Crime in the News

This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework.

Overview

In this lesson students explore the commercial and ethical issues surrounding the reporting of crime in televised newscasts. They begin by discussing their attitudes toward crime, followed by the reading of a handout comparing Canadian and American crime reporting and further discussion about crime and 'the business' of television news. Students further explore how the media affect our perceptions about crime through a discussion on the media's treatment of various 'crime waves.'

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- understand that the news is a form of entertainment which, like other television programs, competes for viewers
- appreciate the different needs of local and national news stations, and how this affects the selection of news items
- appreciate the challenges faced by journalists in trying to offer crime reporting that is not sensational.
- understand the role of crime reporting in attracting viewers
- understand the ways in which crime reporting affects our own perceptions of crime.

Preparation and Materials

Prepare to distribute:

- *If It Bleeds, It Leads*
- *Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?*
- *Crime Audit*

Ensure that students have access to internet-connected devices

Procedure

If It Bleeds, It Leads

Ask students:

- On average, do you think crime is increasing or decreasing in Canada? (*Tally and record the number of students who answer 'yes' to this question, and the number who answer 'no'*.)

Distribute *If It Bleeds, It Leads* to students and have them read it individually, in pairs or as a class. Have students answer the following questions and then take them up in class?

- According to the article, why is crime likely to be newsworthy? *(It's unusual, it's about specific people, it often includes vivid details).* What kinds of crimes are most likely to be newsworthy? *(Unusual crimes and those that are emotionally visceral, like violent crimes.)* Besides whether or not it makes the news at all, what might be some effects of a story being more or less newsworthy? *(More newsworthy stories are placed more prominently—on the front page or home page— are given more space and are more likely to receive follow-up stories.)*

- Why do different news outlets see different stories as being more or less newsworthy? *(Editors' ideas of newsworthiness are based partly on what they think their audience is interested in. Because different outlets have different audiences they'll have different standards of newsworthiness.)* Can you think of news outlets you're familiar with that have different standards of newsworthiness?

- The biggest bias in news is always towards what is seen as newsworthy. How might that bias affect our ideas about crime? *(In general, we tend to overestimate how common more newsworthy crimes, such as violent crimes, are, and overestimate how common crime is in particular. We also often have false ideas about who is likely to be a victim of crime.)*

- How are social networks' judgments of newsworthiness similar to those of news outlets? How are they different? How might they have different effects on how we think of crime? *(They're similar in that they are based on what the audience is thought to be interested in, and in their purpose, which is to get the audience's attention. They're different because they often are developed based on feedback from the audience/users and because how they work is often not understood by users or even their creators.)*

Now ask: What's your opinion now about whether crime is rising, falling or staying the same? *(Crime rates in Canada have been in decline since the mid 1990s. Rates of both crime overall and violent crime have been mostly unchanged since around 2015.)* Do you think people's perception of how common crime is, and of whether the crime rate, is influenced by news coverage? *(Research has consistently shown that it is. Remind students at this point to be wary of the "third person effect," which is the idea that* other *people are more influenced by media than we are.)*

Crime Audit

Divide the class into small groups and distribute the *Crime Audit* handout. Have each group select a different news outlet (you can assign outlets or use the links at https://www.newspapersland.com/canada-newspapers/) and search for crime news at that outlet in the last 30 days. They may do this by scrolling through stories in the relevant sections (some news outlets have "Crime" as a tag, such as https://vancouversun.com/category/news/crime/; if they do not, students can look in Local News and National News) or by searching the site for "crime" or for specific crimes (if they do the latter, remind them to look for less-newsworthy crimes such as fraud, burglary, speeding, etc.)

When students have completed their audits, they will compile their data and report to class. In their presentation, students should note:

The name of the news outlet

- Its main audience (if students aren't sure what the audience is for a news outlet, suggest they look at the ads. What kind of person are those ads aimed at?)

- The total number of crime-related stories in the past 30 days and the number and fraction of home page and local news stories about crime

- The kinds of crime that received the most coverage

- Their analysis of who is included as the suspect/perpetrator and victim, who is quoted or otherwise sourced, and how many stories are episodic compared to how many give context

- The individual crimes that received the most stories

- Their opinion of what the news outlet considers to be newsworthy

Have the class discuss differences between the different news outlets. Did some cover more or less crime than others, or different crimes? How were their ideas of newsworthiness different?

