LESSON PLAN

**Level:** Grades 10 to 12

**About the Author:** MediaSmarts

# Crime in the News

## 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.' This lesson includes a group activity where students audit nightly newscasts based on guidelines they have established for responsible TV crime reporting.

## 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

A good introduction to the predominance of crime in local newscasts is the film *If It Bleeds It Leads* (which can be ordered online through Amazon.com).

Photocopy:

- *Our Top Story Tonight*
- *Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?*
- *Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?* Questions
- *Crime Audit*
- For extension activity, photocopy *WSVN in Miami: Diary of the American Nightmare*.

## Procedure

### Guided Discussion

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 *Our Top Story Tonight* to students. When they have read the handout, ask the following questions:

- According to this handout, how does crime in the news relate to crime in the real world?
- Were you surprised by these statistics?
- Was your original opinion regarding the crime rate influenced by crime reports in the news? How?
- Although the both the crime rate and crime reporting have declined, stories about crime still take center stage in news broadcasts. Why might this be so?
- In what ways is television news like any other television program? (*Like any other program, TV news competes for ratings*.)
- How might a television news story differ from a print-based news story about crime? What elements of the story would each medium emphasize in order to engage readers/viewers?
- What are the constraints that television news stories operate under?
- How does this affect the news we watch? *The news that's selected must be chosen and presented in a manner that will attract and hold a viewing audience. Each year, Newswatch Canada compiles a list of the "Top 10 most under-reported news items." In 1997, this list included how white-collar and corporate crime (whose rates have increased in recent years) are rarely reported in the mainstream media. From a selling-the-news perspective, these stories cannot compete with violent crimes.*
- National newscasts were used for The National Media Archive's 1995 survey on crime stories.
    - How did the percentage of crime stories on local Canadian stations compare to national newscasts? *Although these figures fell between the two national stations, total crime stories vary from station to station. A 1995 study of three local Toronto newscasts found that 36, 37 and 48 percent of their stories dealt with crime.*
    - How did the percentage of crime stories on local American stations compare to both these figures?
- Why might local newscasts have higher instances of crime reporting? *Local TV newscasts have smaller budgets and more competition for viewers than do the two or three national Canadian newscasts. Because of this, they focus on formulas for their programs that will attract and keep viewers; "Eyewitness," "News You Can Use," and "Happy Talk" news are just a few of the gimmicks used to increase viewers. They also rely heavily on sensational crime, accidents and violence—'hooks' that have been proven effective in grabbing viewers' attention. Because American local stations have more competition than their Canadian counterparts, they rely even more on a "Tabloid" format to sell the news: a recent study by Rocky Mountain Media Watch found that over 70 per cent of US lead stories in local newscasts focussed on crime, twice the rate of leads on Canadian television news. (On Balance, volume 10, number 8)*

- What sorts of stories appear in national news? National newscasts look for stories of national or international significance.
- What sorts of stories appear in local news? *Local news focuses on provincial, city and regional news. However, because a "local" newscast may broadcast to a vast array of communities, it must use stories that will keep a broad audience tuned in. Nowadays, it's the local cable TV outlets that feature things like school board or city hall meetings, etc. - not the local newscasts.*
- What types of crime stories appear in national news? *Crime stories involving celebrities or world leaders, crimes of an unusual nature, trials of crimes which challenge the law and set precedents, crimes that represent trends of national concern.*
- What types of crime stories would appear in local news?*In addition to national crime stories, local news includes 'local' accidents and crimes such as murders, rapes, violent attacks, hold-ups, etc.*

From time to time, the news media will focus on "crime waves." In 'Crime and Criminals' (see right sidebar) Dr. Cecil Greek reports that, in the 1970s, news media in New York reported a wave of "crimes against the elderly." This wave was picked up by other stations and newspapers and stories of these crimes suddenly increased from one to four stories per week in each media outlet. The mayor, police force and even the state legislature reacted quickly to this 'wave', imposing stiff penalties on any persons convicted of victimizing a senior. But despite this panic, no proof was ever found that crimes against the elderly had increased during this period. In fact, homicides against the elderly were down 19 per cent that year. Similarly, in the 1980's the media focussed on a satanic crime hoax, only later to expose it as fantasy.

- Can you think of other examples of 'crime waves' that have appeared in the news? *Immigrant crime waves, gang crime waves, youth crime and drug use, increasing violence by young girls.*
- How do waves like these occur? *In reporting the news, news media attempt to make sense of events for us. Classifying events under 'news themes' makes it easier for journalists, increases the newsworthiness of a story, and permits journalists to fulfill their role in warning the public. Also, once the media identifies a new news theme, they become sensitized to future reports of similar incidents, as can be seen by the New York experience. Source: Dr. Cecil Greek*
- Select a crime wave chosen by students. Do you think reports of these incidents reflect a growing problem, or do they represent a media 'crime wave'?

**Activities**

**Activity 1**

**Journal Entry:** In their media journals, ask students to respond to the question "Is crime newsworthy?"

**Activity 2**

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

**Activity 3**

- Divide the class into four or five groups. Each group will monitor different evening newscasts for five weeknights. At least one group will monitor a national newscast, and the others will monitor local stations. (If possible, try to include a local American station in your survey.)
- Before students begin their audits, they will meet in their groups and review the KVUE guidelines in the article *Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?*. Using this article as a guide, students will create their own sets of guidelines for crime reporting on television. As they audit crime stories, students will determine whether the stories shown conform to their standards.
- Students are to complete one *Crime Audit* sheet for each newscast they watch. They should indicate:
    - The type of crime reported and whether this is a new story (indicated by the letter 'n') or a continuing story (marked by the letter 'c').
    - Why the newscast thinks this story is newsworthy
    - The overall tone of the story
    - Whether the story contains gratuitous elements (i.e.: grieving victims, blood and gore etc.)
- Whether this story would have made it on air if it were judged by the group's guidelines.

