Public opinion and political ideology affect how police departments formulate responses to crime. Police officials develop innovative programs, distribute resources, and provide services in reaction to these forces. They also, however, have independent strategies that they promote as responses to crime. These officials expend time and resources to make public and political opinion coincide with the department’s preferred response. Their primary strategy is to control the presentation of the police in the news media.

Police departments actively construct public images of themselves so that news presentation benefits the organization rather than harms it. Existing research on police behavior has focused on how police fight crime, provide services, and maintain order, ignoring how police behave to control their presentation in the news media. This oversight is a significant limitation of the literature. Ericson (1989:206) discussed how the police are in the business of patrolling facts, reproducing “the symbolic order of their organization and occupation.” The level of success achieved by police departments, when attempting to dictate a positive media image of themselves, affects how others define their role in society.

This research examines the presentation of the police in print and electronic media. Both news and police personnel are important participates who construct the media images presented about the police. The relationship between news and police personnel constantly evolves, but is shaped primarily by economic constraints on news production. These constraints force news media to rely on easily accessible information sources. This article discusses how the news media’s reliance on the police allows them to control the images presented about
themselves, ultimately distorting the presentation of crime in the news media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on crime in the news media has relied on two different research methodologies (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). First, most media studies have used content analysis. Studies using this methodology examine the presentation of crime in the news, ignoring how and why certain crimes are selected, produced, or eliminated from presentation. Ethnography is the second type of research method used to study crime in the news media. Studies using ethnography examine the news production process, including decisions made by reporters, editors, producers, and criminal justice sources. Ethnographic research documents how organizational factors, such as spatial arrangements, employee cultures, and social relationships, influence news presentation.

Content studies have focused on the amount and type of crime presented in the news. These studies firmly establish crime as a popular news topic (Gans, 1979; Graber, 1980; Lotz, 1991). For example, Graber (1980:26) found crime accounted for 25 percent of the story topics in newspapers and 20 percent of the topics presented on television. All news media distort official knowledge of crime by overemphasizing violent crime and underemphasizing property crime (Chermak, 1994, 1995; Graber, 1980; Marsh, 1988; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Murder, robbery, and rape are more likely to be presented than burglary, shoplifting, and motor vehicle theft. The news presentation of victims and defendants has been less frequently examined, but not completely ignored (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980).

Some content research has documented the individuals cited as sources within crime stories. Existing research compares the frequency that police are cited as news sources to the citation of other criminal justice officials, government sources, victims, and defendants. For example, Sherizen (1978:220) reported that police sources accounted for over 34 percent of the sources cited and another study reported the police as the primary source of story information when compared to other criminal justice sources (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991:192).
The present research overcomes four specific limitations of this growing body of literature. First, the general images presented about the police have been neglected. Second, researchers have not examined the presentation of police in different types of news story. Third, the research examining the news sources presented combines different levels of the police hierarchy into a general law enforcement category. The present research examines how various police officials are cited as news sources and whether the officials used varies by the importance of the story. Fourth, the presentation of law enforcement sources in the news provides some knowledge on how police attempt to control media images. This information is taken out of context, however, because the researcher has to infer what motivated the news organization to use specific sources. This article supplements the content analysis with direct observation of the news production process to more specifically document how criminal justice sources impact the presentation of crime news.

Several researchers have examined the relationship between news and police personnel (Chibnall, 1977; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Fishman, 1980; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989; Hall et al., 1978). Most ethnographic research concludes that the police determine what is presented in the news, describing the news media as “conduits” for police ideology (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1980; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989; Hall et al., 1978). After interviewing Australian journalists, for example, Grabosky and Wilson (1989:42) concluded that the police dominate interactions with news media “and that, as is characteristic of all dominant relationships, one party (in this case the police) fundamentally determines how the other party acts.” Chibnall (1977:155) described the news media and police relationship as asymmetrical, “because the journalist is always in an inferior negotiating position – the reporter who cannot get information is out of a job, whereas the policeman who retains it is not.” Robert Blau (1993:64, 90), a Chicago Tribune reporter who authored The Cop Shop, a book describing his police beat experiences, discussed how police sources were his friends, how he would not “burn” friends, and how he “scratched” the back of police officers to stimulate communication.