Point out to students that their analysis of how a news outlet judges the newsworthiness of a story can be imagined as an *algorithm* and represented as a flowchart. Draw a flowchart on the board (either freehand, using graphics software, or using flowcharting tools such as Canva https://www.canva.com/graphs/flowcharts/ and Diagrams.net https://app.diagrams.net/ — these are examples only and their inclusion is not an endorsement from MediaSmarts) with "News Story" at the beginning and "Newsworthy" and "Not Newsworthy" at the end. In between, list the three factors that were most often mentioned by groups as making a story newsworthy.

Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?

Distribute *Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?* to students. Have students complete the questions and then discuss their answers in class:

- How does KVUE decide whether or not to cover a news story? How similar is that to the newsworthiness algorithm the class created above?

- Do they feel that these guidelines are reasonable criteria for news reporting, or do you think they go too far? Are there guidelines that you would add?

- Why do local stations rely so much on crime reporting to boost ratings?

- Do they agree with the statement "Sensationalized reporting fuels fear and makes people feel powerless"?

- How do they feel about the author's question: "Can thoughtful coverage of important local issues, crime included, compete with gripping images of maimed victims and distraught relatives?"

Assessment activity: News Feed

Remind students of the earlier discussion around the role of algorithms in news coverage. Distribute the assignment sheet *News Feed* and go through it with the class. You may have students complete the assignment singly or in pairs; students may create the algorithm flowcharts

If time permits, have students share their algorithms and the thinking behind them with the class and give feedback on other groups' decisions.

If It Bleeds, It Leads: Crime in the News

It's one of the most often repeated sayings in the news industry: "if it bleeds, it leads." In other words, things that produce frightening images—like accidents and crime—are always newsworthy.

While there is some truth behind this idea, though, the reality is a bit more complicated. After all, not every accident makes the news: plane crashes usually do, but car crashes generally don't. And whether a crime—even a violent one—is newsworthy is a question that journalists have been trying to answer for over a century.

What does it mean to say that that something is "newsworthy," anyway? A story that's newsworthy is one that a reporter is more likely to cover, that an editor is more likely to assign and approve, that is more likely to make the front page (or the home page).

In 1899, writer Jesse Lynch Williams had a fictional reporter define it in a way that became the standard definition: "A dog bites a man, that's a story; a man bites a dog, that's a *good* story." In other words, something is newsworthy because it is *unusual*. Since then, journalism scholars have identified other factors that make reporters and editors more likely to see something as newsworthy:

- if it's recent
- if it's about specific people
- if it's about a single event
- if vivid details or images are available (for instance, a story accompanied by a gripping photo or video would be more newsworthy than one with no image, or a less attention-grabbing image).

From journalists' point of view, though, they're not applying their own judgment of what is and isn't newsworthy: they're making decisions based on what they think their audience wants to see. That's why different news outlets have different standards of newsworthiness that may include whether it's likely to have an impact on the audience (for example, a factory closing in another city might not make the news, but a factory closing in your city probably would) and f it confirms or offends the audience's values.

Based on that definition it's obvious why crime is so often considered newsworthy. But the definition of newsworthiness means that news coverage is almost always going to give us a distorted view of crime. The most common kinds of crime—non-violent property crimes such as vandalism— are "dog bites man" stories compared to "man bites dog" crimes like murder. That's why there's basically no connection between how common a crime actually is and how often it appears in the news:
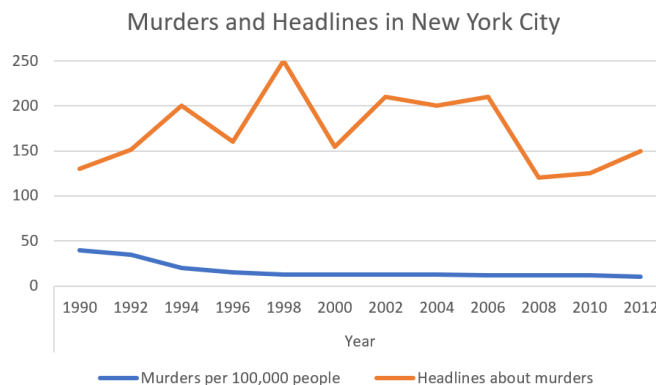
Source: Eisen, L-B. (2015) "America's Faulty Perception of Crime Rates." Brennan Center for Justice.

It also affects *how* crime is covered—almost always in terms of specific events rather than looking at broader patterns or the things that made a crime happen. Coverage of killings of Black people by police, for example, were for many years covered as isolated incidents (if they were covered at all), without giving context that showed how frequent it was.

The focus on stories that are most relevant to the audience can give a false sense of who is most likely to be a victim of crime: this is known as the "missing White woman syndrome," in which crimes against White people—especially White women—are more likely to receive news coverage, even though non-White people, and Black and Indigenous people in particular, are more likely to be victims of crime overall.

Another important question is where the information in news stories comes from. News stories about crimes are often based mostly on reports from police, and reporters are often too busy to look for other sources or information that will provide important context. If a newsroom has reporters that specialize in crime, they may not want to hurt their relationship with police officers who are reliable sources of information; if the newsroom doesn't have specialist reporters, they may not have the knowledge they need to question the police narrative. For instance, when Chicago police released statistics that seemed to show a wave of carjackings by young people, most news outlets ran it without question. It was only when a sociologist at the University of Chicago wrote a letter pointing out that the police only had data on 13 percent of carjacking offenders—too small a fraction to make any conclusions—that anybody questioned it.

Today, many of us get our news from social networks instead of directly from news outlets. But while that does allow audiences to push back against the media's ideas of newsworthiness — it was discussions of police violence on Twitter through the #Blacklivesmatter hashtag, for instance, that pushed that story into the news — they also add another layer of filtering. The news stories that pop up in your feed are those that your online contacts thought were worth sharing, which means they're even more likely to be just those that are seen as relevant to the audience (you). One of the signs of a responsible news outlet is that it's willing to cover stories that its audience won't like, but if none of your online contacts share those stories you might never see them.

As well, most social networks don't just show you everything your contacts share. Instead they use *algorithms* (complex computer programs) that guess what you're interested in. Stories that are highly ranked by the algorithm appear at the top of your feed. These algorithms use their own ideas of "newsworthiness" to make their decisions, but what almost all have in common is that they are made to encourage *engagement:* things that people react strongly to—things they share, things they Like, things they reply to. Unlike a regular news outlet, though, they don't ever explain how they make those decisions. Even the designers of the algorithms might not know, because most algorithms are made to change themselves based on what works and what doesn't. That means that every time you Like or share a news story in your feed (and every time you don't) you are teaching it what *you* think is newsworthy—but you might never know what stories the algorithm *isn't* showing you.

Questions

1. According to the article, why is crime likely to be newsworthy? What kinds of crimes are most likely to be newsworthy? Besides whether or not it makes the news at all, what might be some effects of a story being more or less newsworthy?

2. Why do different news outlets see different stories as being more or less newsworthy? Can you think of news outlets you're familiar with that have different standards of newsworthiness?

3. The biggest bias in news is always towards what is seen as newsworthy. How might that bias affect our ideas about crime?

4. How are social networks' judgments of newsworthiness similar to those of news outlets? How are they different? How might they have different effects on how we think of crime?

Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?

A Texas TV station tries to resist the allure of mayhem

Adapted, with permission, from an article by Joe Holley

It's 10 o'clock, and news viewers across the country know where they'll be for the next few minutes: at the scene of the crime.

Crime and violence - what the Denver-based Rocky Mountain Media Watch calls "mayhem" - are as ubiquitous on local news shows as the winsome male-female anchor team and the happy chat between bite-sized bits of coverage. Critics argue that this mayhem not only crowds out more legitimate news but skews reality: that local TV newscasts must share responsibility for the fact that, at a time when crime rates across the country are going down, public anxiety about crime continues to rise.

What if a TV news operation refused to cover crime in the same old way? Would crime still make the same noise in the community? Would the station?