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

- The total number of crime stories
- The total number of news stories

Students should also be prepared to discuss the content of the crime stories they observed, i.e.: types of crime, tone of stories, gratuitous elements, and whether or not these stories complied with their guidelines for crime reporting.

**Extension Activity**

WSVN in Miami: Diary of the American Nightmare is an article that describes an entirely opposite approach to crime reporting to that of KVUE. Students might use these two articles as the basis for a short essay or class debate:

1. What is the best way to handle the reporting of crime?, or
2. Could WSVN happen here?

**Evaluation**

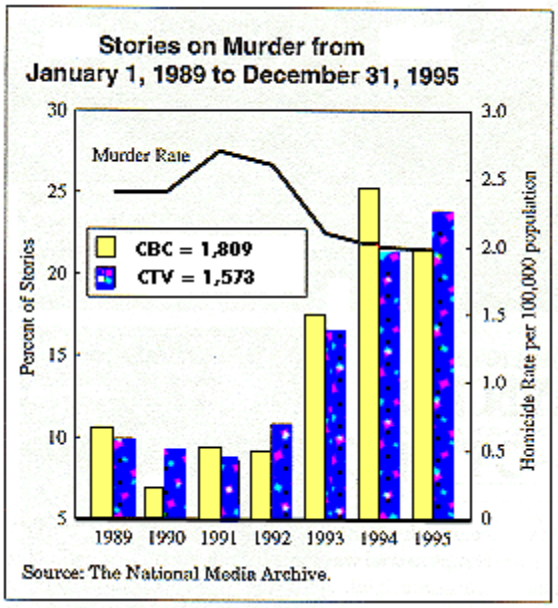
- Activity 1: Journal entry
- Activity 2: Written responses to questions
- Activity 3: Group submissions and presentations
- Activity 4: Short essay

# Our Top Story Tonight: Crime in the News

## A Comparison of Canadian and American Crime Reporting

Is there a difference between crime reporting on American and Canadian newscasts?

Homicide Reporting – Canada




The National Media Archive monitored CBC and CTV newscasts from 1989-1995, and found that stories about murders increased, while the murder rate during the same period decreased. In 1995, two high profile murder trials dominated the news: the trials of Paul Bernardo and O.J. Simpson. Most other murder stories covered by television were those involving random acts of murder.

The National Media Archive noted that 26.7 per cent of the lead stories on CBC and 16.7 per cent of the lead stories on CTV reported on crime (these figures were second only to political stories).

According to Statistics Canada, just 16 per cent of murders in 1995 were committed by someone unknown to the victim. However, of the murders that originated in Canada, 54 per cent of CBC and 66 per cent of CTV coverage focused on random murders. Only 18 per cent of CBC and 11 per cent of CTV news stories on Canadian murders focused on those committed by someone known to the victim – despite the fact that 83 per cent of the murders in Canada are committed by a spouse or acquaintance of the victim.

With this kind of coverage of violent acts on television, it is not surprising that Gallup Canada reported in 1995 that only 4 percent of Canadians believe violent crime to be decreasing.

**Source: *On Balance,* Volume 9, Number 8**

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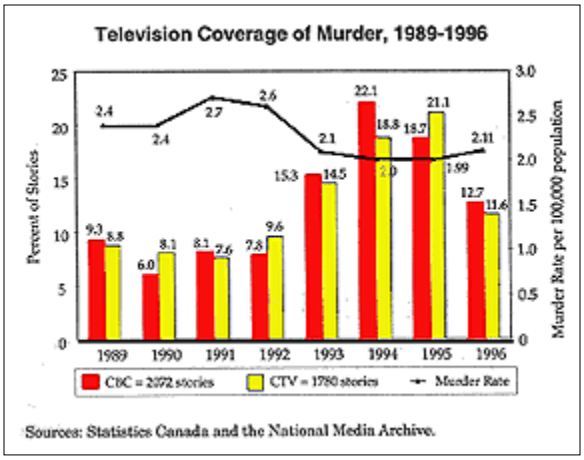
A year later, in their 1996 report, the National Media Archive noted that for the first time in four years, coverage of murder had gone down – even though the actual murder rate in Canada had risen by 6 per cent.

**Source: *On Balance,*Volume 10, Number 8**

Since then, television news has reduced the number of murder stories coinciding with the reduction in the murder rate. In 1999, Statistics Canada reported that the homicide rate had dropped once again – a trend that is likely to continue. In the media, for the first 11 months of 2000, CBC presented only 84 stories on murder, compared with 140 for all of 1999 and CTV reported 146 murder stories, down from 171.

However, television continues to distort the public's perception of murder. Even though the number of stories about random acts of murder has declined slightly since 1995, the news continues to focus on murders perpetrated by strangers. In 2000, forty-four per cent of homicide reports on CBC and 48 per cent of those on CTV reported that the murderer was a stranger. (According to Statistics Canada, only 12 percent of Canadian murders are committed by someone unknown to the victim.)

The same happens with murders involving guns. In 1999, Statistics Canada reported that guns were used in only 3.3 per cent of all violent crimes. In the news, 24 per cent of CBC murder stories and 22 per cent of CTV murder stories mentioned that a gun had been used.




