friends and family members who were present in the courtroom. It could be inferred from this that

opportunities to speak on camera were also given only to those relatives who indicated a desire to do so. The coded news stories show that WBIR covered who was in court each day and what occurred in the courtroom without resorting to manufactured equality in a bid to ensure uniform time was given to the victims' and defendants' families.

It became apparent during the course of this analysis that WBIR's reporting on these trials was unique for the Knoxville area in some ways. The volume of coverage given to the trials was enormous for a local news station. While these cases were primarily handled at the local level, they dominated Knoxville media and public discussions for weeks. Several media outlets introduced live streaming of all three trials in their entirety, a novel concept for local crime coverage. Special sections devoted to the crimes and the trials were established on the accompanying websites of local television stations and newspapers. WBIR and its fellow news outlets also utilized newer technologies like social media to enhance their overall news product in relation to these trials. These additional resources were referenced during most of the analyzed newscasts, reminding interested viewers of the supplementary reporting. However, the expanded elements were not fully integrated into the stories that aired at 6 p.m. each night during the trials. WBIR's broadcast stories, once again, were primarily cut to fit into the established pattern of courtroom reportage. This could be construed as a missed opportunity to showcase more innovative methods of covering murder trials, especially on the local level. It will be interesting to see what role more state-of-the-art mechanisms play in local news coverage in the future.

Race was an obvious aspect of this case, one with strong emotions tied to it and a long history of unrest and divisiveness fanning the potential flames of combustible public opinion. However, this seemingly inescapable flashpoint was largely untouched in WBIR's nightly television news coverage of the trials of the three black male defendants accused of killing the young white couple. This may have been a consequence of the use of video and still images, both of which made explicit discussions about the races of those involved in the trials unnecessary. My initial supposition that race would play a larger role in WBIR's coverage of the Christian-Newsom murder trials did not hold up under analysis of newscast components. One assessment might be to criticize WBIR for having ignored the potentially difficult stories to stay within the more-familiar confines of television coverage of courtroom proceedings. Reporters talked about the intense public interest in the trials but got community reaction from only one demographic: people similar to the victims and their families who were interviewed in predominantly white areas of Knox County.

Despite this apparent omission I believe WBIR should be commended for its restraint in keeping controversies in the courtroom instead of pumping them up on the streets of Knoxville. The race of the victims and defendants was considered such a significant facet of these trials that groups traveled from across the state and beyond to express their views, many of them from groups espousing white supremacy. Commentary about those accused of committing the crimes, about the victims, about every aspect of this case became so rancorous that many local media outlets blocked comment sections on their websites and established extra security around their offices. Yet the situation

ended with fewer alarming incidents than might have been anticipated. One possibility is that the media's lack of attention to race made it less of a focal issue. Data supports the fact that WBIR did not exploit racism for sensationalized coverage. The news station's editorial decisions reflect frames that include race without explicitly approaching the matter. That, in turn, made race just another piece of the trial, clearly present but only implicitly addressed. It would be interesting for future research to analyze coverage of the same three murder trials across other Knoxville-area media outlets to compare their handling of race and their established frames.

Limitations and Future Research

There are many academic avenues still open to researchers on the broader topics examined in this study and on the Christian-Newsom case specifically. The question of bias in news coverage is one such area. Recent studies have taken particular note of situations when journalists felt compelled to incorporate bias in their work or when they felt it was an unavoidable aspect of news stories. It would be interesting to explore whether the bias towards the victims' families revealed in this study was a conscious decision made by WBIR personnel or if it simply emerged as the newscasts progressed. Was there any newsroom discussion of emphasizing the families' roles? How deliberately were video and sound segments chosen to support either of the frames used in this particular station's coverage? It would also be noteworthy to investigate whether other media outlets displayed bias in their coverage of the Christian-Newsom murders. Was coverage similarly oriented towards the victims' families at the other Knoxville-market television stations? And where did the print media's coverage fall? Broadening

the scope of the analysis would also allow for surveys of online comments and articles. This study touched on the issue of public commentary, but there is still much to discover about its role in such a location-based case where people often expressed a connection to the trial events.

Limitations of this study include the scope of the analysis. I chose to focus on one television news station within the Knoxville-area market. From there I narrowed the extent of my research to one specific daily newscast over the duration of the trials. This allowed me to closely examine how these trials were covered through qualitative as well as quantitative data. A study that included all of WBIR's newscasts across all time slots during the trials would have yielded different information. Some of the coverage areas I found lacking in the 6 p.m. broadcasts may have been addressed in other shows. WBIR also does not archive web stories and online commentary in the same way as it preserves its on-air stories. This makes any research into these features of WBIR's coverage of the Christian-Newsom murder trials extremely difficult. However, that is one area that I believe could yield any number of fascinating elements.

Access to the previously-aired broadcasts was another limitation to this analysis. As a WBIR employee I was able to acquire DVD copies of the majority of the newscasts used in this study. Two of the archived shows were missing which necessitated my paying HP Video, an outside media company, for these segments. The costs to acquire copies of all the newscasts across all three trials from the other two local television news stations would have been prohibitive. The cost, coupled with access to scripts and a familiarity with the processes of newscast creation, factored into my restricting this study

to WBIR. However, as mentioned earlier in this document, I took precautions to remove personal bias from my analysis of these news stories and headlines. I focused on the 6 p.m. show, which WBIR still refers to as "the show of record" and therefore places importance on its organization and presentation. During the course of the trials I was employed as an overnight producer, which prevented me from having any interaction with the production or content of WBIR's afternoon shows. It also meant I was frequently asleep when the shows aired initially. These factors allowed me to watch the selected newscasts with a detached perspective. In many cases I, like my coders, saw these newscasts for the first time during this study.

The realities of daily life in a working television newsroom make creating and adhering to a template for certain stories or types of coverage a necessity. Newscasts are organized along certain established formats in terms of story placement and time devoted to news, weather and sports. Information may come in close to deadlines, forcing reporters and producers to use predictable configurations for even the most unconventional stories. Content analysis of WBIR's nightly news stories about the murder trials of Letalvis Cobbins, Lemaricus Davidson and George Thomas showed this media outlet did not venture too far from this method. Narrative conventions of good versus bad and victims versus defendants were retained. Stories and headlines that appeared in WBIR's 6 p.m. newscasts followed a recognizable arrangement for the duration of all three trials. That in turn may have helped solidify viewer expectations and establish frames of reference as the stories progressed. WBIR's editorial decisions also helped eliminate sensationalistic reporting and contrived drama from its coverage of truly

heinous crimes that involved not only extreme torture but racial elements as well. WBIR viewers would feel confident in the types of stories they would see each night, even if the particular content of each story varied from day to day.

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Appendix A: Code Book for Content Analysis of WBIR 6 p.m. Newscasts

These are the terms and definitions presented to volunteers prior to the coding sessions to explain television news terminology as it was used in this study and to clarify instructions given to coders.

1. **Headline** - brief introductory statement appearing before the opening and main stories in a newscast to indicate what topics will follow. Each headline may include a live reporter, a soundbite, video, photograph, graphic or any combination of those elements. Coders will consider what the main focus of the headline is: people or circumstances, victims or defendants, the crimes or trial procedures.

2. **Story date** – the day, month and year of the unit currently being coded (i.e. the airdate of the headlines or story).

3. **Block -** stories within WBIR's 6 p.m. newscasts are grouped into three "blocks". Stories in the "A Block" air after the headlines and before the first commercial break. The stories considered the most important of the day are typically placed here.

   The "B Block" comes after the first commercial break; in WBIR's 6 p.m. news it typically also contains the full weather forecast and sports.

   The "C Block" in WBIR's 6 p.m. newscast usually consists of closing comments by anchors, a "regional color" story, and a tease ahead to the late night news coverage.

4. **Story Placement** – the numerical order of the stories within a newscast, beginning after the headlines for a specific show.

5. **Story Components** – the elements that make up a news story, including video, sound, graphics and still images.

6. **Anchors** - members of a television news station's staff of journalists, they read news stories and introduce reporters, meteorologists, sports reports and other segments of a newscast. Anchors typically read stories from the news studio, either seated at a desk or from another set within the news station, and are among the most familiar personalities to regular viewers of a station's newscasts.

7. **Reporters** – members of a news station's journalism staff who collect information on a story and relate it to viewers through video, interviews, soundbites, graphics, etc.

8. **Reporter live** - a news story that contains a reporter live on location or from a set in the news station relaying information in real time. The reporter may use combinations of story elements (video, graphics, sound, etc.) during their story presentation. Anchors typically introduce the reporter and mention their location before the reporter takes over presenting the story.

9. **Reporter on tape** – when a reporter is seen during a news story, typically at the story's location, but is not presenting in real time.

10. **Video** - moving images of people, locations or events. Video accompanies scripts read by reporters or anchors and may include footage of the trial procedures, crime scenes, memorials, etc. Soundbites and interviews are not included in this category – they are marked separately.

11. **Soundbite** - comments individuals make on-camera that are deliberately used as part of a news story (as opposed to incidental background sounds). There may be several soundbites used within one story, either from the same individual or several speakers. They are typically accompanied by the speaker's name written on screen along with a title or description (ex. "friend of victim" or "defense

attorney"). [See #19 for details about the sources to which soundbites are attributed.]

12. **Interview** – when individuals related to the story respond to a reporter's questions either live during a newscast or during previously recorded sessions. Interviews may be conducted in the news studio or at a story location. For this analysis, segments coded as "interviews" will include a question-and-answer format between a journalist and a source.

13. **Mug Shot** - photographs taken of suspects by law enforcement at the time of their arrest, showing a suspect's face in front of a plain background. These are provided to news media by law enforcement personnel and used during stories about crimes to indicate an individual's connection to criminal activity. For this analysis, mug shots may be incorporated in a larger graphic but are also marked separately.

14. **Photo (non-mug shot)** – images of objects, locations or people connected with the trial (evidence, crime scenes, victims, family members, etc.) that may be shown to illustrate news stories or shown during the trial (either in close-up or projected on larger screens). For this analysis, photographs may be part of a larger graphic but are also noted in a separate category.

15. **Graphic** - still images, maps, bullet points or written quotes shown on the television screen during a news report. These may be small enough to show alongside an anchor or reporter or may fill the entire screen. Mug shots and photographs, although they may be incorporated in a larger graphic, are also coded in their own categories for this analysis. Names and titles shown as speaker identifiers are not included.

16. **Story Content** – coders should briefly summarize the main idea of the story being analyzed.

17. **Dominant Subject** – coders will determine the primary topic of the news story. Stories will be categorized as falling under one of these options:

    a. *Victims* – if the story is primarily about the victims and details of their lives.

    b. *Defendant* – if the story is primarily about the defendant in terms of their lives prior to or after the crimes or their reactions to the trial or sentence.

    c. *Trial procedures* – if the story is primarily about the events taking place in the courtroom, including testimony given, evidence shown, or actions of attorneys, jurors or the judge.

    d. *Sentence/prison* – if the story is primarily about jury or judge decisions on punishment or where the state keeps a defendant before, during or after the trial.

    e. *Friends/family of victim(s) or defendant(s)* – if the story is primarily about the actions, reactions or backgrounds of family members or friends of any of the victims or defendants.

    f. *Other* – if the story is primarily about a topic that does not fall under any of the above categories.

18. **Dominant video** – video used in news stories will focus on one of the following categories:

    a. *Crime scene* – video showing locations where the crime were committed or where the defendants were captured.

    b. *Courtroom footage* – video showing people and actions taking place within the trial courtroom.

c. *Home videos of victims* – video showing the victims before they were killed.
d. *Home videos of defendants* – video showing the defendant(s) before their arrest and incarceration.

e. *Memorials or tributes* – video showing ceremonies or events to remember the victims.

f. *Family/friends [victims]* – video showing family members or friends of the victims, either in court or in other locations.

g. *Family/friends [defendants]* - video showing family members or friends of the defendants, either in court or in other locations.

h. *Other* – video focusing on people, places or events not included in the above categories.

19. **Sound sources** – individuals whose comments are used in each news story, either as soundbites or in an interview, who are not part of the news team. These speakers will be categorized as one of the following:

a. *Law or justice official* – the judge, jurors, defense attorneys, prosecutors, members of law enforcement or investigators, etc.

b. *Experts (not testifying)* – attorneys or other analysts consulted as part of the news report who are not taking part in the actual trial.

c. *Family [victims]* – family members of a victim; they may be speaking in court or outside the trial procedures.

d. *Family [defendants]* – family members of one or more defendants; they may be speaking in court or outside the trial procedures.
e. *Friend/supporter [victims]* – individuals identified as having a close, personal relationship to one or both of the victims; they may be speaking in court or outside the trial procedures.

f. *Friend/supporter [defendant]* - individuals identified as having a close, personal relationship with one or more defendants, either currently or

previously. This includes girlfriends, roommates, etc. For this analysis, people whose comments fall under this classification may make either "positive" or "negative" remarks about a defendant.

g. *Witness* – individuals who are testifying in this case but do not fall under any of the above categories.

h. *Other* – individuals who are speaking, whether in the courtroom or not, who do not meet any of the above criteria. This includes members of the public not involved in the trial.

20. **Still Images** – non-moving visuals in a news story that are not considered video or sound. These may be part of a larger graphic (which may or may not include the subject's name or some text), projected onto a screen inside the courtroom, or shown in close-up view as part of a video. These will be marked if they are a majority of:

a. *Mug shots* – see previous entry

b. *Photos of victims* – photographs of the victims when they were alive and not originally taken for use in trial or law enforcement proceedings.

c. *Photos of defendants [non-mug]* – photographs showing the defendants before their arrest or in a non-law enforcement setting.

d. *Evidence* – photographs of evidence used in the trials (such as clothing, weapons, vehicles, etc.) but excluding houses and other location shots.

e. *Crime scene* – photographs of locations used in the crimes, including the Knoxville house where the killings took place and the homes where the defendants were arrested.

f. *Other* – photographs used in the news story that do not fall under any of the above categories.