Since the beginning of the year, Austin's ABC affiliate, KVUE-TV, a Gannett station, has been trying to find out. KVUE's experiment not only has given Austin viewers something of a choice, but it has forced the station's staff to reassess long-held assumptions about how to cover crime, or even whether to cover it. It has forced reporters, editors, and news directors to ask that more basic question: What is news?

Partly because violent crime is relatively rare in the city, Austin TV has never been terribly crime-obsessed. But after a complicated network-affiliation swap last year, the local CBS station, re-named K-EYE, hit the market with a bagful of gimmicks, razzle-dazzle graphics, and hyperbole, focusing attention on the way crime gets covered. K-EYE's yen for mayhem may be only slightly more knee-jerk than its competitors', but its approach underscored the public's impression that local TV news thrives on violence and disaster. Although K-EYE's ratings remain in single digits nearly a year after the affiliation shuffle, the station has stayed with its format.

It was KVUE, meanwhile, the longtime ratings pacesetter, that decided to try to break its Pavlovian response to the squawking police scanner and the melodramatic visuals.

Now, before a crime story makes it on the air on KVUE, it must meet one or more of five criteria:

- Does action need to be taken?
- Is there an immediate threat to safety?
- Is there a threat to children?
- Does the crime have significant community impact?
- Does the story lend itself to a crime-prevention effort?

No sooner were these guidelines installed on January 21 than they were tested by a trio of murder stories. In early February, in the small town of Elgin, thirty miles east of Austin and in the KVUE viewing area, three men shot and killed each other during a Saturday-night brawl. The triple murder failed to make the KVUE newscast.

The station's three competitors aired the story. "When somebody's killed, that's news," says Jeff Godlis, K-EYE's news director. But to Mike George, KVUE's news manager, the incident was unfortunate, but it wasn't news. George points out that a KVUE reporter drove to Elgin twice to investigate. She found that the men, all Mexican nationals, were not permanent Elgin residents, and that the dispute that prompted the shootings was an isolated incident fueled by drugs and alcohol.

"There was no immediate threat to public safety, no threat to children, and there was really no action that you would take, other than to say 'I don't want to go to that part of Elgin,' " says Cathy McFeaters, KVUE's executive producer. "It really wasn't a crime-prevention story, so then the question becomes significant community impact, and the reaction that we got by just asking people about it was that they weren't too concerned." Staff members worried that some might think the reason this story did not air had to do with the nationality of the killers and victims. "We talked about whether it would make a difference if these guys were from Lubbock or New York or wherever," McFeaters says. "It didn't."

The second story, during the third week of the experiment, involved a man who stabbed his wife in the front yard of their home and then barricaded himself inside the house. Some of KVUE's competitors reported live from the scene.

KVUE's reporter on the scene found that the man inside the house was eighty-two years old, could barely walk, and was nearly blind. He had no criminal record and seemed to present no threat to neighbors or to the police. Again, the incident didn't meet the guidelines, and KVUE did not air the story.

The third story took place in a Wal-Mart parking lot, where a twenty-one-year-old man, after an argument inside the store with two teenagers, was shot and killed when he walked outside. Because the perpetrators were at large at the time of the newscast, thus meeting the threat-to-public-safety guideline, and because the shooting happened in a busy Wal-Mart parking lot, the story easily met KVUE's guidelines.

"Austin police need your help today," KVUE anchor Walt Maciborski began. "They are looking for suspects in a murder at a Wal-Mart store. The shooting happened in the parking lot of the store in Northeast Austin last night. . . . Police arrested a sixteen-year-old at his home this morning and charged him with murder. They are looking at store surveillance tapes to find other suspects." A seventeen-year-old was later arrested and charged.

McFeaters, KVUE's thirty-one-year-old executive producer, is the catalyst for the crime-coverage experiment. An associate producer at KVUE during and after her college years at the University of Texas at Austin, she then went to the Gannett station in Jacksonville, Florida, and took a job in 1991 as a producer at ABC's WSOC in Charlotte, North Carolina. That ABC affiliate bears the dubious distinction of being the ninth-worst station for excessive "mayhem" out of a hundred that the Rocky Mountain Media Watch group examined last fall. (The top three stations on the "mayhem index" are WLKY-TV, Louisville, Kentucky; KNBC-TV, Los Angeles; and KFOR-TV, Oklahoma City.)