**Sources: Statistics Canada, *Canadian Crime Statistics,* 1999and *Fraser Forum*, March 2001**

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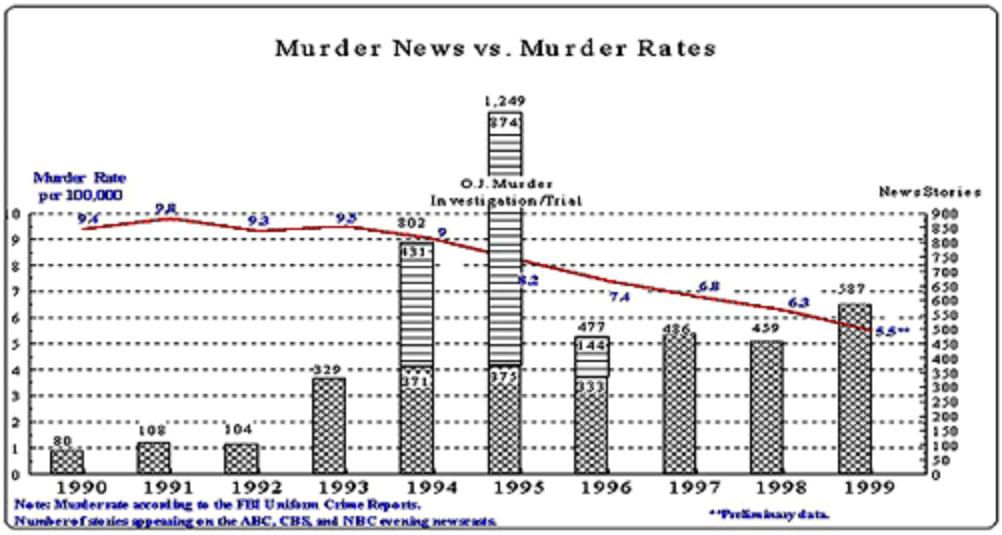
### Homicide Reporting – United States




The Center for Media and Public Affairs monitors American newscasts. Like the National Media Archive in Canada, the CMPA has also noted a discrepancy between murder stories and the actual murder crime rate. While homicides have declined during the 1990s, coverage of murders has steadily increased on the network news during that same period. In 1990 only one out of nine crime stories dealt with homicide; by 1995 more than one out of every four stories (27 per cent) concerned a murder case.

Murders in general were given increased air time, even after the O.J. Simpson story. In fact, when the O.J. Simpson coverage died down, media filled the void with stories on robberies, murders and police chases (which used to be judged only worthy of local news coverage). After 1997 the crime which caught the attention of the media was school shootings. As well, the last third of the decade saw a five-fold increase in murder coverage from the first third of the decade. Like Canada, this represents a reversal of what is actually happening as the U.S. homicide rate continues to

fall. However, this trend may be changing. In 2001, CMPA reported that crime coverage in the American news was 39 per cent lower than in 1999.

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**Source: *The Media Monitor*, July/August 2000, Volume XV, Number 1, 2001**

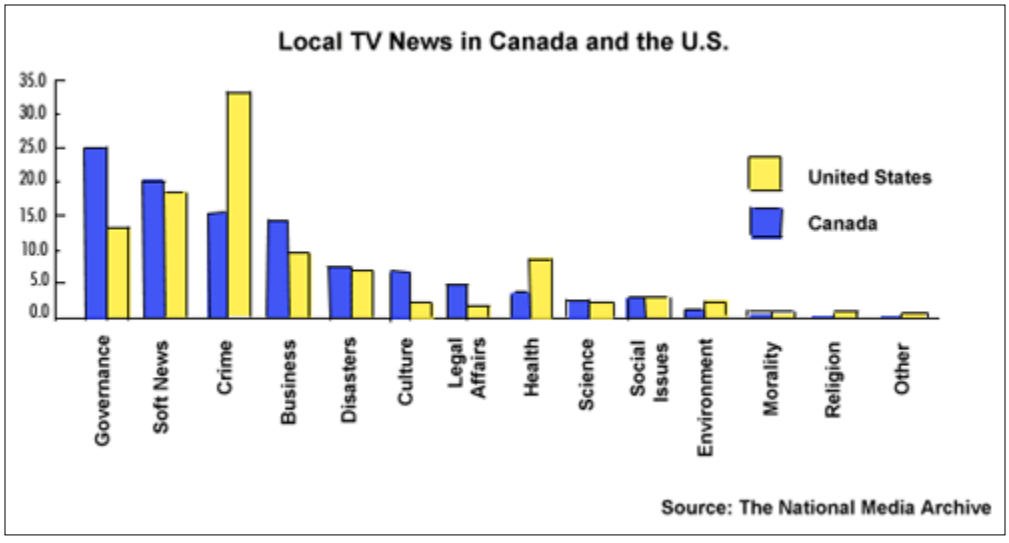
**"Chaos" News Reporting in Canada and the United States**

In 1997 The National Media Archive completed a study comparing the local TV newscast reporting of crime, accidents and natural disasters in Canada and in the United States. The study revealed that this "chaos" news accounted for 22 percent of local Canadian TV news items, compared to 40 per cent on local TV news in the U.S. American stations were also more likely to lead their newscast with a report on crime, accidents or disasters (72 per cent) than were Canadian stations (34.7 per cent).

**Proportion if Civil, Chaos, and Entertainment News in Canada and the U.S.**

| | Canada | U.S. | CBC Stations | CTV Stations | Other Stations |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Civil News | 50.7% | 39.6% | 52.4% | 53.6% | 45.7% |
| Chaos News | 22.0% | 40.1% | 20.1% | 22.2% | 23.7% |
| Entertainment News | 27.3% | 20.3% | 27.5% | 24.2% | 30.6% |

The National Media Archive also found U.S. local news more sensational than the local newscasts in Canada. Rocky Mountain Media Watch reported that 35 per cent of the news reported on local US news programs focused on crime. In fact it is the "crime" portion of “chaos” news (which includes crime, accidents and natural disasters) that puts American reporting ahead of Canadian reporting in this category. For example, fifty-nine per cent of lead stories in the American news focused on crime compared to 23 per cent of leads in Canada.




**Source: *On Balance,* Volume 10, Number 8, 1997 and Volume 11, Number 2, 1998**

## Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?

**A Texas TV station tries to resist the allure of mayhem**


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 solution, McFeaters thought, was to leave the business. She reached the nadir, she says, with a story about bestiality; she'd rather not recall the details. But in plotting her escape from WSOC, she discovered by accident that KVUE had an opening. Her boss there would be Carole Kneeland, a respected broadcast veteran who happened to share McFeaters's concerns about crime coverage.

Kneeland, who is forty-seven, was the capital bureau chief for nearly eleven years for Dallas's WFAA-TV before becoming KVUE's news director in 1989. Like McFeaters, she has long been concerned about what she calls local TV's over-coverage of crime and disaster. For her, a story that KVUE ran last fall seemed to crystallize the issue. A pickup truck swerved off the highway and into the playground of a day care center, killing a child. It was a poignant story, but it happened in California. The story ran in Austin and elsewhere for one reason: the heartbreaking video of the little body lying on the playground.

Not long after that, Kneeland and McFeaters began putting together their crime-coverage concept. The station has been convening monthly community meetings for the previous year, and from those meetings they already knew that the coverage of crime and violence was a persistent viewer complaint.

"We wouldn't even have to ask about it specifically," Kneeland says. "We'd say, 'What do you think about local news coverage?' The first thing they'd always react with was, 'It's too violent. It's too sensational.' Or, 'There's too much crime coverage with no significance.' "

"I remember talking to Carol, and I said, just jokingly, 'I just wonder what would happen if no one covered crime?' " McFeaters recalls. "It wasn't like a mission of mine or anything; it was almost out of spite for Charlotte."

It was also a marketing strategy, she admits. "That is not why we are doing it, but that's certainly a part of it. I felt sure that people would appreciate this and would watch us because of it."

The two women encouraged the news staff to begin analyzing how - and why - the station was covering crime stories. "The reasons [reporters] gave about why something ought to be covered - 'Somebody ought to do something about that!' or 'It affects the community' - gradually became the categories," Kneeland recalls. Informal criteria evolved over a period of three or four months.

The station's general manager, Ardyth Diercks at the time, signed off on the experiment in early December; Kneeland and McFeaters laid the final guidelines out for the staff on January 10. With a promotion barrage and explanatory spots during the newscasts, the station put the plan into practice a week and a half later.

A number of viewers complain that they got tired of *hearing* about the new approach. Indeed, until March, the explanation and promotion of the new guidelines were woven right into the newscast. A crime story typically concluded with a graphic of the new guidelines, with big red check marks on which guidelines the story was deemed to have met. There were oral explanations as well. "Today's marijuana bust is an example of a crime-fighting or crime-prevention effort, one of the guidelines we're using now to change the way we cover crime," anchor Judy Maggio told her viewers in February. "The project is KVUE Listens To You On Crime. We're still going to cover crime, but we're doing it in a less violent and sensational way. We would like to hear your feedback." She went on to say that she and "Bob" - co-anchor Bob Karstens - would host a discussion about the station's new crime-coverage philosophy on America Online that evening.

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."

But when does "responsible reporting," to use Chief Watson's term, become a kind of cheerleading for local law enforcement or a device for self-censorship? In the first few weeks of the experiment, the station seemed to be blurring the distinction between straight reporting and being "a responsible member of the community." Its incessant efforts to tease out crime-prevention tips in every story often sounded more like police public-service announcements than news stories.

"We've got these neat little guidelines," reporter Kim Barnes says, "which means we've got to give a solution, so let's give some tips. My concern is that so much of our focus and concern is on getting the sidebar [the crime-prevention tips] that we're not getting the who, what, when, and where - which is our primary job."

Some viewers consider the KVUE experiment an effort to avoid reality. "Grow up," one viewer urged in another fax. "The world is violent. Your ignorance of it doesn't make it less violent. It only makes it more palatable to you when you stick your heads in the sand."

A similar objection came from Joe Phelps, pastor of an American Baptist church in an Austin suburb. "Frankly," the minister wrote in an op-ed piece that ran in the *Austin American-Statesman*, "hearing about violence is the least we can do to remain connected with our fellow citizens, our kin, who experience such tragedy. The reporting should not be sensationalized. Pictures may not always be appropriate. But the reality that people kill and are killed on a regular basis is newsworthy. We need to hear it."

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.

For Kneeland, McFeaters, and others at KVUE, the perception that the station no longer covers crime has been frustrating. When critics call, Mike George takes pains to explain the distinction the station makes between covering a crime story and airing it. His reporters listen to the police scanner just as they always have, he explains, and they still investigate crime and violence. But after they've asked the questions and nosed around the crime scene, they now have to decide whether the story is worth putting on the air. And if it's worth putting on the air, is it worth "packaging," giving it the full story-and-pictures approach? "This policy makes us think about the way we cover crime," George says. "It's just like any other story: we ask the question 'Why is this important?' "

"What we're trying to get away from is an automatic response to the way we cover crime," McFeaters says. "We're not trying to deny the ugliness in the world; that's not what this is about. However, we have a responsibility not to give that ugliness more play than it deserves."

McFeaters draws a sharp distinction between what KVUE is doing and the "family-sensitive" approach, pioneered by WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, one of a handful of stations around the country that are spurning violent, manipulative, and emotion-laden newscasts. The Minneapolis station pledges that its 5 p.m. newscast will never contain material that a family with children watching would find offensive. To McFeaters, such a pledge is a gimmick, in effect a kind of self-censorship. The Minneapolis station, she says, allowed the perception to develop that it had, in effect, "gone soft" on crime. She doesn't want that to happen to KVUE, and the station's promotional efforts are aimed at heading off that notion.

It is a Monday night toward the end of February, and McFeaters and Knee-land have called a meeting of the newsroom staff to assess their experiment. Minutes after anchors Bob Karstens and Judy Maggio wrap up the 6 p.m. newscast with a bit of happy chat with weatherman Mark Murray, the staff gathers around a white oval table in the corner of the large, airy newsroom. Behind them, floor-to-ceiling inverted-V windows in a stark white wall offer views of suburban Austin at dusk.

Maggio and Karstens sit side-by-side at one end of the table, just as they do on the set. Reporters, editors, producers, directors, news managers, engineers, and photographers, a couple of dozen in all, slouch in chairs and on desks or lean against the wall around the table. Several of their colleagues scurry about the newsroom getting ready for the 10 p.m. newscast. It's a youthful-looking group; the average age is probably under thirty.

Three video cameras record the gathering as McFeaters opens the meeting with a videotape of another gathering - a viewer focus group that had met several times over a two-month period. The seven members of this group - young and old; black, white, and brown; male and female - are thoughtful and articulate and uniformly supportive of the station's crime-coverage experiment. "I have to be perfectly honest," says Ora Houston, a grandmotherly African-American woman. "I have not missed the crime or the mayhem or the stabbings. It's like my life is much more settled, it's calmer. We know crime's going on. In our neighborhood, we're trying to be pro-active about it, but we don't need to see it every day."

The tape ends. Standing in the shadows away from the table, McFeaters says, "Let's start with some of your frustrations."

A reporter replies: "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." Another says she worries about digging for the deeper angle and slighting the "who, what, when, where, why. Are we fulfilling our core responsibility?" Someone else, expanding on the thought, suggests a billboard-type graphic that would display such information, without pictures. Somebody else comments that "People are saying, 'Oh, y'all are the station that doesn't cover crime anymore.'"

"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.' "

"Of course, we make those decisions all the time," McFeaters replies, "when we don't report the death of someone with AIDS or cancer or a baby that's died of SIDS." She adds that the only strong complaint she's heard about the experiment is about the promotion. "They're saying, 'All right, already! Quit telling us what you're going to do and just do it!' "

The group discusses ratings and how long the experiment might last if ratings slip. "Hypothetically, what if it costs us number one?" asks reporter Greg Groogan, surveying the faces of his colleagues. "Do we stand on principle, or do we backtrack?" Groogan urges taking a stand.

"I think we do have a more intelligent group of people here in Austin than in other cities," Carole Kneeland says, "so if it can work anywhere, I think it will work here."

Everyone around the table on Monday night was keenly aware that the experiment had undergone its most severe test just a day earlier, February 25. Groogan, who usually covers politics and investigative projects, had been doing weekend duty as part of a skeleton staff. He had arrived at work on Sunday thinking that he had made it through more than a month of the experiment without having to make a critical news judgment. A few minutes later he and photographer Chris Davis were rushing to the scene of a shooting at an apartment complex for married students at the University of Texas.

"We confirmed that there were three dead on the scene," he recalls, "and the thought process began right then. 'Is this going to meet the guidelines? If this was murder, was the murderer still at large? Was there an issue of public safety?' "

It seemed that a graduate student in engineering had shot his wife and four-year-old daughter and then turned the gun on himself. "We had a hook," Groogan says. "It was the first murder on UT properties since the Charles Whitman shootings from the UT tower in 1966. That wasn't a bad hook, but that wasn't going to cut it under our new guidelines."

Meanwhile, University of Texas police had found a weapon and told Groogan they had a 911 tape of the woman calling for help. Campus police were slow to provide much more, and the 5:30 newscast was looming. "We still weren't there," Groogan recalls, "at least for the early show."

If not for the guidelines, Groogan would already have been back at the station with a story in the can. Viewers might not have seen body bags, as they did on K-EYE that evening, but they might have heard the 911 tape and gotten the details about three violent deaths. Now, however, Groogan couldn't find a justification for airing the story: there was no immediate threat to the community, the crime itself was solved, and there was really nothing to say about prevention. There seemed to be no significant community impact; the family was new to the apartment complex, and the neighbors barely knew them. The guideline about children? In this case, the child was dead.

Back at the station, Sunday anchor Wendy Erikson had another killing on her hands, and another decision about the guidelines - an apparent drive-by shooting on Austin's predominantly black and Hispanic east side that had taken place late Saturday night. The suspect was in custody, there was no threat to children, no threat to the community.

"We were between a rock and a hard place," Groogan says. "With our limited weekend staff, we could follow both stories and still not get them on the air. We called Carole at home."

Erikson, thirty, is from suburban Chicago, where, she says, "I grew up watching death and destruction" on TV. She would have aired both Sunday stories without a second thought - before the experiment. Now she found herself in something of an ironic situation. Kneeland wanted to run the drive-by shooting story, but Erikson didn't believe it met the criteria Kneeland herself had developed. "Our credibility is on the line," Erikson told her boss.

"Carole told us to start digging on both, looking for larger issues," Groogan recalls. "She said, 'We cannot drop these stories. If we don't go on the air, that's the price we pay, but we cannot use these guidelines as an excuse not to cover them. Our job is to gather facts and then decide whether to air. The guidelines are not an excuse for not doing the nuts-and-bolts job of reporting.' "

Groogan and other reporters dug. Although neither story made the 5:30 newscast (except for a brief mention of the East Austin murder), Erikson fully aired them both at 10.

The story of the apparent murder/suicide at the university apartment complex focused on the immediate community's response to the tragedy. The residents of the apartment complex gathered at sunset on a playground and talked over what had happened, among themselves and with Groogan. Groogan also listened as counselors talked to the residents about signs of domestic abuse, which was an issue in the investigation, and what they could do to help prevent it.

Groogan believes that the guidelines forced him to stay with the story, and that this extra effort paid off in context and perspective. "In this place," Groogan reported at 10 that night, "where small children are constantly at play, there is a new fear - a fear of guns. They're supposed to be illegal on all university property. Residents wonder if other neighbors have ignored the ban." The visuals were subdued - the apartment complex, children playing there, and, from a distance, the residents in discussion.

KVUE also determined that the other shooting, in East Austin, had significant community impact as well, and in ways KVUE might have missed had it covered the incident simply as a drive-by shooting. Groogan and reporter Robbie Owens - who was pulled off another story to explore the community's response - discovered a predominantly black neighborhood eager to let the rest of Austin know that this was not just another stereotypical incident. "Although this is a terrible time for Bobby Reed's family and friends, they want Austin to know that this was not a gang shooting or a crack deal gone bad," Robbie Owens explained on the air. "It was a family gathered - laughing, talking, and eating enchiladas. Then, witnesses say a white man pulled up, exchanged some words - including a racial slur aimed at the black family gathering. They say he then fired a shotgun, hitting two people, one of them Bobby Reed, who died. But tonight some family and friends say their concern right now is not about hatred, but about loss."