21. **Descriptors** – words or phrases used in each news story to describe people or procedures related to the crimes and/or trial, broken down into categories:

a. *Characterization of crime/trial* – terms to describe the trial procedures or the actual crimes (ex. “brutal”, “the kids didn’t deserve this”).

b. *Race of defendant or victims* – terms referring to the race of the victims or defendants, either directly or indirectly (ex. “black”, “white”).

c. *Characterization of victims, defendants, victims’ families, or defendants’ families* – references to these individuals or groups in physical, emotional or psychological terms (ex. “scared”, “angry”, “difficult few days”, “violent”).

d. *Background of victims or defendant* – references to the personal histories of the crime victims or those accused of those crimes, broken into the following classifications:

- Education: levels achieved, difficulties, etc.
- Family: what their relatives are like
- Economics: class, poverty or wealth, etc.
- Childhood/upbringing: abuse or happiness, etc.
- Other: unclassified phrases that may occur

Appendix B: Code Sheets for WBIR 6 p.m. Newscast Headlines

1. Date _____

2. Location (1st, 2nd, 3rd) _____

3. Dominant subject:	YES	NO
a. Victims	☐	☐
b. Defendant	☐	☐
c. Jury/jurors	☐	☐
d. Trial procedures	☐	☐
e. Sentencing	☐	☐
f. Friends/family	☐	☐

4. What is the headline about? _____

5. Components [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a) Video	☐	☐
b) Mug shot	☐	☐
c) Photograph (non-mug)	☐	☐
d) Sound	☐	☐
e) Graphic	☐	☐
f) Reporter live	☐	☐

6. Video [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Crime scene	☐	☐
b. Courtroom footage	☐	☐
c. Home videos of victims	☐	☐
d. Home videos of defendants	☐	☐
e. Memorials or tributes	☐	☐
f. Family/friends [victims]	☐	☐
g. Family/friends [defendants]	☐	☐

h. Other _____

7. Still Images [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Mug shots	☐	☐
b. Photos of victims	☐	☐
c. Photos of defendants [non-mug]	☐	☐
d. Evidence	☐	☐
e. Crime scene	☐	☐
f. Photo w/ name [victim]	☐	☐
g. Photo w/ name [defendant]	☐	☐

h. Other _____

8. Sound [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Live interview	☐	☐
b. Taped interview	☐	☐
c. Natural sound	☐	☐
d. Soundbite	☐	☐

9. Soundbite sources [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Law or justice official	☐	☐
b. Other officials	☐	☐
c. Experts (not testifying)	☐	☐
d. Witnesses	☐	☐
e. Family [victims]	☐	☐
f. Family [defendants]	☐	☐
g. Friend/supporter [victims]	☐	☐
h. Friend/supporter [defendants]	☐	☐

Descriptive Language Used (please specify terms, subject & speaker/source):

Specific mentions of race:

Appendix C: Code Sheets for WBIR 6 p.m. News Stories

I. Newscast Attributes

1. Story date _____
2. Story Location (Block) _____
3. Story Placement (1st, 2nd) _____
4. Length of story (minutes/seconds) _____

5. Story Components (mark all that apply):

	YES	NO
a) Anchors in studio	☐	☐
b) Reporter live	☐	☐
c) Reporter on tape	☐	☐
d) Video	☐	☐
e) Soundbite	☐	☐
f) Interview	☐	☐
g) Mug shot	☐	☐
h) Photo (non-mug)	☐	☐
i) Graphic	☐	☐

j) Other _____

II. Story Content

1. What is the story about (describe briefly):

2. Dominant subject:

	YES	NO
a. Victims	☐	☐
b. Defendant	☐	☐
c. Trial procedures	☐	☐
d. Sentence/prison	☐	☐
e. Friends/family of		
e1. Victim(s)	☐	☐
e2. Defendant(s)	☐	☐

f. Other (specify) _____

III. Video/Sound

1. Video [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Crime scene	☐	☐
b. Courtroom footage	☐	☐
c. Home videos of victims	☐	☐
d. Home videos of defendants	☐	☐
e. Memorials or tributes	☐	☐
f. Family/friends [victims]	☐	☐
g. Family/friends [defendants]	☐	☐
h. Other _____		

2. Dominant video (choose one from above) _____

3. Sound [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Live interview	☐	☐
b. Taped interview	☐	☐
c. Soundbite	☐	☐

4. Sound sources [mark all that apply]:	YES	NO
a. Law or justice official	☐	☐
b. Experts (not testifying)	☐	☐
c. Family [victims]	☐	☐
d. Family [defendants]	☐	☐
e. Friend/supporter [victims]	☐	☐
f. Friend/supporter [defendants]	☐	☐
g. Witness	☐	☐
h. Other _____		

IV. Photographs [mark all that apply]:

	YES	NO
a. Mug shots	☐	☐
b. Photos of victims	☐	☐
c. Photos of defendants [non-mug]	☐	☐

d. Evidence ☐ ☐
e. Crime scene ☐ ☐
f. Other (specify) _____

V. Descriptors – note words or phrases used in this story to describe the people or events listed below.

1. Characterization of crime/trial: _____

2. Race of defendant: _____

3. Race of victims: _____

4. Characterization of:
   a. Victims _____
   b. Defendant _____
   c. Victims' families _____
   d. Defendant's families _____

5. Background of victims:
   a. Education _____
   b. Family _____
   c. Economics _____
   d. Childhood/upbringing _____
   e. Other _____

6. Background of defendant:
   f. Education _____
   g. Family _____
   h. Economics _____
   i. Childhood/upbringing _____
   j. Other _____

Appendix D: Tables and Figures

Table 1. Headline Components

Date	Location	Video	Mugs	Photos	Sound	Graphics	Liveshot
8/17/2009	1st	x		x			
8/18/2009	1st	x					
8/19/2009	1st	x					
8/20/2009	1st	x					
8/21/2009	1st	x					
8/22/2009	1st	x					
8/23/2009	1st	x		x			
8/24/2009	1st	x		x			
8/25/2009	1st	x					
8/26/2009	1st	x					
10/19/2009	1st	x					
10/20/2009	1st	x					
10/21/2009	1st	x					
10/22/2009	1st	x					
10/23/2009	2nd	x					
10/26/2009	1st	x					
10/27/2009	1st	x		x			
10/28/2009	1st	x					
10/29/2009	1st	x					
10/30/2009	1st	x					
12/1/2009	1st	x		x			
12/2/2009	1st	x					
12/3/2009	1st	x					
12/5/2009	1st	x					
12/7/2009	1st	x					
12/8/2009	1st	x					
12/9/2009	3rd	x					
12/10/2009	1st	x					
Total		**28**	**0**	**5**	**0**	**0**	**0**

This table shows the component elements that comprised headlines coded as part of this analysis. Headlines are a series of two or three brief statements that air just prior to a newscast to introduce viewers to the stories that will lead that newscast.

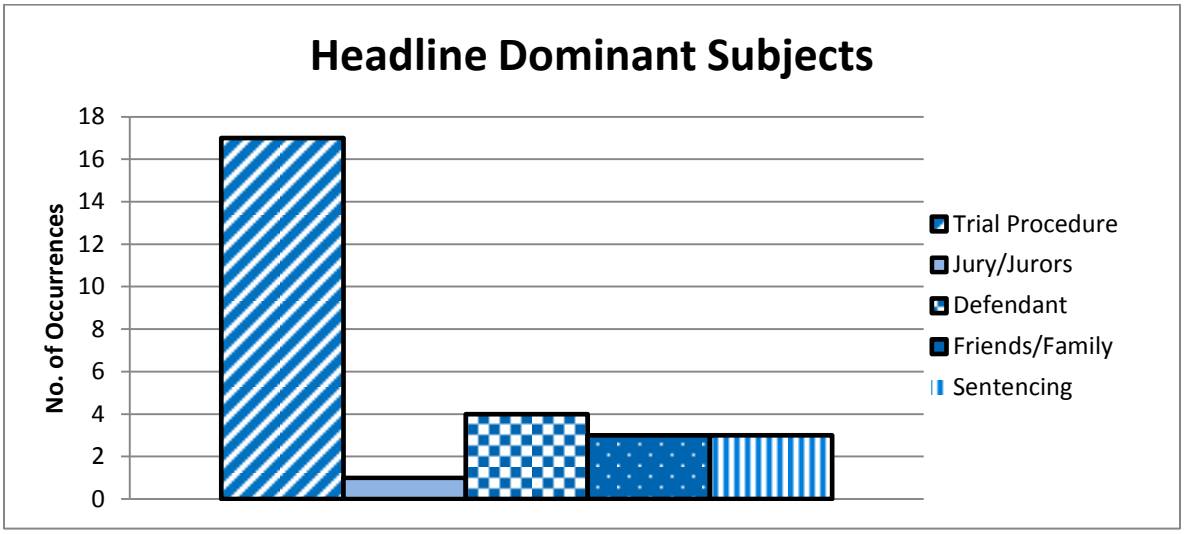


Figure 1. Headline Dominant Subjects

This figure illustrates the categories and frequencies of the main subjects coded for each of the twenty-eight headlines analyzed in this study. Trial procedure was coded as the most frequent subject of headlines about the three murder trials.

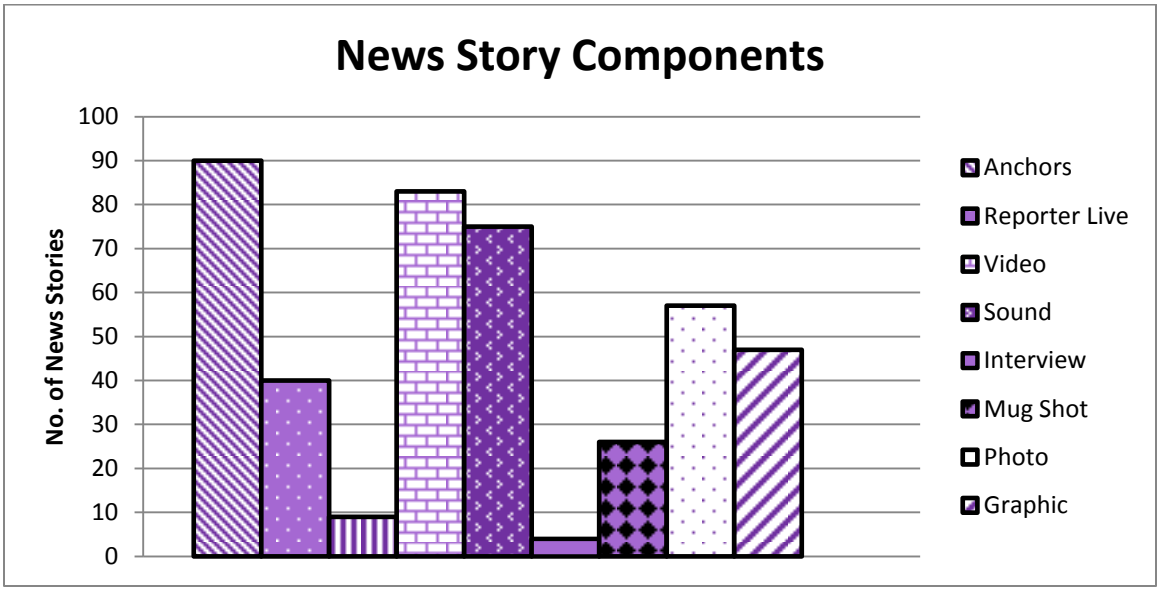


Figure 2. News Story Components

This figure illustrates the various components used in the news stories coded for this study. These elements were utilized in different combinations by WBIR journalists to convey information about the trials to viewers. Anchors, video and sound appeared most frequently.

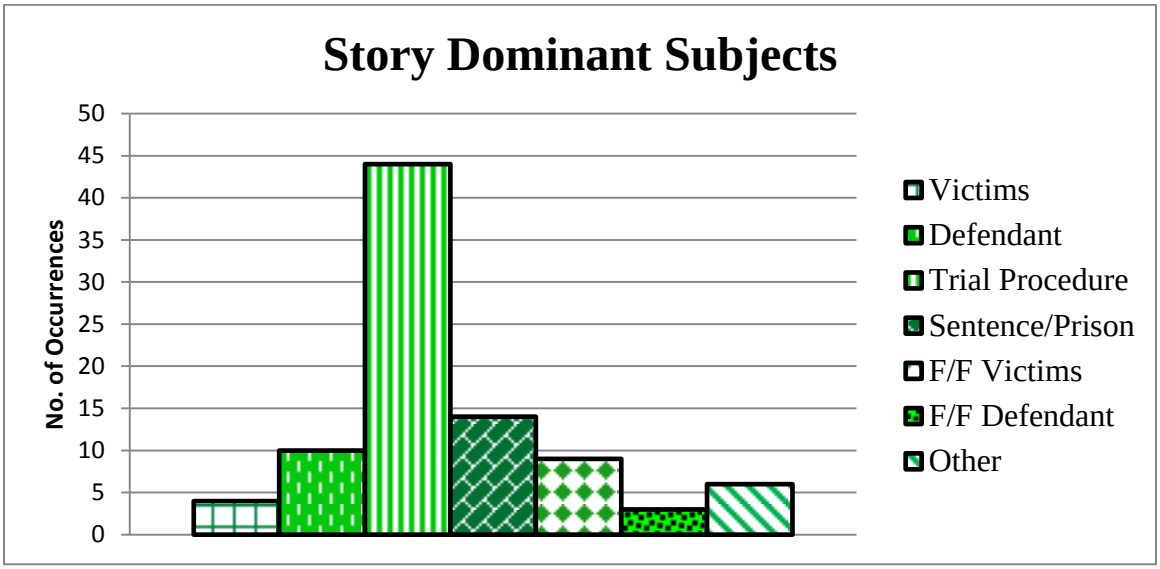


Figure 3. News Story Dominant Subjects

This figure illustrates the categories and frequencies of the main subjects coded for each of the ninety news stories about the three murder trials in this study. Trial procedure was the dominant subject in the majority of new stories.

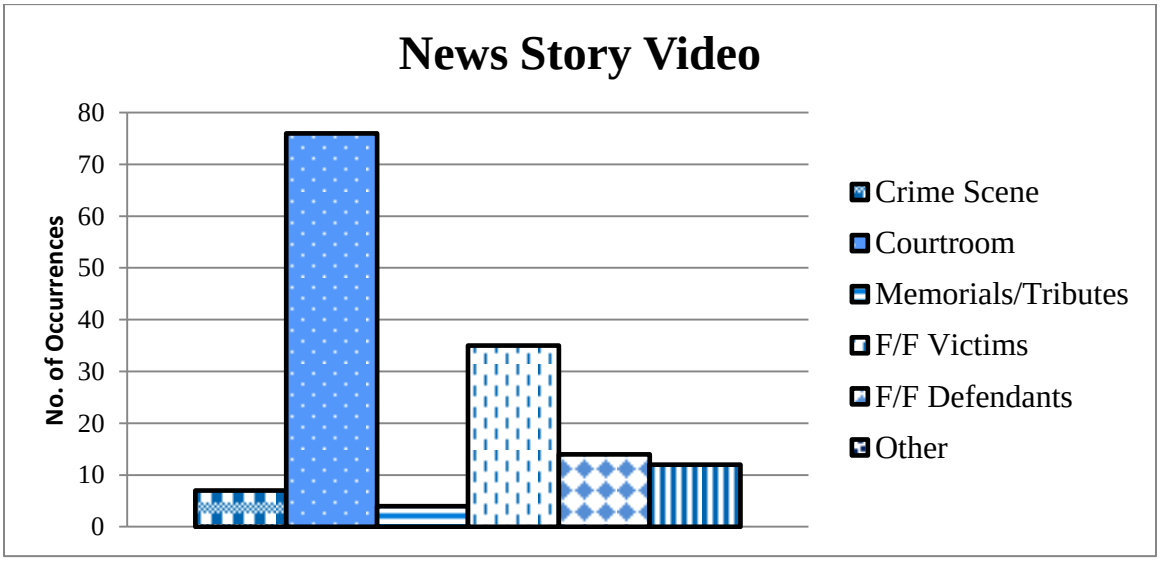


Figure 4. News Story Video

This figure illustrates the people and places shown in videos during the ninety news casts coded in this study. Video from inside the courtroom during the trials of the three defendants was coded most frequently, followed by video showing the friends and families of the two victims.

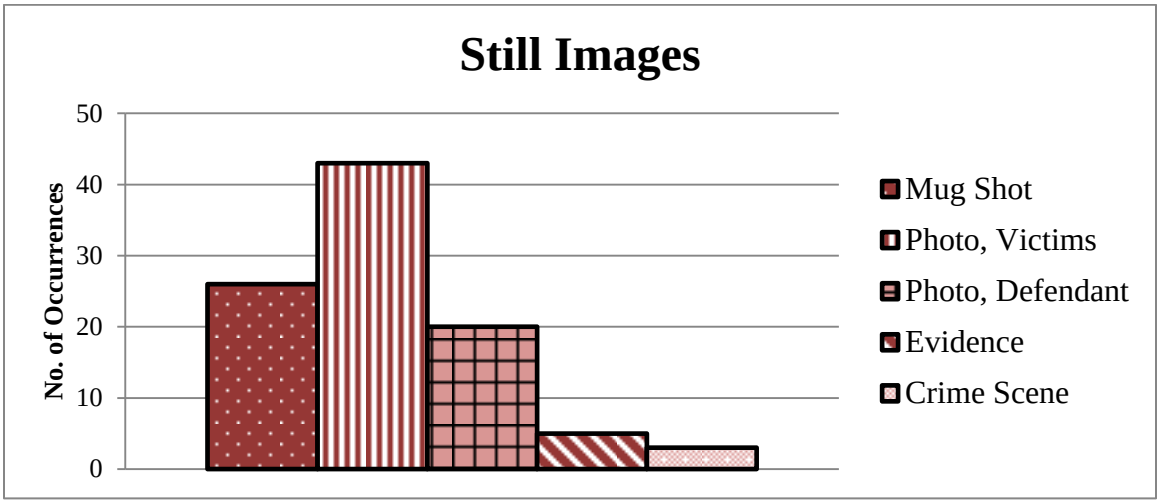


Figure 5. News Story Still Images

This figure illustrates the types and frequencies of still images that appeared in news stories coded in this study. Photographs of the victims and mug shots of the defendants in the Christian-Newsom case appeared most often in WBIR's news stories on the three murder trials.

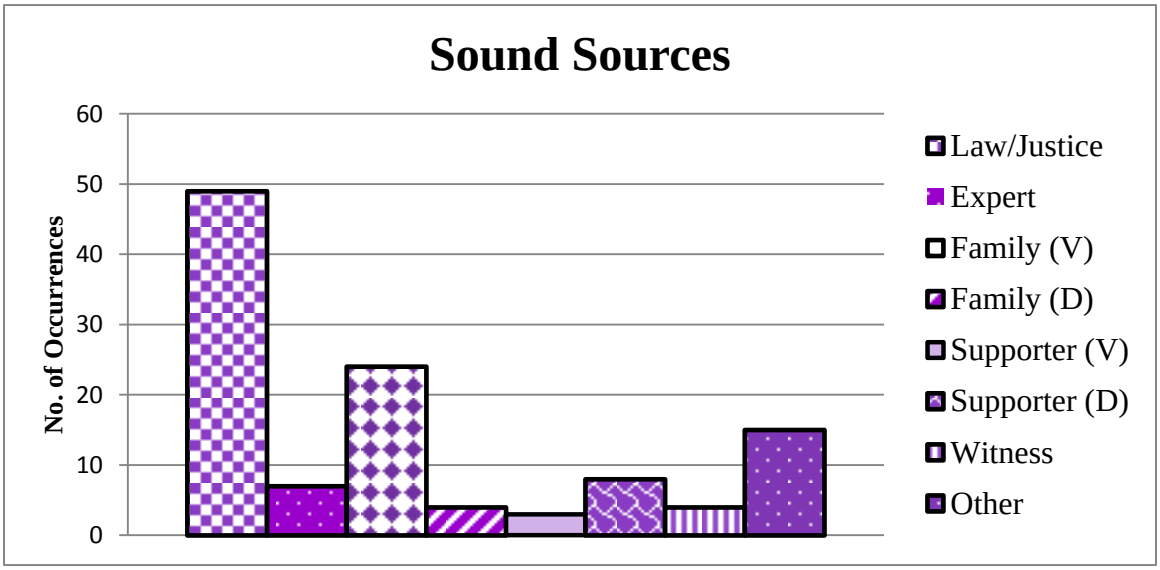


Figure 6. News Story Sound Sources

This figure illustrates the sound sources used by WBIR journalists during coverage of the three murder trials included in this study. Law and justice officials like the judge and attorneys were heard most often, followed by members of the victims' families.

Table 2. Coded Terms Used in News Stories

Category	Code	Description	Count	% Codes	# Words	% Words
Character Traits	Negative_Def	Terms negatively describing character of trial defendants	411	22.60%	1209	19.50%
Character Traits	Negative_Vics	Terms negatively describing character of victims	40	2.20%	134	2.20%
Character Traits	Neutral_Defs	Neutral terms describing character of defendants	63	3.50%	170	2.70%
Character Traits	Neutral_Vics	Neutral terms describing character of victims	22	1.20%	78	1.30%
Character Traits	Positive_Defs	Terms positively describing character of defendants	64	3.50%	250	4.00%
Character Traits	Positive_Vics	Terms positively describing character of victims	79	4.40%	332	5.30%
Emotion	Defs_Bad	Terms describing negative emotions of defendants/families	79	4.40%	277	4.50%
Emotion	Defs_Good	Terms describing positive emotions of defendants/families	2	0.10%	7	0.10%
Emotion	Defs_Neutral	Terms describing neutral emotions of defendants/families	28	1.50%	74	1.20%
Emotion	Others_Bad	Terms describing negative emotions of others	79	4.40%	227	3.70%
Emotion	Others_Good	Terms describing positive emotions of others	21	1.20%	69	1.10%
Emotion	Others_Neutral	Terms describing neutral emotions of others	8	0.40%	16	0.30%
Emotion	Vics_Bad	Terms describing negative emotions of victims/families	148	8.20%	547	8.80%
Emotion	Vics_Good	Terms describing positive emotions of victims/families	61	3.40%	180	2.90%
Emotion	Vics_Neutral	Terms describing neutral emotions of victims/families	10	0.60%	29	0.50%
Narrative	Attention	Terms indicating media and public attention to the trials	119	6.60%	454	7.30%
Narrative	Brutality	Terms indicating violent nature of the crimes	274	15.10%	676	10.90%
Narrative	Tragedy	Terms indicating the tragedy of the trials	307	16.90%	1074	17.30%

This table shows the categories and codes applied by coders to descriptive terms used in the ninety news stories in this study. Words and phrases negatively describing the defendants occurred most frequently, while terms referring to positive emotions of the defendants or their families occur least.

Vita

Laura Elizabeth Headlee began her educational journey in Loudon, Tennessee, where she attended public schools through the 11th grade. She was honored to be selected to complete her senior year of high school at The United World College (UWC) of the Atlantic in St. Donat's Castle, Llantwit Major, Wales where she was one of 4 Americans out of 300 students representing 74 countries. Through the UWC program of study, she earned her International Baccalaureate degree.

Ms. Headlee continued her educational path in the United States where she earned her Bachelor of Arts in History at American University in Washington, D.C. Internships on Capitol Hill and in the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress provided valuable academic and research experience throughout her undergraduate time of study.

Upon returning to Knoxville, Tennessee, Ms. Headlee perpetuated her love of learning and of communicating information to others through her work with students at The University of Tennessee's Thornton Athletics Student Life Center. It was during this period that she discovered her interest in journalism and took a position as Photography Editor of UT's student newspaper The Daily Beacon. She also earned a Bachelor of Arts in Art with an emphasis on media arts, graduating magna cum laude from The University of Tennessee.

Ms. Headlee's continuing pursuit of new challenges within the world of journalism led her to WBIR-TV in Knoxville. Through her work as a television producer, she has continued to broaden her range of skills and has produced a wide variety of

newscasts. Her work includes both studio and live production coverage of many breaking news events such as the Emmy-nominated coverage of the McClung Warehouse fire.

Ms. Headlee completed her Master of Science degree in Communication and Information, with a major in Journalism, in May 2012. As a life-long learner, she plans to continually pursue new challenges that will expand the dissemination of information through all media.