"That was the first time I had worked for a metered market, where you live or die by the daily ratings," McFeaters recalls. "You lead with crime. I always understood the thing about ratings, because I'm a very competitive person, and I love to be first. But being number one revolved around the lowest common denominator, and I got disgusted with it. But how could I argue, because we were doing really well?"

The response to the experiment itself has been overwhelmingly positive. "A big congratulations to KVUE for the efforts to keep unimportant violence off television. . ." reads a typical fax. "We are not interested in gory details about who got smeared on the interstate, who got murdered, etc." reads another.

Austin Police Chief Elizabeth Watson, an outspoken advocate of community policing in this rapidly growing city of more than half a million people, also endorses KVUE's new approach, while she is critical of K-EYE's razzle-dazzle. "I think that it is commendable for a major TV news station to really take a look at responsible reporting, commendable from a community service standpoint," she says. "Sensationalized reporting fuels fear. It makes people feel powerless."

Competitor K-EYE, meanwhile, is trying to make a little ratings hay with that no-crime perception of KVUE. "Is your newscast giving you all the news?" K-EYE's latest promo asks, a not-so-subtle dig at KVUE's highly publicized crime diet.

One KVUE reporter said, "Sometimes it's difficult when there's something you're not covering, and you know the other stations are covering it, and you wonder whether you're doing your job."

"One of the frustrations is that we've made the decision that this particular life is more important than another one," reporter and weekend anchor Wendy Erikson says. "A family is out there saying, 'My family deserved at least a fifteen-second notice.' "

Is changing society a journalistic concern? Can new journalistic guidelines also be promotional vehicles? And can thoughtful coverage of important local issues, crime included, compete with gripping images of maimed victims and distraught relatives? "Crime is punctuation," anchor Bob Karstens says. "It grips people. It's hard-edged. The challenge for us is to find stories with the same hard edge that aren't crime stories." McFeaters, who takes pride in the flashy Florida TV tricks she picked up in Jacksonville, believes KVUE can offer good journalism *and* good TV.

Joe Holley is a writer who lives in Austin

Questions: Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?

1. How does KVUE decide whether or not to cover a news story?

2. Do you feel that these guidelines are reasonable criteria for news reporting, or do you think they go too far? Are there guidelines that you would add?

3. Why do local stations rely so much on crime reporting to boost ratings?

4. Do you agree with the statement "Sensationalized reporting fuels fear and makes people feel powerless." Why or why not?

5. Respond to the author's question: "Can thoughtful coverage of important local issues, crime included, compete with gripping images of maimed victims and distraught relatives?"

Crime Audit

News outlet:

Main audience:

Total number of crime-related stories in the past 30 days:

Check the news outlet's home page and the "local news" page (if there is one.)

> **How many stories on those pages are about crime?**

> **What fraction or percentage (roughly) of the stories on those pages are about crime?**

Which kinds of crime received the most coverage? List the top three and the number of stories about each.

1.

2.

3.

Pick two stories about the most common kind of crime and, on a separate sheet of paper:

a. **Identify who is the *suspect* or *perpetrator* (if known) and who is the *victim*. What information are we given about them?**

b. **List everyone who is *quoted* in the article and the *sources* of any other information (facts, statistics, etc.)**

c. **Identify whether the story is *episodic* (focuses just on the single incident) or whether it gives *context* about the situation (for example, does it say how common this kind of crime is overall? Does it talk about who is most likely to be a victim of this kind of crime?)**

Which individual crimes received the most stories? List the top three and the number of stories about each.

1.

2.

3.

In your opinion, how does this news outlet decide which stories are *newsworthy?* Think of three factors that go into that decision and list them from what you think is most to least important:

1 (most important):

2 (second most important):

**3 (least important, but still a factor):**

News Feed

For this assignment you will be creating an *algorithm* that a social network could use to decide whether or not to show you a news story.

An *algorithm* is a computer program that makes a decision or recommendation. They sort, select or suggest things to you.

Some examples of algorithms are the YouTube Up Next bar, the TikTok #ForYou page, the Instagram feed, and the autocomplete on your phone. They can affect how highly something ranks in search results, where something appears in our feed, or whether we see something at all. An algorithm can make the difference between whether one person sees a news story or a million people do.

Algorithms can be represented as *flowcharts* where each box is a different factor to be considered. The beginning of the flowchart for a recommendation algorithm would be a particular piece of content (a video, a photo, a news story, etc.) and the end would be whether it is *boosted* by the algorithm to a large audience, whether it is *shown* just to people who follow the account that posted it, or whether it is *hidden* from the feed and shown only to people who specifically look for it.

For example, here is how Facebook describes the algorithm they use to decide what shows up in the News Feed:
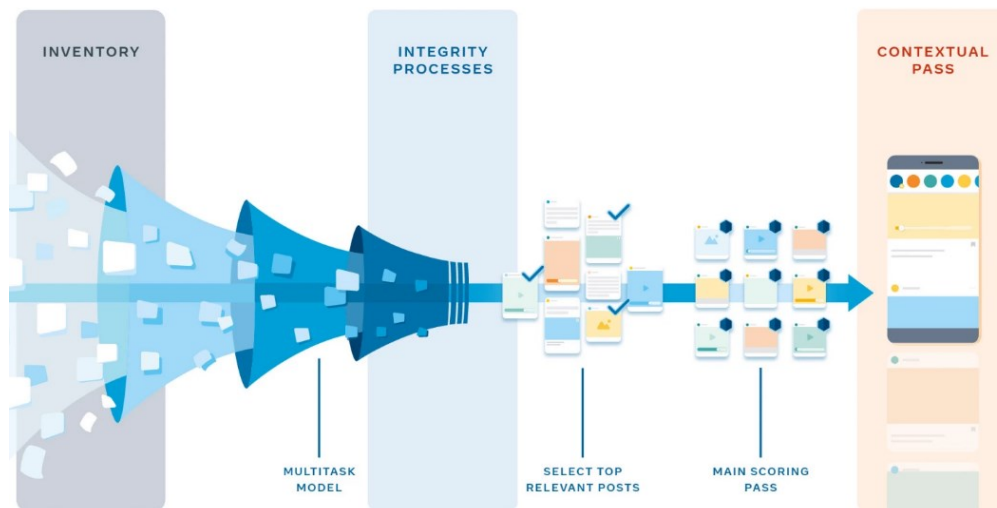
Content ("inventory") passes through what Facebook calls the "integrity process" (which sorts out spam and similar content), then selects the posts it thinks will be most relevant to you, then scores each one based on a prediction of how interested you'll be in it, and finally does a "contextual" ranking where it compares it to other things you've seen recently so you're not always seeing the same content.

You can create your algorithm flowchart either freehand (drawing on a piece of paper or organizing index cards), using a graphics program, or using infographic software such as Canva (https://www.canva.com/graphs/flowcharts/) or Diagrams (https://app.diagrams.net/)

This algorithm should reflect your thinking on what decisions a news outlet and social network *should* make about whether or not something is newsworthy. It should include at least **three** factors that the algorithm will use to classify a story as more or less newsworthy, in what order those factors should be considered, and how those factors lead to one of three outcomes: Boost, Show and Hide.

When you are done, write a paragraph explaining why you chose those factors and why you sorted them in the order you did.

Assessment Task Rubric

	Learning Expectations	*Achievement*
Understand	*Reading Media:* • show an understanding of the forms and techniques of a medium and genre • understand how format, medium and genre can influence content and meaning *Media Representation* • understand how media representations can influence our view of reality • understand how media representations can influence our opinions on a social issue • understand how different audiences can see the same text differently *Consumer Awareness:* • understand the ways in which commercial considerations can influence content and meaning • understand how the media industry works and how that affects what and how media texts are produced and distributed *Finding and Verifying* • understand how the information we see online is influenced by sorting and recommendation algorithms	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)
Create	*Media Representation* • create a text that challenges media representations of an issue or group *Making and Remixing:* • design a simple algorithm and explain the reasoning behind it	Insufficient (R) Beginning (1) Developing (2) Competent (3) Confident (4)