What makes crime ‘news’?

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How do news readers sustain an appetite for journalistic reports of crime? From day to day, many news stories on crime differ only in details about time, place and the identities of victim and defendant. How do daily readers come to take interest in today’s report of murder or robbery, given that the story they read yesterday was substantially similar? For reliable information on crime, newspaper readers could turn to sociological studies. For entertainment they could, and indeed many do, read detective novels. What are the distinctive aspects of form or content that make daily news reports of crime continuously interesting to the modern public?

The sociological study of news is burgeoning, but one of its fundamental questions, the explanation of ‘the appetite for news’ (Carey, 1982; cf. the conceptualization of the problem in ‘gratifications research’ Katz, Blommer and Gurevitch, 1973), remains very open. The need is to account for the significance to readers of the structure as well as the substance of news. In the case of crime news, how can we explain not only the relative importance of this category of news, but also: the emphasis on reporting crime as it enters the criminal justice process; the differentiation of types of crime stories; the daily recurrence of the reading appetite; the way in which crime news is shaped to make it appear ‘recent’; the dispersal of crime stories throughout the paper?

A coherent theoretical answer can be developed by addressing a number of themes previously marginal to the sociological studies both of news and of social problems. First I will offer an analysis of the content of daily news stories on crime. Sociologists have become
increasingly sophisticated in examining the social organization of the news production process for biases which affect whether and how particular stories are reported (e.g. Fishman, 1980). But despite the contingencies affecting whether a particular item will be published, in fact all crime news stories that are published fit one or more of four classic forms of moral problematic. These categories should be understood as necessary but not sufficient conditions for publication. The argument is that candidate crime stories for publication in daily newspapers must be shaped along one or more of these lines before they will be treated as newsworthy.

The substantive analysis was developed and tested until it exhausted sets of news stories drawn from New York and Los Angeles daily newspapers running over seven years. The first section below describes the samples and, with illustrations of the most novel, borderline cases, in effect reproduces the coding book used to analyse the new articles.

In the second section, I argue that, whatever the influences on news organizations that affect their selection and rejection of particular stories, daily news readers have an independently generated fascination with the stories that are published. This fascination is not primarily with learning about crime itself: daily news readers do not sustain an interest in crime stories either to do folk sociological theorizing about causes, or to become better prepared to cope with the realities of crime in society.

In the final section, I attempt to comprehend the patterns revealed by the current data sets and the research literature with a theory of the quotididian reconstruction of news readers' appetites for stories of crime. My thesis is that crime is made 'news' by a modern public searching for resources to work out sensibilities routinely made problematic in everyday modern urban life.

Moral boundaries in crime news

I first became curious about the recurrent content of crime news while studying the federal criminal prosecution office for the Eastern District of New York (hereafter, EDNY). The leadership of the office was highly sensitive to publicity and had institutionalized a clerical routine for clipping local stories that made mention of the office. Working with the eight volumes of clipped stories covering the office from mid-1974 through 1978, I developed definitions of several types of crime news items and employed six undergraduate students to code the stories from the New York Times and from the Newday. The resulting data set included approximately 550 stories on about 200 separate crimes. The definitions in the coding book were continuously revised to resolve ambiguities revealed in review sessions and to assure that each story would fit at least one category.

This data set had obvious weaknesses but it also had a subtle strength. The jurisdiction of a federal prosecutor's office only covers the major 'street' crimes (robbery, rape, assault, murder) in a relatively minor and incidental manner as compared to state-level prosecution offices. As a result, those federal crimes which make the news tend to show idiosyncratic wrinkles or exceptions to the typical crime news story. For the purpose of discovering the fundamental dimensions of newsworthiness, apparently exceptional or idiosyncratic cases have special value. In this study the research objective was to articulate, via the logic of analytic induction, the essential or universal basis of crime newsworthiness; or the necessary contents which a story on crime must be given before it will appear as new. The relative frequency with which stories of different types appeared was not the central concern.

The New York data had the further limitation of a possible bias in the selection criteria of the prosecution office. (We did check the New York Times index against two of the eight volumes of clippings collected by the prosecution office and found a handful of additional cases but none of a qualitatively novel type.) In order to increase the reach of the analysis, I employed two other students to code all crimes, state and federal, covered on the front page and on the first page of the Metro section of the Los Angeles Times published in 1981, 1982 and 1983. For each year, each Saturday, Sunday and Monday edition was examined; for the other weekdays, a different day's edition was examined for each week, on a rotating basis. This coding operation eventually selected 1,384 stories. Again the coding categories were revised continuously in the style of analytic induction, in order to define categories capable of identifying the newsworthiness feature or features of all cases. 

An initial lead into 'the factors associated with newsworthiness' was provided by Bob Rodhier (1973: 34) in his analysis of crime coverage by British dailies. He found that 'whimsical circumstances' — 'flower people' stealing flowers from a cemetery, the theft of a detective's car, a bank tricked by a 10-year-old — loomed large: 'This category, perhaps surprisingly, seemed to be probably the
most important in relation to crime reporting in general. Another important category was the involvement of an important person, as defendant, victim, or bystander. Roshier's study suggests the hypothesis that those who commit crimes do not become newsworthy because of what they tell about crime, but because crimes may be especially telling about other things of interest to readers.

Despite the rich variety of crimes in the news, we eventually found that a small number of recurrent themes could encompass all the data. In order to be made newsworthy, crimes must be depicted in one or more of four ways. Each appears to call into question a moral boundary recurrently defined by adults in everyday modern life.