Skolnick and McCoy (1984) and Guffee (1992) drew similar conclusions after interviewing police personnel. Skolnick and McCoy (1984) interviewed police chiefs who described the media as their link to the public. The police chiefs interviewed, however, admitted that they did not like some aspects of crime reporting, such as when reporters
manipulate crime victims or take police scandal stories out of context. Similarly, Guffee (1992) described the police and reporter relationship as symbiotic, but interactions were tense because of how reporters presented some stories out of context.

A recent study of Canadian news media contributes significantly to the police-news media literature. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1989) observed news and source cultures to document the relationship between news personnel and criminal justice, political, and private sources. They found that police departments gave news media access to the police organization to control the images presented, providing documents, interviews, and physical space. They stated: “The police have come to appreciate that the news media are part of the policing apparatus of society, and can be controlled and put to good use in this respect” (93).

Ericson, Baranek and Chan’s study is important because they acknowledge the news media’s role in determining police behavior. They found that the ability of the police to control news content was circumscribed by media formats, media logic, and editing. Police sources transmit an image consistent with news media requirements to get prominently presented, but develop offensive and defensive strategies in order to maximize news content control. They discussed how the police use physical space, government regulations, formal meetings, and public relations personnel to influence what is presented about the police in the news media. For example, police keep some crime incidents secret, provide some information on others but use their symbiotic relationship with reporters to discourage its disclosure, release partial information, or promote events as propaganda.

This article combines content analysis with ethnographic observations to examine the presentation of the police in the news media. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1987) stressed that the majority of media research does not link these two methodologies. They used both methodologies to examine various topics across three important media volumes (1987, 1989, 1991). The current study combines research methodologies to expand on what is known about the police-media relationship, clarifying their findings regarding the level of control police have over news images. This research is also important because of its examination of American news media, contrasting the results with existing research in Canada (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987; 1989; 1991), Australia (Grabosky & Wilson, 1989), and England (Chibnall, 1977; Hall et al., 1978; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994).
METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was used to examine the presentation of the police in print and electronic media. Skolnick and McCoy (1984:529) emphasized that systematic sampling of media content is necessary to determine how well the media report on the police. Content data were collected from six print and three electronic media organizations in six different cities. Newspaper content was collected from The Albany Times-Union (New York), The Buffalo News, The Cleveland Plain Dealer, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Dallas Times Herald, and The Detroit News. Television content was collected from stations in Albany, Cleveland, and Dallas.1

A theme analysis of content was completed using a combination of coding rules from earlier research (Graber, 1980; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991). Content was coded from any crime story reported in a newspaper or across an entire broadcast, including crime incident, statistical report, and policy stories.2 The coding rules were applied to 2,411 newspaper stories and 659 television stories. Various content variables were collected, including the type of crime, source, and criminal justice stage mentioned. In addition, story size was collected as a measurement of the importance of each story.3

Ethnographic observation of the crime news production process was conducted in one newspaper and one television station in a large metropolitan city to supplement the content findings. Observations took place in summer 1991. The newspaper ethnography occurred within an organization that will be called the Midwest Tribune.4 The Tribune is a large sized newspaper with a daily circulation of about 500,000. Observations were also conducted at a television station in the same city. It will be referred to as the Midwest Nightly.

Approximately 150 hours were spent in each news agency. The majority of crime stories were produced between 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. at the newspaper, and between 3:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. at the television station. Most of the observations occurred during these shifts. In addition, some late-evenings were spent at the newspaper and early mornings at the television station to see as much of the production process as possible. The time spent at each organization was used to observe reporters covering a variety of stories. Specifically, I spent over fifty hours with reporters assigned to the police beat where I observed how police reporters produce crime stories, who they contact for information, and what results from these interactions. In addition, I spent
time with reporters sporadically assigned to cover police stories to contrast with police beat activities.

**FINDINGS**

The news media structure their activities in order to produce stories about crime efficiently. News production involves condensing the large number of local, state, and national crime incidents into a limited amount of news space. In order to meet production demands, reporters establish relationships with sources willing to provide story information (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987, 1989; Gans, 1979; Tuchman 1973, 1978). Police are experts who can comment about an event immediately after it is discovered. These sources are publicly accepted as credible voices on crime, underscoring the media’s authority and protecting their image as an objective conveyor of the important events of the day (Chibnall, 1977; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989).

Police involvement in the news production process affects media selection and production decisions. For example, a police department can eliminate a story from media consideration by not releasing a crime incident report. Police also actively further their interests by requesting presentation of specific events. Moreover, after reporters decide that a story is “newsworthy,” police personnel play an important role in the production of stories, deciding what aspects of an incident are downplayed or emphasized. Various police personnel are accessible and understand the type of information reporters need to produce crime stories. Police input into news selection and news production decisions affects how they get presented to the public.

**Police, News Media, and News Selection**

Newspapers increase selection access to official police knowledge of crime by establishing beats within departments. The *Midwest Tribune’s* police beat was located on the first floor of police headquarters. Police officers had to pass a hallway leading to the beat office to enter headquarters, making it easy for reporters to establish relationships with police sources. Moreover, it provided these sources the opportunity to actively promote story ideas. Police sources went to the beat office to check on the status of particular stories or provide reporters information about upcoming events. For example, a police lieutenant
provided police beat reporters with a press release about an award ceremony for four officers and visited the beat office the day of the event to make certain the story was covered.

Police beat reporters selected crime stories from four primary sources. First, reporters perused police documents, such as arrest logs and blotter reports. These documents provide cursory information on crime incidents, such as the type of crime, the defendant, the victim, and the location. Media access to these documents was uninhibited because they were placed on a counter separating a public hallway and an office. However, reporters were not allowed to go behind this counter into the office. Police officials could exclude particular events because reporters did not know if the reports provided included every crime that had occurred.

Second, reporters selected crime stories from telephone contacts with police sources. Two Tribune reporters covered police activities during the day and another arrived at night to cover late-breaking stories. The daytime reporters arrived in the morning and started each day by calling city and suburban police departments, police districts, and specific divisions (e.g., homicide, missing persons). The Nightly relegated this task to an intern. Reporters would ask, “Have you had any murders today?” or “Do you have any bodies for me?” Officers that answered the telephone provided information about crimes that they thought were newsworthy.

Third, reporters monitored police scanners throughout the day, occasionally discovering a breaking crime story. Reporters had to produce these breaking stories by gathering information from sources at a crime scene. Although layout changes can be made, it was difficult to get these stories prominently placed because news space is limited, and editors decide story placement as reporters complete stories.

Fourth, departmental spokespersons are story selection gatekeepers. Skolnick and McCoy (1984:544) reported that almost all large city police departments employ full-time press officers. They discussed how these officers are experts at producing positive images of the department, knowing the type of information that is newsworthy and understanding how to provide it in a way that captures public attention. Reporters from the organizations I observed relied primarily on a police department spokesperson to clarify the newsworthiness of events that they had selected from other sources. In addition, this spokesperson contacted reporters frequently to inform them about important crime incidents. Reporters referred to the police spokesperson as the
“mouthpiece,” his office was next to the police chiefs, and his primarily responsibility was to promote the department.

After reporters selected five or six crimes from other sources, they would call the spokesperson to obtain full reports of selected incidents. The spokesperson would release reports late in the day – near the reporter’s dead line (between four and five o’clock). This gave time to clarify the police response before releasing information, but it also limited the number of additional sources the reporter could contact for information. Moreover, he refused to provide information about some crime incidents daily. Reporters ignored these events, because the spokesperson gave them enough information on other events to fill daily story quotas.

The police spokesperson also manufactured newsworthy events, such as arrest days, award ceremonies, and community activities, to promote positive public images. He was responsible for organizing press conferences, deciding who should speak, when, and to what media. Press conferences are an effective way for departments to announce innovative programs, accomplishments, and arrest statistics because they can fully control what gets presented to the public. For example, Tribune and Nightly reporters covered a press conference where the department announced an increase in the number of drug arrests from the previous year. The statistics provided were packaged so reporters could take quotes directly from police documents.

Police, News Media, and News Production

Once specific crimes are selected as possible stories, reporters gather information by interviewing sources. Reporters contact various police sources first to clarify the newsworthiness of an incident. Sources are often apprehensive about answering questions from reporters because they fear their comments will be taken out of context and incorrectly interpreted. Police sources share these fears, but ignore them because they need to control knowledge. Police have institutionalized a process to give them dual oversight over how their organization is depicted in the news, controlling both ends of the news production process which limits the possibility of being mistakenly represented in the news.

Table 1 presents content data on the sources cited within crime stories. These results indicate that law enforcement sources dominate as news sources in print and electronic media, accounting for over 25 percent of the incident information provided in both types of media.
Police sources are easily accessible, constantly available, and willing to participate to control crime images. The availability of police sources allows reporters to produce stories with minimum interference. Sources that are difficult to contact and unfamiliar with the news process, such as defendants, victims, and surviving family members, are far less likely to be cited as news sources because of the burdens contacting them place on reporter’s daily routines.

Court sources were cited nearly as often as police sources in newspaper stories, although they were infrequently cited in television stories. Newspapers establish court beats within courthouses. These beats are similar to police beats in purpose, function, and production capability. Court beat reporters produce several stories efficiently by gathering information for stories using available court documents and court sources. Television stations do not have established court beats, because broadcast time is limited. Television stations do not present as many court sources.

### Table 1  
****Crime Story Sources****

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All stories</th>
<th>By Medium</th>
<th>By Story Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New paper</td>
<td>television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>32.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrections</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim acquaintance</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendant</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendant acquaintance</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness/Juror</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents⁰</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other⁰¹</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not specific²</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Statistical stories accounted for less than 1% of the total number of stories.

⁰ Police or court documents.

¹ Includes experts, hospital sources, school officials, or community groups.

² Sources cited as “sources say,” “authorities say.”

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stories and, when they do, reporters rely on testimony recorded from having cameras in the courtroom rather than specific court sources.

Table 1 also indicates that police dominate as sources in crime incident, policy, and statistical stories. Police sources are used in crime incident stories to describe what happened, who was involved, and the status of an investigation. Police and political sources are used frequently in policy stories to discuss innovative police responses, crime prevention programs, and legislative initiatives. Police discuss or provide departmental documents on the frequency of certain types of crime and arrests in statistical stories.

Table 2 presents the specific police sources used by news media for law enforcement information. When law enforcement sources are cited, individuals from the top levels of the police hierarchy provide over one-fourth of the information. Police chiefs account for approximately nine percent of the law enforcement source attributions, and captains or lieutenants were used nearly 20 percent of the time.

The upper levels of the police hierarchy dominate as law enforcement sources in all types of stories. Police chiefs, captains, and lieutenants supplied approximately 25 percent of the law enforcement information in crime incident stories, 40 percent of the law enforcement information in policy stories, and 80 percent of the law enforcement information in statistical stories. Police chiefs are least likely to be cited

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>All stories</th>
<th>By Medium</th>
<th>By Story Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>Television</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police said</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police chief</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain/Lieutenant</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrol officer</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBI official</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEA</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other federala</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Includes Customs, ATF, and U.S. Marshals*
in crime incident stories, but take a more active role in policy and statistical stories to promote specific programs. They do not have time to get involved in the routine coverage of crime unless the media are covering an extraordinary story. Police chiefs do, however, delegate crime incident story oversight to subordinates. These subordinates, usually a captain or a lieutenant, represent the department and chief as public relation spokespersons. These spokespersons have sound, established relationships with newspaper reporters because of their daily interactions with them.

The generic “police said” without specific attribution to a named source was the most frequent law enforcement source cited. There are two reasons for the prevalence of this generic attribution. First, the “police said” attribution is frequently used as a follow-up to an attribution to a named source. A reporter will attribute information in the first sentence of a story to a specific individual. After that, the reporter will cite “police said” for attribution to the same named source. Second, police organizations are large and porous bureaucracies. Reporters have numerous sources that are used when officials are unwilling to cooperate. For example, a Nightly reporter produced a story on a series of rapes that occurred in a specific neighborhood. The police chief and the spokesperson were unwilling to provide comments to the reporter because they did not want to frighten the people that lived in that neighborhood, explaining to the reporter that the rapes were not linked together. The reporter still produced a story by convincing a sergeant to comment off-camera about the dangerousness of the area combined with video comments of concerned citizens. The sergeant was not named. The reporter attributed the information to “police sources” and “police said.”

The content results indicate that police officials are less likely to be used in television stories than newspaper stories. This difference between television and newspaper use of sources can be attributed to the beat structure of newspapers. Newspaper beat reporters are located near police spokespersons, interviewing them at their convenience. These reporters are expected to produce a large number of crime stories and use their relationship with the spokesperson to accomplish this task. Nightly reporters did call the police spokesperson daily for story selection ideas, but relied on conveniently located sources near crime scenes for on-camera comments. These reporters need video to produce a story and are more likely to use whatever sources are available at crime scenes.

Table 3 presents content results on the police sources used in different sized stories. It was hypothesized that the upper levels of the
police hierarchy would be more frequently cited in primary stories than tertiary and secondary. It was thought that size correlated with the importance of the story and that upper level police sources would be more actively involved in trying to manipulate the images of the department in these stories. That is, in times of crisis or when the opportunity exists where police can get additional positive exposure, the administrative levels of the organization would take a more active role participating in the news production process.

The results in Table 3 do not completely support this hypothesis. Police chiefs were rarely cited in newspaper tertiary stories and never cited in television tertiary stories as would be expected. They were similarly cited, however, in secondary and primary stories in each medium. Captains and lieutenants were used similarly in all sized newspaper stories, but were more likely to be cited in primary stories compared to their citation in tertiary and in secondary television stories.

The differences in the distribution of sources across different sized stories are minor. There are three explanations for the similar use of sources in all sized stories. First, sources may be unable to accurately predict which stories are going to be an important story and given large amounts of space. It is easy to predict the newsworthiness of some crimes, such as a police officer murdered, denoting a crisis situation for the department. The importance of other stories, however, randomly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police said</td>
<td>49.9%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police chief</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain/Lieutenant</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrol officer</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheriff</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBI official</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEA</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other federala</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Includes Customs, ATF, and U.S. Marshals
increases in newsworthiness, depending on the type of information obtained from sources. Chermak (1995), for example, discussed how the amount of news space provided to a story depended on the quality of quotations from crime victims. A sobbing, emotional plea from a mother, whose child was murdered, was front page material. Since the willingness of the victim to participate is frequently unknown, it is difficult for the police to predict the amount of news space that will be provided to some crime stories. A second explanation for the equal distribution of sources is that police receive positive news coverage from the current process that is in place. Police are satisfied with how they are presented, using the same control process regardless of the importance of the story. Finally, these results could indicate that size, as measured by column inches or length of time presented, may not be an accurate indicator of importance. Crime stories have to compete with the other news available to be presented. A story that receives ten column inches on a heavy news day may be more important than a story that receives twenty column inches on a slow news day.

**Police, News Media, and News Presentation**

Police departments influence news selection and production decisions, providing access to the crimes known to them and commenting when asked by reporters. Police frame crime stories in a way that strengthens their position as a crime fighting institution. The process in place to produce crime news also benefits the news media because they can satisfy the public’s craving for crime news while expending limited resources. This mutually beneficial relationship determines how the police are presented in the news.

For example, the relationship between news media and police organizations guarantees that the police are frequently presented in crime stories. The content analysis revealed that 40 percent of the stories presented covered the beginning stages of the criminal justice process, including police discovering incidents, conducting investigations, and making arrests. The stage most frequently presented in the news was the discovery of a crime. Nearly 20 percent of the crime incident stories discussed this first stage of the criminal justice process where a victim or citizen reports the crime to the police. Police decide how these recently discovered crimes get presented because minimum information is available from other sources at this stage. