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Perceiving Hate Crimes: A Comparative Analysis of Major Newspaper Coverage of Hate Crimes in the United States and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This study examines a year of major coverage of hate crimes across select United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) newspapers. Historically, scholars have gained valuable insights into American perceptions pertaining to crime through a critical examination of American newspapers' reportage of crime. The central argument of this research is that the amount of press coverage of hate crimes is a determining factor in the formation of public perceptions, values, attitudes, and behaviors regarding hate crimes in the short run as well as in the long run. Previous studies reveal the existence of a unidirectional relationship between both news content and public opinion regarding social issues. The findings of this study suggest that the print media in the UK reports more stories of hate crimes than the print media in the US. The author concluded that the UK's more stringent laws regarding hate crimes might have contributed to the greater amount of print media coverage of hate crimes in the country.

Keywords: Hate Crimes, Newspaper, Moral Panic, United States, United Kingdom.

Introduction

Examining the extent of hate crime occurrences in communities has become an increasingly important issue, as societies become more diversified and begin to assume further multicultural characteristics. Crimes against individuals based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and religion have existed since the origin of humanity. It was not until the 1980s that the terms hate crime and bias crime became integrated into the vernacular subsequent to their appearance in print media (Colomb & Damphousse, 2004). The media's representation of these crimes has an immediate impact on society's perception of the extent, nature, and types of hate crimes. According to the agenda-setting theory, newspaper coverage has an immediate and sustained impact on the prevalent public values, attitudes, and behaviors (Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996; McCombs, 2005). Newspapers consistently reflect the culture and societal values of a community in

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their reportage, and consequently, the media's representation of social problems has a direct impact on society's perception of various types of social problems.

Historically, scholars have furnished important insights about social issues through the examination of newspaper reports. Studies have discovered that there is a unidirectional cause-effect relation between news content and public opinion (Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2016; Husselbee & Elliott, 2002). For example, Jacobs and Henry (1996) observed that media accounts that focus on the sensational aspects of hate crimes may prevent a comprehensive or accurate understanding of the true nature and magnitude of a hate crime. Consequently, this lack of understanding can cause the reader to wrongly perceive the existence of a hate crime epidemic, when in truth, the national figures from the Uniform Crime Report and other crime-gathering databases might not reflect this phenomenon. Further, Perse & Lambe (2016) discovered that media reports directly impact perceptions of how pervasive social problems are. This can lead communities to develop a fallacious fear of victimization, leading to moral panic. Moral panic is constituted of the community's response to the fear or perceived fear of crime (Schildkraut, Elsass, & Stafford, 2015).

Literature Review

Several studies have explored the role of media in the creation of moral panic based on the fear of crime. One study in particular, Colomb and Damphouse (2004), based on the pioneering work of Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1999), defined moral panic as an episode(s) that triggers a group to perceive concern, concord hostility, volatility and disproportionality. Their findings suggest that between 1998–1999 America was in a state of moral panic due to hate crimes. They found that a major contributing factor to this moral panic was the sensationalized and vast amount of media coverage of the Matthew Shepard murder case. Although national figures did not suggest an actual spike in the number of hate crimes across the United States, the media attention extended to the Shepard case created amoral panic that led citizens to believe that the number of hate crimes was on the rise.

Various studies have examined the role of media in the creation of moral panic (for example, Cohen, 2002; Carlson, 2016; Greer, 2013; Longazel, 2013). In Cohen's (2002) classic work on moral panic, he describes the role of the media in framing stories that shape the views of a community, through which they "vilify" a group based on that group's representation in the story. Agenda-setting is the term used to describe the shaping of stories through the media. It is through agenda-setting that media outlets determine the way in which they could frame stories concerning social problems and crimes (Garland, 2008). The agenda-setting theory suggests that media representatives play a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions of reality by highlighting and reporting news that they perceive as being newsworthy. This theoretical position proposes that through agenda-setting, the media can effect cognitive change among people and restructure their thinking. The agenda-setting theory posits that the media helps individuals define the events or reports that do or do not signify as notable public issues. A contemporary view of the agenda-setting theory suggests that in addition to dictating to the audience what they should think, the media also tells them how to think about issues they report (Wolfe, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2013).

The existing research refers to the phenomenon of the media's representation of a story and proposes ways in which it should be interpreted as framing and priming respectively. Framing refers to the positioning of a story in the newspaper, whereas priming refers to the manner in which it is contextualized by the media. Kimmel et al. (2001) suggest that the placement of the Matthew Shepard murder story on the front page of newspapers across the country and the reference to the crime as a hate crime present examples of both framing and priming. Husselbee and Elliott (2002) suggest that the agenda-setting theory serves as a valuable framework for understanding the way in which media reports create "shared cultural" definitions of hate crimes. This theory was utilized as a lens through which to analyze the findings and interpretations of this study. In this study, the author focused on the differences in print media reports of hate crimes, comparing media reports across the United Kingdom and the United States. Examining the differences in the frequency, types, and themes in reporting will allow an understanding of the perception of hate crimes in the two countries

The present study examines the extent and nature of media reports of hate crimes in the US and the UK. Specifically, this study explores the frequency and context of hate crime stories in major newspapers in both countries. The Human Rights First's definition of a hate crime will be utilized to guide this research. This definition is compatible with the scope of this research project because it includes a wide range of crimes and individual characteristics under hate crimes and does not contain legal jargon that may render the interpretation of the definition more complex. Human Rights First (n.d.) defines hate crimes as follows:

acts of violence motivated by bias based on race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, disability, or other similar attributes, or a combination thereof. Hate crimes include acts of defacing property, desecrating graves and places of worship, assault, murder, and intimidation—when verbal threats or threatening behavior place a person or a group of people in fear of harm (p. 1).

Methodology

A significant amount of research has explored various elements of newspaper coverage and their effects on society (Archold, Dahle, Fangman, Wentz, & Wood, 2013; Jamel, 2014). Additionally, content analysis has been employed as a methodological framework to examine these issues (Lombard, Snyder, Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Sutherland, McCormack, Easteal, Holland, & Pirkis, 2016; Welch, Fenwick & Roberts, 1997). This paper's analysis is a continuation of that area of research and follows the conventional methodological framework of content analysis (Berg & Lune 2012; Boréus, & Bergström, 2017). Subsequent sections in this paper describe the process through which specific newspapers were selected, coded and analyzed.

Materials

The units of analysis for this study were newspaper articles from January 2013–December 2013, extracted from LexisNexis. This research was conducted during a period in which the UK had introduced a new hate crime law. The researcher thought that exploring media articles in the year in which a change in the law was effected would offer a significant amount of news coverage of hate crimes. In comparison, the US had not had any recent changes in federal hate crime laws.

Procedure

LexisNexis is considered to be the world's largest computerized database of archived newspapers and other documents. Within the database, the term *hate crime* was searched, and only articles from national newspapers were selected, because they have a greater readership due to wider circulation. A total of 25 articles were selected from the following newspapers from the United States: *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *USA Today*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, and from the United Kingdom, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Post*, *The Sun*, and *The Daily Telegraph* were selected for the purpose of this study.

Two reviewers, initially independently, analyzed the content of each of the articles to identify the core emphasis of the articles. Two separate coding analyses were conducted. The first evaluated the context of the articles. Specifically, articles were evaluated for the type of coverage and tone with regard to the treatment of hate crimes' coverage. Each reviewer independently classified each article into one of three categories. The categories were as follows: 1) *opinions*, 2) *crimes*, and 3) *laws*. Definitions of the criteria for each classification are described in the following section.

The first category, *opinion*, includes articles that stated an author's opinion about a certain type of hate crime or related issues. Articles in the category included content that did not concentrate on a criminal act but the author's opinion regarding the implementation of a particular hate crime law and its perception in the community. The second category, *crimes*, was defined as articles that dealt with explicit hate crimes; specifically, those instances in which a hate crime against a person or an institution was reported in detail. The third category, *laws*, consists of articles that addressed hate crimes laws. In this category, articles that discussed laws, the application of laws, and the creation of new laws were included. The articles were also categorized in terms of tone as positive, negative, or neutral about their treatment of hate crime coverage.