"We had a family pleading for peace, and the community impacted was more than just that block where he lived," Cathy McFeaters says. "It was all of East Austin, all of black Austin."

"I believe that Sunday night newscast was a litmus test," Groogan says. "To Wendy's credit and to our producers' credit, they didn't want to be hypocrites. To Carol's credit, she sensed that by digging a little deeper and looking a little wider, we could still cover those stories without breaking our commitment."

Wendy Erikson still feels a little unsettled by that Sunday experience, however. On the earlier newscasts, "all other stations aired both stories," she recalls, "and I was literally anchoring and feeling that we weren't covering crime. We had four people dead on a quiet Sunday, and we weren't covering it. I've been taught to present the facts, and now I'm in this position where I'm having to decide whether this particular story is something I feel viewers should see.

"I'm in transition," she adds. "I'm uncomfortable with the guidelines right now, but part of me does feel very good thinking I may somehow be contributing to a change in our society."

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.

She acknowledges that ratings will ultimately determine the fate of KVUE's experiment, but she hopes the station doesn't rush to judgment. "They usually give news directors and anchors two or three years, football coaches two or three seasons before they off 'em," she says. "I don't think you draw any conclusions by one book." If ratings slip, McFeaters says she'll blame the presentation, not the concept, and she'll press to keep trying.

"We characterize it as an experiment, because it is," she says, but adds, "It's not an experiment in the sense that there's an end to this; it's not a one-shot deal. There's no way that at the end of the month Carole or I can walk out into the newsroom and announce, 'OK, now we can start covering crime the way we were.' This newsroom is forever changed. Everyone is going to look at how they cover crime differently from now on."

The February ratings came out in mid-March. They were KVUE's best ever. The station increased its already-solid ratings lead for every newscast, reaching its highest numbers in a decade for its 10 p.m. show. The crime-coverage experiment continues.

Joe Holley is a writer who lives in Austin
**May/June 1996**
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## Questions: Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?

1. Comment on the guidelines that have been created by KVUE. Do you feel that they are reasonable criteria for news reporting, or do you think they go too far? Are there guidelines that you would add?

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

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

4. By implementing these guidelines, KVUE journalists believe that they are delivering "responsible reporting" to their viewers. Critics argue that these guidelines are a form of "self-censorship", that people have a right to hear the news, even if it's violent. From the article, find four comments in support of KVUE's philosophy, and four comments against their approach to crime reporting. Which do you agree with most?

5. Review KVUE's decisions regarding the following stories: the triple murder in Elgin; the murder/suicide at the University of Texas; and the drive-by shooting in East Austin. What journalistic decisions had to be made in each case? Do you agree or disagree with the way in which they were handled?

6. Adopting these guidelines has not been easy for the journalists involved. What are some of the ethical dilemmas that KVUE's journalists and producers have faced?

7. 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

**Newscast: _____**

**Date: _____**

**Total number of stories: _____**

**Total number of stories relating to crime: _____**

**Referring only to the stories that relate to crime, fill out the following form.**

| Type of crime | Significance of story | Tone of story | Gratuitous elements | Does this story meet group criteria for crime reporting? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
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# WSVN in Miami: Diary of the American Nightmare

By Jonathan Cohn
***The American Prospect*, No. 19, Fall 1994**
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*The Book of Revelations does not say whether the apocalypse will be televised. But if it is, WSVN in Miami will not have to interrupt its regular programming.*

It's July 18 - the day of a visit by President Clinton to Miami - and WSVN, the nation's most notorious tabloid station, is leading its ten o'clock newscast with yet another lurid murder story. "Let me let you take a look at the body of Carmen Rodriguez, still laying next to her car," reporter Glenn Milberg says as the camera zooms in on a white, body-shaped shroud with a pool of blood at one end. "That's exactly where she was shot a few hours ago." WSVN cuts from Milberg to film of the victim's son arriving at the scene and bursting into tears, then to taped footage of the body that shows the arm of Carmen Rodriguez extending out from under the canvas.

WSVN manages to get five more bodies on screen within the next seven minutes, including the partially uncovered corpses of four teenagers killed in a car accident. We also see the accident's one survivor, bloodied and with an amputated leg, being lifted from the wreckage. A subsequent sequence shows a man, who was shot in the head while minding a local store, sitting in an ambulance with a bandage on his bleeding wound. He lived, so it wasn't "Top Story" material.

Nine minutes, six car wrecks, and one beating into the broadcast, the words "ROADSIDE RAPE" swoop on screen like a spacecraft. A reporter explains that over a period of several months, three women have been attacked while driving through the city: "This type of car crime is happening all too frequently." Re-enacting one such incident, a driver bumps a woman's car, and when she pulls over, he jumps in her car and drives away. (Both drivers are actors.) "The criminal element is out there," intones a Florida highway patrolman. A passerby frets that, "You just never know when it's going to happen."

Finally, fourteen minutes into the show, WSVN mentions that the President visited today to talk about health care and promote the upcoming pan-American summit in Miami. The two-minute segment is presented sans analysis, MTV sound-bite style.

A rough tally for the newscast: excluding sports and weather, WSVN has devoted 22 out of 34 minutes of broadcast time to stories about people being attacked, robbed, injured, or killed. That includes 15 minutes on murders and other crimes. There has been no political or other so-called institutional news, save for the segment on Clinton and an update on the crisis in Haiti. The rest has consisted of celebrity stories, health news, and a piece on the Levy-Shoemaker 3 comet hitting Jupiter.

For residents of South Florida, WSVN has become the daily diary of the American nightmare. Shootings. Stabbings. Rapes. More shootings. With every broadcast, WSVN tests the limits of decency, feeding Miami's social divisions and caustic political atmosphere along the way.

Critics have taken aim at WSVN's journalistic ethos before, with mixed results. Newsweek dubbed WSVN "Crime Time Live." Locally, leaders of Miami's African-American community have attacked WSVN for promoting racial stereotypes. Yet while WSVN has tamed its programming in recent months, such notoriety may serve primarily to enhance the

station's bad-boy reputation. High-minded criticism is no match for high ratings and the advertising it brings.
But what's most worrisome here is not the lack of taste or judgement at one television station but the reaction of the audience. While 69 per cent of South Floridians think local news contributes to a "climate of fear," more than three-quarters say they still rely on it as their primary source of community information.

As a result, the triumph of the tabloid format in South Florida may say as much about the nature of Miami's community as it does about the values of WSVN's owners, managers, and reporters. Like palm trees, indifference to public life flourishes in South Florida. Since the same could be said for many other cities, concerned citizens on both sides of the newsdesk should consider what it is about South Florida that promotes disinterest in public affairs - and what role the more responsible media might still play.

***If It Bleeds, It Leads:*** "Tonight, WSVN is leading with a story of a suburban boy who accidentally set himself ablaze while trying to construct a Molotov cocktail"

Ten o'clock rolls around on another sultry South Florida evening, and tonight WSVN is leading with a story of a suburban boy who accidentally set himself ablaze while trying to construct a Molotov cocktail. The show needs a good visual, but there's no footage of the boy on fire. Ace reporter Milberg improvises. As she explains to viewers how to make a Molotov cocktail, the broadcast cuts intermittently to a show-and-tell sequence: a hand holds a glass jar, pours clear liquid into it, and splashes it on the camera lens to demonstrate how the gas leaked out and set off the explosion. Accompanied by sound effects, the sequence's blurred black-and-white shots are reminiscent of an Oliver Stone movie.

The fast cutaways, re-enactments, artsy cinematography and music are the trademarks of WSVN news and the chief legacy of Joel Cheatwood, the architect of its news format. After WSVN lost its NBC affiliation in the 1980s - NBC decided to buy one of WSVN's competitors - WSVN owner Ed Ansen and Cheatwood dreamed up the tabloid scheme as a way to save the station from extinction.

At the time, the move was considered risky. But Ansen and Cheatwood figured that if they made news entertaining, they could build a solid audience. They were right. In the five years since it turned tabloid, WSVN news has climbed from fourth to second place in South Florida's highly competitive television market, with occasional spells in the top position. In 1989, it signed on as a Fox Television affiliate. According to Newsweek, WSVN made $20 million in 1993, making it one of the most profitable local stations in the country.

Already, imitators have sprung up in Chicago, Los Angeles and other markets. In Boston, backyard of the nation's intelligentsia, WSVN's parent company recently bought station WHDH; its tabloid transformation is under way. Could the formula work on a national scale? Fox TV seems to think so. A Fox executive recently hailed WSVN as the future of network news, though she hedged on whether WSVN would be the model for Fox's planned entry into the national news business.

In Miami itself, WSVN has increasingly set the tone for local news, except for one station that adopted a "family-sensitive" format and now sits at the bottom of the ratings heap. When University of Miami scholar Joe Angotti sampled a week of programming in November 1993, he found that WSVN had devoted nearly 50 per cent of its 6 o'clock broadcast to crime, more than double its closest competitor. In a similar test six months later, that number was down to 30 per cent on WSVN, apparently because tourism-sensitive advertisers raised a fuss. But on WPLG, Miami's most popular and well-respected station, crime coverage had risen to 30 per cent, placing it in a virtual tie with WSVN.

In an interview, an assignment manager at WPLG acknowledged that despite his station's reputation for integrity and firm grip on the top ratings spot, it was becoming "more sensitive to crime. We had to make sure we weren't falling behind." They haven't, and neither have most others.

Ansen and Cheatwood have insisted that they perform a public service by appealing to an audience that might otherwise not watch any news at all. (Both turned down requests to be interviewed for this article.) The station does appeal to younger viewers. But given its emphasis on glitz and contempt for responsible journalism, the motive seems transparent.

Of course, free-market journalism is an old story, as is South Florida's obsession with the macabre. In the 1980s, when Miami became the terminus for the nation's cocaine traffic, violent crime did rise sharply. Nary a week went by when some low-level drug dealer didn't show up on the front pages with a blindfold and a bullet in the head.

But WSVN has taken the obsession to an extreme, at a time when violent crime in Miami is actually declining. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the incidence of both murder and forcible rape fell steadily from 1982 to 1992 (the most recent year for which data is available). In 1982, Miami officials reported 190 murders and 349 forcible rapes; in 1992, they reported 128 murders and 272 forcible rapes. (Actually, the incidence of rape peaked in 1983, not 1982, at 365.) However, in an NBC survey of South Floridians in January 1993, 73 percent said they thought the murder rate had increased. This mirrors the trend across the country: crime rates are down nationally, but public awareness of crime continues to rise.

Ironically, most residents seem to recognize that the media image of Miami is distorted. In the NBC survey, 66 per cent of the respondents said local news shows pay too much attention to crime. Hal Boedeker, the Miami Herald's television critic, figures that for most viewers WSVN and its imitators are "a guilty pleasure, a quick thrill. You laugh at the things you think are outrageous." But if the discrepancy between crime rates and crime perceptions is indicative, tabloid coverage may be contributing to serious distortions of public understanding.

***A Tale of Two Cities:*** "Boston may prove to be less susceptible than Miami to tabloid TV because the two communities are so different"

When word spread that WSVN's Ed Ansen planned to add a Boston station to his broadcast portfolio, civic-minded New Englanders greeted the news with the same enthusiasm they might muster for a new toxic waste dump. Broadsides filled The Boston Globe. Michael Dukakis, a part-time Floridian, campaigned against the sale. A local nonprofit group even tried - unsuccessfully - to organize a buyout of the station before Ansen could get his hands on it.

Today, WHDH does look increasingly like WSVN - albeit in some subtle ways - but Boston's other stations haven't changed all that much. For the most part, WHDH has the tabloid niche to itself.

It is still too soon to know for certain whether tabloid news will play in the Boston market. Perhaps Boston's journalistic traditions of responsible, staid reporting are stronger than Miami's. The Globe barely responded when Rupert Murdoch took over the rival Boston Herald and gave it a tabloid makeover. And Boston is home to PBS's flagship quality station, WGBH.

More importantly, though, Boston may prove to be less susceptible than Miami to tabloid TV because the two communities are so different. As a former resident of South Florida (for 15 years) and a current resident of Boston, I've observed the differences first-hand.

For starters, most Floridians do not have a deep attachment to the state. Less than 20 per cent of Florida's people were born there; only Nevada has a smaller proportion of native-born inhabitants. Because many residents have only recently arrived, they are not likely to know the state or its government well.

South Floridians, in particular, feel more than a geographical distance from the doings of state government in faraway Tallahassee. They don't have much stake in what the state does, and a lot of them want to keep it that way. Unlike Florida's Latin American immigrants, who came seeking political haven, many of the refugees from up north were in search of a financial haven - in other words, a land free of income and inheritance taxes. Taxes, of course, don't usually enamor citizens of state government. But they do make them a lot more interested in what the government does. Even Florida's many retirees, who do depend on government, look to Washington, not Tallahassee, for Social Security and Medicare benefits.

Granted, people with weak ties to a state may still have strong ties to a city or town. In South Florida, however, most of the newcomers have recreated miniature versions of places left behind - Little Havana, Little Haiti, and all the little Brooklyns that constitute Florida's retirement communities. Miami as such does not evoke their loyalty. Ask a typical South Floridian where he or she is from, and you're apt to hear "Havana" or maybe "the Upper West Side" - even from Miamians of 10 or 20 years.

What South Floridians do share, of course, is mutual hostility. Not by chance did Miami erupt into riots four times within ten years. All were sparked by direct clashes between Miami's Cuban and African-American communities, the most antagonistic pair, while more complicated ethnic passions simmered beneath. "The extraordinary division of Miami along ethnic lines continues to define its reality," Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick advise in City on the Edge: The Transformation of Miami. "Anglos, Blacks, and Jews, Nicaraguans, Haitians, and Cubans, tend to stay within their ethnic circles and to greet calls for intermingling with skepticism, if not hostility."

In such an environment, news of crime and violence play well, because it both entertains and validates stereotypes, while public or institutional news about the region doesn't stand much of a chance, since it's not likely to be relevant to many viewers. What, after all, does a suburban Miami commuter care about a Metro-Dade bus strike? Less than 6 per cent of South Floridians use public transportation.

Contrast this situation with Boston's, where for all of the legendary racial tensions, city news still matters to many citizens. Relative to Miami, Boston has strong civic traditions, thriving social networks, and popular public activities. (The share of the population using public transportation is twice as large.) As a result, Bostonians are more likely to reject tabloid news and demand information about their city and state from their nightly local news.

Trouble is, the rest of the nation looks more like Miami and less like Boston every day. What the 1994 Almanac of American Politics says about Florida is particularly true of the Miami area. "Florida's lack of community traditions and mediating institutions are part of the problem - and one that threatens the nation too as it becomes increasingly like Florida."

Indeed, cities across the Sunbelt and West, the nation's youngest and fastest growing regions, all share Miami's defining characteristics: high rates of immigration, a rapidly changing population, and growing class divisions. Cities such as Houston, Denver, or Los Angeles don't have vibrant downtowns to serve as economic anchors or cultural centers that might foster common identity. Instead, they more strongly resemble what Joel Garreau calls "edge cities" - clusters of strip shopping centers and office complexes surrounded primarily by walled-off housing developments.

The political profiles of these cities are familiar, too. As in South Florida, many of America's new growth centers have paved the road to prosperity with low tax rates, undercutting social services in the name of attracting business. Public opinion in these cities mirrors South Florida's: generally conservative, particularly when it comes to issues related to crime, poverty, and tax levels. (Is it any surprise that Florida and Texas lead the nation in capital punishment but rank behind other large states in quality and quantity of social services?) This political culture creates an environment in which people feel little connection to government and, as such, little interest in news about it.

These cities are missing what Robert D. Putnam has described in these pages as "social capital" - the networks and traditions that bind members of a community together (see "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," TAP, No. 13, Spring 1993). That is why these cities are such fertile ground for flashy but ultimately inconsequential tabloid news. News about the community, region, or state seems much less important to people who are less likely to have roots in its past, connections with each other, and a deep sense of place as part of their personal identity. If the nation's cities continue to look more like Miami, we can expect to see more WSVNs, and continued deterioration in public dialogue, for years to come.

***When All Politics Is Individual*:** "Maybe in a perfect world everybody would be watching MacNeil/Lehrer. But we can't afford to be boring"
One can imagine Ansen, Cheatwood, and their comrades at WSVN arguing that Miami really is different - and that people there really want to watch their programming. Indeed, they have. "Maybe in a perfect world everybody would be watching MacNeil/Lehrer," Ansen told Newsweek. "But we can't afford to be boring."

Still, recognizing a social ill is one thing; reinforcing it is quite another. If tabloid programming thrives because the sense of community has shriveled, responsible journalists ought to be thinking about what they can do to replenish it. If there is any hope for the informed public discussion that is the basis of democratic self-government, journalists need to seek out stories that tap into broadly felt interests. Remarkably, in Miami that week of July 18 - despite a presidential visit and ongoing discussions on Capitol Hill - neither WPLG nor WSVN, the two benchmark stations, aired substantive local stories on health insurance. Dramatic health care stories, of no small consequence to South Florida's populations of both the retired and the uninsured, would not have been hard to find.

It was Tip O'Neill - a politician from Massachusetts, not Florida - who famously remarked, "All politics is local." O'Neill was just acknowledging the power of parochial interests, which are bound to be strong in a state where people are intensely interested in local issues. The shift to tabloid television news may be a symptom of the waning of local public life and the onset of a more extreme parochialism - the secession into private life. The old variety of parochialism seems so much more attractive now that we see the alternative.