(1) Personal competence and sensibility

In this category we placed the most numerous single type of crime story: accounts of ingenious, vicious, and audacious crimes — of deceptions that trick the close scrutiny of diligent customs inspectors, of the most bloody murders, of big heists in broad daylight. Such stories instruct readers on the nature and limits of personal competence and sensibility. Because of the general implications of the news they generate, artful dodgers and cool killers have often provoked a public interest bordering on affection. In a tradition extending back at least to Dostoevsky's time, crimes and criminals have been praised for what they say about the ingenuity and audacity that readers can reasonably expect not so much from criminals but from their civil fellows and of themselves.

One sub-category contained stories dramatizing exceptions to presumed demographic patterns of personal competence and moral sensibility. Reports of armed robberies by children (in 1982 there was a highly publicized case in Manhattan) or by the flamboyantly homosexual (the facts on which the film A Dog Day's afternoon was based), by women, and by the elderly challenge our stereotypes not simply about crime but about the capabilities associated with those age and sex statuses. A story about a 10-year-old bank robber shows a surprising intentionality or seriousness of purpose and carries implications that run not only to juveniles charged with crime, but to aggressive acts performed by one's children against each other as well as to demands by children for adult privileges. If one's 10-year-old is seen as a potential bank robber, it might appear silly to insist that he go to bed at nine o'clock or eat his peas.

Containing Kennedy Airport, the EDNY federal criminal jurisdiction regularly produces stories illustrating the competence of daring ingenuity. Contraband dealers, especially those who must take their goods across inspection points, contribute an endless series of examples proving the possibilities of ingenuity. Long Island and New York City news readers may read one day about gentry or high technology machine parts smuggled in toothpaste tubes, the next day about amazingly large quantities of heroin unsuccessfully stashed within vaginas and anuses.

Crime news stories illustrating the dimensions of human competence and moral sensibility include not only those that portray criminals as exceptionally insensitive or exceptionally daring, but also those that indicate the limits of criminal insensitivity. Illustrative of the latter was a NY Daily News story (15 June 1977) about a 21-year-old ex-convict who jumped out of a tenth-floor Brooklyn Criminal Court building moments after he was convicted of armed robbery. By noting that the fellow 'had been in trouble with the law since he was 15', the story made the point that even apparently hardened criminals may not be totally insensitive to social pain. Although this particular tenet of journalistic social philosophy may be unusual, it is routine for crime news to imply some sort of teaching about the contemporary state of moral character. Thus despite its reputation as sensational, the Daily News does not in fact routinely report either suicides or armed robberies. To be made newsworthy, a provocative theme about personal moral competence will typically be built into the story.

(2) Collective integrity

A second type of news story on crime addresses the moral integrity of the community. Large baggage thefts at Kennedy Airport and thefts at the Gruman Company, 'Long Island's single largest private employer', will be covered by Newday and the New York Times, while equally large 'takes' pulled off at establishments less central to the collective identity of the region will be ignored by the local press. Virtually all thefts deemed newsworthy are depicted as events endangering one or another foundation of collective identity. Thus the illegal taking of small clams by commercial fishermen on Long Island became newsworthy because the 'pirates' were depicted as so
cruel as to take 'baby' clams, but also because their activity was said to threaten 'the hard clam resource of the Great South Bay'. Hijackings of shipments will be more likely to make the news if the shipments by chance are headed for institutions deemed integral to the moral character of the community, for example a prominent church or any public school district. Prosecutions of students for smoking pot are not usually worth news attention, but they are if the students attend Long Island's Merchant Marine Academy. Such stories have an unspoken melodramatic quality: they implicitly tap folk ideas about the vulnerability of collective identity, suggesting that the crime threatens to rip society in some essential part or symbolizes the presence in the community of forces so malevolent as to threaten the metaphorical social fabric.

On the federal level, counterfeiting is a venerable candidate for news of crime cast as a danger to community institutions. Counterfeiting has the symbolic distinction of representing a challenge to the integrity of the entire economy. Subtitle it cries the fear: 'What if we can't trust our money? How could commerce proceed?'

Threats to collective integrity are also represented by crimes occurring in contemporary centres of goodness, places symbolizing the American conception of the good life: sneak thefts from collection plates in churches, robberies at Disneyland, murders at Bob's Big Boy or McDonald's. These stories raise the spectre that 'the centre does not hold', that no place is safely sacred. A related set of stories places denotes places and personnel trusted to be healthy for the soul and the body, and describes events which undermine the faith that draws the public to them. Examples include reports of torture or sexual abuse occurring at child care centres and while under anaesthesia in dentists' offices.

The personal identity of the victim may also make the crime a symbolic challenge to collective identity. Thus the 1982 street murder of ex-Senator Ribicoff's niece in Venice (Los Angeles) generated enormous publicity. Crimes become newsworthy when they victimize the elite, as was the case in a Newsday story about the theft of several twenty-to-thirty-foot cabin cruisers, but also when they merely come within the charismatic penumbra of elites. In Los Angeles, one may read of burglaries that occurred just in the neighbourhood, not in the house, of famous movie stars; in Washington one may read of drug dealing in the shadows of the Capitol; throughout the country one may read of petty criminality by distant relatives of the president. Crime news of this sort tracks the people and places that have come to be regarded as central to collective identity. Indeed, crime news provides the sociologist with a handy, detailed map to trace the institutional geography of the sacred in modern society.

Implicitly recognizing the importance to the public of this form of crime, a federal statute directly define attacks on certain symbols of national character as criminal. New York newspapers have covered criminal provocations of pathetic individuals who, in so obvious and amateurish a manner as not to be really threatening, have sent threatening notes to the president; and the case of a seemingly nice young man who somehow managed to find an American Eagle to shoot on Long Island.

Also in the category of crimes portrayed as threats to the character of the community are the large number of stories on organized crime. Organized crime, depicted as emanating from an 'underworld', has become a powerful and versatile imagery for evil in the United States. Secretly organized, dark ('swarthy') in complexion, threatening always to taint or contaminate good people, organized crime is a contemporary metaphor structured along ancient images of infectious disease and satanic danger. Once labelled a 'member' of organized crime, an individual's misfortunes (e.g., an auto accident) may generate a news story containing no reference at all to a crime or to a victim.

Similarly, stories lacking allegations about offenders may be newsworthy if they document the existence of other forms of vast, uncontrolled, anti-social forces. Thus we read periodically of discoveries of large caches of arms, seizures of huge stores of narcotics, and realizations that national security information has been accessed by some otherwise innocent savant skilled in manipulating computers.

(3) Moral political conflicts

The third category of crime news that conveys general messages about moral character is exemplified by reports of weapons offences by a local organization sympathetic to the PLO or the IRA; bank robberies by members of the Black Liberation Army; and extortionate demands by Puerto Rican independence groups. The audiences for such stories are constituted as interested parties before

The media's role in crime news has been a subject of much debate. On one hand, the media is a powerful tool in shaping public opinion and can play a crucial role in crime prevention and justice. On the other hand, the media's portrayal of crime can also have negative consequences, such as stigmatization and discrimination.

There have been concerns about the media's role in crime news, particularly in the United States. The media's focus on crime can create a sense of fear and insecurity, especially in communities that are disproportionately affected by crime. At the same time, the media's coverage of crime can also raise awareness of important issues, such as the need for social and economic policies that address the root causes of crime.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need for critical media literacy skills. This involves developing an awareness of how the media constructs and presents crime news, and understanding the potential impact of this portrayal on society.

Overall, the media's role in crime news is complex, and it is important to approach this issue with a critical and nuanced perspective.
percent of the official crime rate. Sherizen (1978: 215) computed the percentages of crimes known to the police (FBI Schedule 1 types) that were reported in four Chicago newspapers in 1975: 70 percent of homicide cases were reported, five percent of the rapes, one percent of larceny/thefts. He concluded: 'the more prevalent the crime, the less... reported'. This systematic 'over-representation' of violent crime in the news is also characteristic of black community newspapers (Ammons et al., 1982). And in a study of British newspapers, Roshier (1973) similarly found that crimes against the person were consistently over-represented in contrast to official criminal statistics. (See also Jones, 1976, on St. Louis; and the review in Carofalo, 1981: 323)

News reporting of white-collar and common crimes has also been found to reverse the relationship found in official statistics. In our set of federal crime news stories published in New York between 1974 and 1979, we found that white-collar crimes and 21 percent, common crimes. In a separate study, we counted the types of cases which, according to federal court records, were actually prosecuted during these years in the local jurisdictions. Court records and the news reports about 22 percent of the criminal cases charged white-collar crimes. 70 percent, common crimes. This over-representation of white-collar crime has been documented in studies of newspaper coverage of all crimes, state and federal. Roshier (1973: 34), on British papers, and Graber (1980: 39, 40) on Chicago papers, also found an over-representation of higher social class offenders: the Chicago Tribune identified about 70 percent of the criminals as white and about 75 percent as from middle or upper socioeconomic statuses. 5

For our purposes, these patterns of over-representation of violent and white-collar crimes might suggest that news organizations have gravely distorted readers' understandings of crime. If so, the moral tides are isolated from the content analysis of crime news — in which violent and white-collar crimes loom large should not be taken as leads to special sources of reader interest. That is what they read, one might say, because that is what they have been lead to believe crime is. Readers are interested in these moral tides because they believe that, through them, they are learning about crime in society.

It has often been suggested that readers' perceptions of crime in society more closely reflect crime as described in the news than crime as described in official statistics. But on closer inspection, the supposed power of the news to shape readers' perceptions of crime in society has not been clearly established by research. Perhaps the most famous study in this area, E. James Davis's 30-year-old study of crime news in Colorado newspapers (1952), presented novel evidence of a lack of 'consistent relationship' between crime news and the FBI's compilation of local police reports. Davis found that a community's perception of a crime wave was generated by an increase in news coverage that was not justified by changes in official crime rates. But Davis cautioned that he found no clear evidence that public perceptions of crime generally follow the news more closely than the Uniform Crime Rates (UCR).

Outside the context of a 'crime wave', the news does not appear to dominate public perceptions of crime. There is evidence that the public is aware of the different images of crime portrayed by police statistics and journalistic descriptions of crime, and thus reads the two for different purposes. Stinchcombe et al. (1980) compared the coverage of crime in magazines published between 1972 and 1975, with periodic surveys asking the public whether crime was a major problem. There was almost random change in the level of magazine crime coverage, but the public's opinion about crime as a major problem changed in a clear pattern, jumping in 1969 and remaining high to 1974. Between 1970 and 1974, violent crime increased dramatically on official statistics, as did the public's fear of crime, while the attention given to crime in the periodical literature decreased. The authors conclude (at pp. 36-7): The weight of the evidence is that people pay more attention to the true crime rate than to the level of media coverage. As far as one can tell from recent developments in fear of crime, the radical increase in the crime rate observed by the police (and reported in FBI Uniform Crime Reports) is also observed by the people, and it frightens them. 6

These data are complemented by those found by Herbert Jacob (1980). Jacob did not report on public attitudes but, unlike Stinchcombe et al., he did study newspaper crime reports. For the period 1948 to 1978, he found little increase in front-page crime news, even while, for the nine cities studied, UCR statistics increased by 300 percent. (Front-page crime news increased from two to four percent.) Thus the increase in the fear of crime reported by Stinchcombe et al. again appears to be related much more closely to official police statistics than to newspaper coverage. Synchronic as well as historical evidence shows a public
understanding of crime in society that more closely tracks official than media descriptions of crime. Graber (1980: 49) compared characteristics of offenders and victims in the news and in interviews' perceptions: 'The press does not depict criminals and victims largely as non-whites, poor, and lower class, but the panelists do.' In her study, the Chicago Tribune identified about 70 percent of the criminals as white, about two-thirds of the victims as female, and about 75 percent of the criminals as of middle or upper socioeconomic status. The panelists interviewed by Graber, on the other hand, estimated the race, sex, and socioeconomic status of criminals and victims almost invariably to the picture given in the Tribune.

A recent study conducted in New Orleans (Shelby and Ashkins, 1981) compared the rank order of FBI index crimes in police statistics and in a telephone sample of community residents. The public ranked homicide the fourth most common type of crime; police statistics showed it to be in seventh place. The public ranked burglary as the second most common type of crime, the same ranking found in police statistics. Robbery was in first place according to the public but in third place according to police statistics. As in other cities, a resident of New Orleans who received information on crime solely from the local news media would rank murder and robbery at the top of the list and burglary at the bottom. Roshier (1973: 37) used a similar methodology with British readers and concluded: 'Public perceptions do not seem to be influenced by the biases in their newspapers but, in fact, are surprisingly close to the official picture.'

The public does not appear to read crime news in a naive search for the empirical truth about crime. Other concerns appear to sustain the readers' interests. This is suggested by comparing crime as represented in the news and in entertainment media. The most common serious (FBI Part One, 'index') crimes according to police statistics, larcenies and burglaries, are rarely the focus of either news stories, TV shows (Dominick, 1973: 245) or the silver screen; murders and rapes, among the least frequent crimes in FBI statistics, are among the most frequent crime subjects on both news and entertainment shows. (See Garofalo, 1981: 326, on the 'similarities in the characteristics of crime, offenders, and victims conveyed by the news media and by television drama.') And there is a marked parallel between crime in the news and in fiction: 'the author of one of the first British stories of crime detection, "Clement Lorrimer; or the Book with Iron Claps" (1848), turns out to be a newspaper crime reporter... Throughout their history the genres of crime fiction writing and crime news reporting have gone hand in hand and even today are occasionally hard to distinguish from each other' (Chibnall, 1980: 209–10). It is less plausible to assume that the public takes cinematic, novelistic, and press depictions of crime as evidence about crime than to suggest that, in approaching both news and entertainment media, the public is not essentially trying to learn about crime.

Is there not a disparaging assumption of public naivety underneath the view that people generally read crime news to understand crime? If crime experts can read crime news on a daily basis while remaining sceptical of the material as criminological data, perhaps the lay reader is no more foolish. Within the culture created by law enforcement personnel, the crimes that make everyday occupational 'news', or are subjects of informal conversation, appear substantially similar to those that make it into the newspaper. According to Sudnow's (1965) study of interactions between local public defenders and prosecutors, the cases that generate the most informal commentary among these criminal justice professionals are not those which most accurately represent the statistically typical crimes they handle. Personal and situational idiosyncrasies, not 'normal' crimes, distinctively generate their folk news. In the federal prosecutors' office in which I did observational research, several of the cases receiving the most informal commentary were also those that became big news stories and major Hollywood movies (A Dog Day Afternoon, The French Connection, Prince of the City). The same 'common sense' appears to govern law enforcement officers when they gossip about their cases and both lay and expert readers of news reports of crime. Why should reporters and editors not follow the same 'common sense' in selecting crime news? As Park long ago noted (1940: xiii-xiv), reporters are disciplined to be atheoretical in determining what is newsworthy and to put themselves in the perspective of the average reader responding emotionally to events.

The social generation of the appetite for crime news

We have already in effect rejected one hypothetical explanation of reader interest, the utilitarian theory that crime news, by depicting
unexpected events, enables readers to reduce their practical problems with crime through reshaping knowledge about crime toward greater empirical accuracy. Readers appear to be so well aware of the atypicality of crime as covered by the news that their reading seems to be a search for ‘the unexpected’. But ‘the unexpected’ provides only the beginnings of an adequate theory. We must still specify in just what sense newsworthy crime is ‘unexpected’.

Ambiguities of ‘the unexpected’ in crime news

Consider the theoretical implications of the pattern of ‘recency’ in newsworthy crimes. As almost all sociologists of the news have noted, there is an urgency with which a story must be published lest it lose its character as ‘news’. (Tuchman, 1978: 51, on ‘hard’ versus ‘soft’ news; Hughes, 1940: 67, on ‘big’ versus ‘little’ news; and Rosco, 1975: 10-12, on the ‘recency’, ‘ immediacy’ and ‘currency’ of the news.) But if in the reporting of crime it is taken for granted that something newsworthy should have happened in the immediate past, the necessary something is in fact only rarely the crime itself. Of the 200 crimes reported in the previously described sample of New York area newspapers, about 100 were common crimes and seventy white-collar crimes. Only 6 percent of the initial reports of white-collar crimes clearly described the crimes as occurring within six months of the date of reporting. In part because the criminality indicated was typically a pattern of fraud or corruption that did not appear to begin or end on any particular date. But even for common crimes, such as robberies, thefts from post offices or at airports, and credit-card sales, only 30 percent were described as occurring within six months of the first article on the given offence.

A similar indication appeared in our examination of about 1,400 crime articles appearing in the Los Angeles Times in 1981, 1982 and 1983. Incidents and cases were coded separately: crimes were coded as cases if they had been processed to the point of arrest or beyond (indictment, trial, sentence, post-prison release, etc.). Of these news articles on crime, only 45 percent reported criminal incidents, or crimes that had not been officially processed to the point of arrest. If the newsworthiness of crime could be explained by expectations violated by crimes themselves — the victim’s experience of the unexpected in the form of surprise, or the shock waves set off in public consciousness when the crime was committed, we should find an overwhelming predominance of recent criminal incidents in crime news.

While the news emphasizes yesterday’s events, the crimes covered in daily newspapers did not necessarily happen yesterday nor even in the recent past. Some feature of the story signals a currency that makes the crime newsworthy, but the current element is less often and less clearly the incidence of the crime than a feature of the criminal case, a subsequent event affecting the victim, or a vicissitude of the alleged criminal’s life. If a violation of ‘the unexpected’ somehow must qualify crime to be newsworthy, the necessary element of surprise is a matter neither of the victim’s experience nor of the reader’s empathic shock that something so awful might also happen to him.

More directly, we should question whether surprise is a common, much less essential, feature in the experience of reading crime news. Here I would ask the reader to review his or her own experience for evidence that the most avid readers of stories on particular crimes may be those who are least surprised. During Watergate, it was not necessarily Republican readers who were the most religious followers; many left-wing Americans rejoiced in the daily unfolding of what they regarded as more proof for what they had long believed.

Especially newsworthy crimes do not appear to be especially unexpected, either to victims or to readers. According to highly publicized opinion polls, Americans believe that a substantial proportion of unindicted congressmen are corrupt. Yet a new official charge of corruption against a congressman will always generate news coverage. Banks are robbed more than many other types of commercial establishment, yet they remain distinctively newsworthy sites of crime.

In short, if crime news inevitably carries a sense of the unexpected, just what that sense is, is not obvious. Perhaps, following Durkheim, we should turn the explanation around and consider whether crime is newsworthy for its symbolic value in articulating the normatively expected.

The historical limitations of the Durkheimian view

Durkheim (1958: 67; 1964: 108) argued that in violating social
order, deviants may actually promote collective consensus — normative cohesion, the moral integration of society, a widespread sense of order in society — by provoking occasions for mass reactions against deviance. Crime news may be the best contemporary example of what Durkheim had in mind. The reading of crime news is a collective, ritual experience. Read daily by a large portion of the population, crime news generates emotional experiences in individual readers, experiences which each reader can acquire as shared by many others. Although each may read in isolation, phenomenologically the experience may be a collective, emotional "effervescence" of moral indignation. But the application of the Durkheimian perspective to crime news requires a tortured reasoning.

There is a fundamental, historical difference between the social meanings of contemporary crime news and those of the public ceremonies of labelling deviants that Durkheim had in mind and that Kari Erikson (1966) documented in his celebrated book on seventeenth-century Puritans. Contemporary news stories on crime focus on stages in the criminal justice process before punishment. In our data set of crime news stories published in New York area newspapers between 1974 and 1979, the perspective of official authority, as represented by a description of an action or comment by a law enforcement agent, was present in less than half of the articles. About 85 percent of the articles appeared before disposition, when the outcome of official investigation and allegation was still unclear. Less than 12 percent of the cases first appeared in the news at or after the stage of sentencing. On the surface, the contemporary reading of crime news disconcerts rather than reassures.

The previously noted study of the Los Angeles Times provides additional support. About 45 percent of the articles for 1981, 1982 and 1983 (n = 1,384) were on incidents or criminal events distinguished from crime cases or crimes reported as officially processed to the point of arrest or beyond. There are thus a variety of indicators that crime news raises perhaps as many questions about collective integrity as it resolves; its structure seems as likely to increase doubts about social order, by publicizing crimes that are still open criminal cases, as to strengthen a sense of collective order by celebrating a triumph of collective will over deviants and disorder.

In a long historical perspective, the modern newspaper appears as a distinctive social structure for collectively observing deviance, a structure dramatically different from that existing before the nineteenth century. Shortly before a mass Sunday newspaper was created in England in the 1830s, crime news was circulated on broadsheets. One of the last and most successful broadsheets was widely disseminated in the 1820s; the 'Last Dying Speech and Confession' of the murderer of Maria Marten sold more than 1,100,000 copies (Williams, 1978: 43). Before the nineteenth century, in western and in primitive societies, among Erikson's Puritans and among the primitives Durkheim examined in his book on religion (1965), deviance was made a mass public symbol most emphatically, through exemplary forms of punishment and subsequent gossip, after doubt about criminal responsibility was resolved. Broadsheets were written to detail the behaviour of the condemned on the scaffold: 'The best sellers were the literature of the gallows. These were the last dying confessions of murderers and an account of their execution' (Hughes, 1940: 140). The wayward Puritan was put on trial, then in stocks on public display and made the subject of sermonizing, primarily after punishment was decided upon and delivered by officials symbolizing the collective identity of the society. Witchcraft trials in the American colonies and throughout medieval Europe were means of dramatizing the execution of collective will, not processes in which a problematic outcome was subject to adversarial skill (see Currie, 1968).

In western societies, mass media for disseminating news about crime at first threatened confidence in collective order, then with the rise of print media came to serve the official interest in order, and then with the advent of the daily newspaper once again took on an unsettling role. Chibnall (1980: 180) notes that in Great Britain in the middle ages, before the advent of printed media for conveying crime news, ballads often diserved a social control function by dramatizing the heroic defiance of outlaw. Then, in the late seventeenth century, when pamphlets and broadsheets emerged to give a written form to crime news, they emphasized 'dying speeches' in which official authority, often through the quoted (or invented) words of the condemned, displayed the terrible costs of crime and praised the path of virtue. But the twentieth-century newspaper offers a much less moralistic format for news about crime. In many respects it more clearly celebrates than excoriates criminals. As Foucault (1979) has analysed historical change in the social meaning of deviance, in pre-Enlightenment society adjudication was
private (as symbolized by 'star chamber' proceedings) and punishment was public (as exemplified by elaborate torture and execution ceremonies); in post-Enlightenment society, trials became the public drama of criminal justice, while punishment retreated to the privacy of prisons, emerging into publicity only rarely and then in shame. Before the nineteenth century, public viewing of deviance may have had a morally integrative effect on the community; but to make the same analysis of today's crime news is to ignore the distinctive contemporary social organization. Metropolitan daily news stories on victimization and arrest are routine and are only in the exceptional case followed up by stories on conviction and punishment.

A social class sub-pattern is notable in this context. The higher the educational and economic level of a newspaper's readers, the more it appears to employ a form that provokes rather than resolves its readers' moral anxieties. Comparing New York's *Times* and *Daily News*, studies have found the latter to be more sensational in that it contains a higher proportion of crime news (Deutschmann, 1959). But comparing the crime stories published in the two papers, there is little difference in reported fact. Both papers draw on essentially the same police sources and records. The difference lies in the language used to describe the crime.

The *Daily News* moralizes while the *Times* uses what are conventionally regarded as emotionally neutral, technical terms, in particular the formally non-prejudicial, officially constrained language of courts and lawyers (Meyer, 1975). Thus the *Daily News* reports the illegal harvesting of undersized clams as clams that were 'copped', while the *Times* refers to a 'theft'. The *Times*, under a headline of moderate size, describes an arrangement by which a Sylvania official is paid money to public transit officials in order to ensure acceptance of bulbs not meeting specifications, as a bribery; while the *Daily News* runs a large front-page title: 'Subway Bulb Gyp'.

The difference, which becomes even more pronounced if one compares contemporary daily US newspapers with those published sixty years ago, is that newspapers with readers of a higher social class level leave moral execution to readers, at least as a matter of form; while newspapers with relatively lower-class readers lead the chorus of invective. Thus it appears that the more modern the newspaper, or the more formally educated the readership, the more that crime news is styled to provoke rather than resolve doubt.²

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**Daily Crime News Reading as a Ritual Moral Exercise**

Although the frequency of news stories on homicides, violent robberies and rapes might seem evidence of a 'lowbrow' insensitivity in the modern public, an opposite interpretation is more revealing and more consistent with the overall patterns in crime news. The interest is less morbid than inspirational. If portrayals of violent crime show in the extreme the lack of sensibility with which members of our society may treat each other, readers' appetites for such stories suggest that they are not so coarse as to take for granted destructive personal insensitivity. The fact that assaults on property are far less newsworthy than assaults on the person indicates that readers' fundamental concerns are more humanitarian than material.

Or rather, by picking up the paper to read about yet another brutal crime, readers can attempt to sustain their conviction that their own moral sensibility has not yet been brutalized into a jaded indifference. The predominance of stories on violent crime in contemporary newspapers can be understood as serving readers' interests in re-creating daily their moral sensibilities through shock and impulses of outrage.

Instead of the empirically ambiguous idea that crime becomes interesting to the extent that it is 'unexpected', and in place of a simple invocation of Durkheim's ideas, I would argue that crime news is taken as interesting in a process through which adults in contemporary society work out individual perspectives on moral questions of a quite general yet eminently personal relevance.

Each of the categories of crime news relates to a type of non-criminal, moral question that adults confront daily. First, crime stories with implications about personal competence and sensibility are taken as interesting because they help readers feel that professionally they are not 'living it up' with analogous questions in everyday life. In routine interactions with others, we must make assumptions about their essential qualities, assumptions about the age competencies of the young or old, about qualities related to gender, or about qualities like intelligence (which today are less politically controversial but more visible than the competencies supposedly associated with age and sex). If children can hold up banks, should we take as serious the statement by our 7-year-old that he would like to kill his younger brother? If there is a 'Grandma Mafia', should we be concerned that the elderly woman behind us in the supermarket line may have a lethal intent as sherams her cart into our rear?
We must also make assumptions constantly about our own essential competencies and sensibilities. The question of audacity is faced not only by criminals. How daring, how ingenious, can I be? Would it be admirably daring; just reasonably cautious; or really, recklessly foolish to submit a paper for publication in its current draft? Crime news is of widespread interest because it speaks dramatically to issues that are of direct relevance to readers' existential challenges, whether or not readers are preoccupied with the possible personal misfortune of becoming victims to crime.

Similarly, the second group of crime news stories, those that depict threats to sacred centres of society, are deemed interesting because readers understand that they themselves must work, die after day, to define moral perspectives on questions about collective entities. The interest in such stories comes not just from the practical necessity of evaluating the physical safety of different places, but from inescapable encounters with enigmas of collective identity. In contemporary bourgeois life, questions of physical safety are of minor relevance compared to questions about collective moral character - mundane, recurrent questions such as: What's a 'nice' (morally clean) place to take the family to dinner?

The question raised by this type of crime news — is society holding together? — is the global form of questions asked more narrowly by readers in their daily routines. In everyday, concrete work settings, do you sense the collective identity of the university in which you are employed? If so, your behaviour will have a significance otherwise lacking: you will shape your behaviour somehow to fit into or against the character of the whole. Sociologists have long argued that social facts are real, that there is a reality to collective identity that transcends individual experience. The debate about the reality of collective identity is bothersome not only to sociological theorists, but to laymen as well as sociologists in their everyday, practical action.

The forms of the issue, as it appears in the lives of each member of society, are extremely diverse. Some worry about the level of 'strength' or 'health' of 'the economy' (or 'the military', or 'the family'). In this anxiety, 'the economy' is addressed as a whole, a thing that presumably exists objectively, not only as a convenient metaphorical shorthand for summarizing some arbitrary aggregation of individual economic events. But the objective measure of 'the economy' is always in dispute. 'The economy' is recurrently experienced as a precarious collective entity whose integrity may be threatened by hidden forces, an entity which goes up and down in response to pressures that no one has been able to locate precisely. Many news readers shape their everyday emotional mood as well as their consumption and investment decisions upon a sense of optimism or pessimism about the fate of 'the economy'.

As members of society continuously confront issues of personal and collective competence, they develop an appetite for crime news. Worrying about miscalculating their own and others' personal abilities, people find interesting the questioning of personal moral competence that is often intensely dramatized in crime stories. Repeatedly assessing whether, how, and how effectively certain people, organizations and places represent collective identity, members of society consume tales about the vulnerable integrity of personages, institutions, and sites.

As to the third category of crime news, stories reflecting pre-existing tensions among groups, people in persistent political conflict often hunger for moral charges to use against the character of their opponents. They find satisfying morsets in crime news.

Finally, what process of daily stimulation might be behind the widespread taste for news of white-collar crime? I would suggest that the newsworthiness of white-collar crime is constructed in a dialectical relationship to the moral routines of everyday life. The crimes of people in high white-collar occupations are especially newsworthy, not because they are shocking or surprising - not because such people are presumed to be more conforming, decent, respectable or trustworthy than blue-collar workers or the unemployed; but because they have to be treated as if they are.

It is certainly inadequate to attribute the newsworthiness of white-collar crime to shocked expressions of honour. News readers maintain appetites for stories of white-collar crime, day after day — another congressman caught taking bribes; another multinational corporation caught corrupting foreign governments! — while common crimes committed by poor, young, minority males continue in their redundant, typically non-newsworthiness procession, because every day, in infinite ways, news readers only feel forced to enact trust in and deference towards the former. However cynical a person's view of the morality of business, political, and civic institutional leaders, he or she lives surrounded by symbols of their superior status: their towering offices, their advertised qualities on subway or bus placards or on TV commercials, their names on hospitals. Readers of a news story about white-collar crime recall
that they have made many payments to that firm; that they were moved around by that airplane or bus company; that they have had their neighbourhood or recreational environment defined by those politicians or party leaders; that each day at work they must defer to a person in that type of superior status. The newsworthiness of white-collar crime owes much to the routine moral character of the division of labour. (On the 'moral division of labour', see Hughes, 1971.)

I have argued that crime news takes its interest from routinely encountered dilemmas, not from concerns focused on crime. The reading of crime news is not a process of idle moral reflection on past life; it is an eminently practical, future-oriented activity. In reading crime news, people recognize and use the moral tale within the story to orient themselves towards existential dilemmas they cannot but confront. What level of competence should I impute to that 10 year-old? Is the economy strengthening or weakening? Should the political arguments of the PLO be heard with respect? Am I wise to defer to the boss in earnest, or should I balance apparent fealty with self-respecting cynicism?

The content of crime news provides no solutions, not even advice on how the reader should resolve the dilemmas he will confront. Instead, crime news provides material for a literal working out of the moral perspectives that must be applied to dilemmas of everyday life. Crime is in today's newspaper, not because it contradicts the beliefs readers had yesterday, but because readers seek opportunities to shape their moral attitudes they will have to use today.

The idea that crime news serves readers' interests in performing a daily moral workout explains not only the content but several features of the structure of crime news. Crime news features details on the identities of victim and offender, and on time and place. As such, it encourages readers to see the event as potentially within his or her own experience. Its form serves to mobilize the reader's response by providing a shock or inviting outrage; it is a type of 'hot news' (Hughes, 1980: 234), specifically provoking an emotional response, inducing a response of the 'whole organism' (Park, 1940: 670). The focus of crime news on the early criminal justice stages, stages before formal adjudication and punishment, when questions of guilt have been raised but not resolved, also provokes readers' emotions by challenging them to react against the face of uncertainty.

As several studies have documented (Graber, 1980: 49; Sherizen, 1978), crime news focuses on criminals much more than on victims.

Katz, What makes crime news?

In our New York area data set from the mid-1970s, a comment by the victim or a representative of the victim was reported in only twenty-one out of 527 articles, compared to 162 comments from the defence side and 185 comments by the prosecutor. A focus on victims would have substantial practical relevance for readers, were they concerned with learning how to avoid the costs of crime. Some neighbourhood 'throwaway' papers respond directly to these concerns. Unlike the major metropolitan dailies, the neighbourhood newspapers often present crime news under the by-line of a local policeman who begins the story from the victim's perspective (e.g. 'When driving back to her house at 11 p.m. on September 5, a resident of the 600 block of Lucerne noticed an unfamiliar car in her driveway. As she exited her car ...') and concludes with annotated advice on what the victim might have done to avoid vulnerability. The same readers, picking up the metropolitan daily and inspecting its crime news, are no less pragmatic in their perspectives on crime news, but their practical concerns appear to be different — larger and more pervasively relevant.

The emphasis of the city papers on the criminal rather than the victim is understandable if we understand the reader's concerns as less with avoiding victimization than in working out moral positions on which his own behaviour will be based. If the victim's behaviour is often as important as the criminal's for understanding the causality of victimization, a focus on the criminal's behaviour stimulates moral sensitivities with which the reader may wish to identify. Each day in myriad ways the metropolitan news reader must work out his position on dimensions of moral callousness, personal audacity and faith in collective enterprises, and these are the very matters which the news depicts criminals as testing.

This perspective on interest in crime news makes understandable the apparent contradiction of substantive redundancy and constantly sustained reader interest. Laid side by side, stories about violent crime published over a sequence of days may appear quite similar. But they are experienced as new, as 'news', because the questions they tap re-emerge daily in readers' social lives.

The experience of reading crime news induces the reader into a perspective useful for taking a stand on existential moral dilemmas. The dilemmas of imputing personal competence and sustaining one's own moral sensibility, of honouring sacred centres of collective being, of morally crediting and discrediting political opponents, and of deferring to the moral superiority of elites,
cannot be resolved by deduction from rational discourse. In these moral areas, a measure of faith — of understanding a position or making a commitment that underlies the reasons that can be given for one's beliefs — is an essential part of everyday social life. Crime news accordingly moves the reader through emotions rather than a discursive logic, triggering anger and fear rather than argumentation.

Like vitamins useful in the body only for a day, like physical exercise whose value comes from its recurrent practice, crime news is experienced as interesting by readers because of its place in a daily moral routine. The very location of crime stories in the newspaper indicates that editors and readers understand this. Although minor local crime stories have a regular place in "Metro" sections, serious stories may be scattered in unpredictable places throughout the general news sections; they are not as neatly confined to a substantial, specialized section as are sports and financial news. The structural location of crime news re-creates the unpredictable character of the phenomenon, and transfers to the reader a measure of responsibility to organize its place in his life.

Modern newspapers appear to emphasize this role. The more modern or sophisticated the newspaper, the less it moralizes in style, the more it imposes responsibility for moral reaction on the reader as a matter of form. Another modern feature of crime news, its focus on the early stages of the criminal justice system, places the responsibility for "conviction", in both its narrow, criminal justice sense and in its broader, existential sense of commitment through faith, on the reader.

This responsibility is not necessarily one desired by readers, yet it appears to be one they acknowledge they cannot ignore or escape. Although people often fear crime and criticize the news in negative and disturbing, and shaving (cf. Douglas, 1966): the ritual, non-rational value of experience that is, to a degree, shocking, uncomfortable, and self-destructive, and that is voluntarily taken up by adults in acknowledgment of their personal burden for sustaining faith in an ordered social world.

Notes
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1 Unlike the traditional examples of analytic induction, I sought to define necessary but not sufficient causal conditions. The fact that in persons four alternative paths in newsworthiness is not inconsistent with this methodology, I note later on how, depending on the research purpose, the four paths can be folded into three, two, or one. The key advantage of analytic induction was in driving the analysis to a deeper level than could be obtained by initially fixing coding categories and applying them to produce quantitative results. On the distinctive implications of analytic inductions for the traditional questions of methodology in social research, see generally Katz (1982).

2. Our set of 1,884 in Los Angeles Times articles was distributed as follows: "personal competence", which included stories on crimes of violence that did not otherwise fit any of the other categories, made up about 50 percent of all articles; "collective integrity" held 33 percent; "moralized political conflict", 8 percent; "white-collar crime", 10 percent.

3. Other studies are supportive (Dowmack, 1978: 110). Schramm (1969: 264) found no patterned difference in the reading of "immediate reward news", a category which included the comics, crime news, sports and society news, although economic status was significantly and directly related to reading of public affairs news.

4. Dornack (1978) studied crimes reported on the front pages of the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times in 1950, 1960 and 1969. Although he found that violent crime was covered at three times the rate of white-collar crime, these figures, when compared to statistics on proportions, still indicate an over-representation of white-collar crime. State district attorneys file more than ten times as many cases as do federal district attorneys, and white-collar criminal cases are so rare as to be virtually invisible in state court statistics. See the literature review in Dornack (1982: 32). Gans (1980: 141), examining the news on TV and in weekly magazines, found that "true crime" stories and "true crime" coverage of "unknown" and "unknown" in trouble with the law, a pattern of equality which again, when compared to statistics on officical action, shows a strong bias towards the coverage of people of higher social status.

5. Cf Jones (1976: 246), comparing periodically reported FBI statistics and daily news articles: "one suspects that readers are more likely to rely on the much more common day-to-day stories in forming their impressions about trends in the amount and distribution of crime".

6. Gabe's panel also saw "street crime" as occurring less often than commonly reported crimes: drug offences, drunken driving, breaking and entering, weapons violations, prostitution, welfare cheating, consumer fraud, and parole violations.

7. See also Garfinkel (1980): "the press gives very little attention to the posiditional processes of the criminal justice system", citing three studies. But cf. Rosnow (1973: 33), on British papers: "all the newspapers gave an exaggerated
impression of the chances of getting caught and, when caught, of getting a serious punishment.

8. Crimes in the entertainment media, however, may follow the Durkheimian pattern: On TV, but not in the news, the audience learns that "evil is always punished in the end." See Schramm (1964).

9. Cf. Schudson (1978: 119): "Perhaps . . . the Times established itself as the "higher journalism" because it adapted to the life experience of persons whose position in the social structure gave them the most control over their own lives."

References