The second categorization scheme was conducted to understand the specific types of hate crimes that were reported in print news during this period. As articles were reviewed, the following eight categories emerged: (1) *race*, (2) *religion*, (3) *national origin*, (4) *sexual orientation*, (5) *gender/gender identity*, (6) *disability*, (7) *other similar attributes*, and (8) *general*.

Findings

A total of 25 articles from 12 from US papers and 13 UK papers were identified. Table 1 summarizes the initial analysis and findings. The information in Table 1 reveals a couple of interesting patterns. First, the number of articles that were put in the *crimes* category represented the largest group. The fact that 64% of the articles dealt with a particular crime holds considerable significance. As described in the previous section, the *crimes* category was defined as articles that dealt with overt hate crimes. For example, one article from a US newspaper described a physical assault on a Muslim cabdriver, and reported that the assailant asked the cabdriver before the attack if he was a Muslim. The article described the way in which the victim's life had changed since the crime. A full evaluation of this article revealed a neutral tone adopted by the writer.

The second category, *opinion*, is defined as articles that state an author's opinion about a certain type of hate crime or related issue. For example, an article in a UK paper described the author's experience as a Goth and a new law that has been created to protect Goths' victimization; further, it reported the way in which this event allowed him to reflect on his experience as a member of that subculture and the possibility of rejoining the

community. The two articles focused on the way in which a newly enacted law would protect people whose victimization has historically been overlooked in the UK.

The third category, *laws*, comprises articles that addressed laws concerning hate crimes. In this category, articles that addressed laws, the application of laws, and the creation of new laws were included. For example, one article from a UK newspaper described a new hate crime law that protects Goths, punks, and heavy metal fans who are targeted because of their subcultural identity. This article addressed a new law; it was written factually, thereby, was rendered a neutral tone.

Table 1. Article analysis by category and context (N=25)

	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Opinions (2)	US: 0 UK: 0	US: 0 UK: 0	US: 0 UK:2
Crimes (16)	US: 0 UK: 0	US: 0 UK: 0	US: 8 UK: 8
Laws (7)	US: 0 UK: 2	US: 1 UK: 0	US: 2 UK: 2

Table 2 provides the analysis of specific hate crime groups that received newspaper coverage. The items listed in the left-hand column are those included in the definition by Human Rights First, used in this study to operationalize a hate crime. Two other issues sub-culture and cultural groups, were explicitly outlined in the Human Rights First definition; however, some articles highlighted the creation of hate crimes around particular subculture groups. As a result, these articles were placed in the category of other similar attributes. Articles were coded as general when the content did not concentrate on any particular hate crime.

Table 2. Article analysis by specific crimes and issues by country (N=25) Specific Crime

	US	UK
Race	5	-
Religion	4	4
National Origin	-	-
Sexual Orientation	1	1
Gender/Gender Identity	1	-
Disability	-	-
Other Similar Attributes*	-	8
General**	1	-

*Other Similar Attributes includes cultural groups and sub-culture groups who are defined in articles as victims of hate crimes.

** General includes articles that did not discuss a particular hate crime.

As observed in the article analysis by crimes and by country (Table 2), the analyzed articles primarily focused on hate crimes based on race (N=5), religion (N=8), and other similar attributes (N=8). Few articles dealt with sexual orientation (N=2), gender/gender identity (N=1), and general description of hate crimes (N=1). No articles specifically addressed hate crimes based on ethnicity, national origin, or disabilities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reported in the previous section furnish a picture of information regarding the ways in which national newspapers in the US and UK reported hate crimes over a one-year period. This exploratory study reveals a small number of articles (25) that appeared and covered various issues related to hate crime. Analysis revealed that 80% of the articles presented a neutral tone, while 12% presented a negative tone. A total of 64% articles focused on a particular hate crime that had taken place. Given that the majority of articles reported crimes, it was not surprising that they assumed a neutral tone. In fact, the majority of the articles presented factual information about the crime and the victim with little, if any, suggestive tone.

In exploring the differences between the types of offenses covered in the UK as compared to the US, a clear pattern emerged. The majority of hate crimes that occurred in the US were crimes against individuals based on race and religion, while articles from the UK focused on religion and other similar attributes. Other similar attributes were defined as a cultural group or sub-culture who have been provided a protected status. In April 2013, the UK created laws that were enacted to protect these groups from violence and abuse. During the month of April, six newspaper articles that focused on different hates crimes against Goths were reported. In light of the fact that the law was recently enacted and there are very few laws in the books that protect a person based on their affiliation with an alternative sub-culture, the heightened print media coverage was not surprising.

The findings of this study suggest that there is a clear difference in newspaper reportage of hate crimes in the UK and the US. Some of the differences can be attributed to the two countries' conceptions of hate crimes and the types of statutes that exist in each. In the US, most crimes motivated by hate are prosecuted at the state level, and states are left to their own devices to create and enforce hate crime statutes. Some states do not have hate crimes laws within their statutes, which results in those states not prosecuting crimes based on the motive of hate. Other states have penalty enhancements that consider a hate crime an aggravated act that allows for extended sentences when the motive of the offense is hate. The federal government is primarily guided by the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which makes it illegal to physically harm someone based on their race, religion, national origin, gender or sexual orientation, among other characteristics.

Unlike the US, the UK has one set of laws that govern the country's hate crime violations. As a whole, the UK's hate crime laws are much wider and more inclusive than those in the US. As discussed in this study, the UK recently enacted laws that protect individuals who belong to alternative cultural groups. Specifically, the law states: "Expressions of hatred toward someone on account of that person's color, race, disability, nationality (including citizenship), ethnic or national origin, religion, or sexual orientation is forbidden" (Meer, 2008, p. 64). They also have laws that govern hate speech.

Other differences may be due to the diversity in the constitution of the two countries. For example, the US had a significant number of articles related to race. Given turbulent history of the US regarding race relations, this is not surprising, whereas a considerable number of articles from UK papers focused on hate crimes based on religious intolerance. Given the UK's geographical location and membership in the European Union, the influx of diverse individuals is expected. The lack of understanding and religious intolerance often leads to fear of people who are different, which can lead to hate crimes.

Regarding the theoretical implications, this study extends the existing research that has established the value of agenda-setting theory to examine the role of print media in setting cultural agendas (i.e., moral panic) (Kimmel et al., 2001). There has been limited research regarding agenda-setting theory and its application in the understanding of the way in which the media frames and primes crime news. Agenda-setting theory can offer significant insights into the media's presentation of news that focuses on acts of crime to the masses, and how the people are swayed to perceive crime based on these representations. This exploratory study utilized both content and thematic analysis to explore media reports of hate crimes. Future research should continue to rely on agenda-setting theory as the theoretical framework for exploring this line of research, because it offers substantial insight into the specific ways that priming and framing are utilized as mechanisms for analysis of ways in which hate crimes are represented in the media.

In both the UK and the US, there have been significant cultural and political changes that have instigated an increase in the number of hate crimes (Corbett, 2016; Rosa & Bonilla, 2017). This makes questions about ways in which the media frames the stories about hate crimes particularly relevant to current events.

One of the primary limitations of the research reported here is the number of articles analyzed and the timeframe from which the news stories were gathered. Although analyzing news articles that covered the period of one year provided some understanding of the matter, a more comprehensive period is required to expand on the implications of this study. It should be noted that this is part of a larger longitudinal study that examines media reports of hate crimes over a ten year period. Further, a more widely representative set of newspapers will be included. A more diverse range of newspapers will allow for the exploration of ways in which newspapers with varying audiences cover the same story.

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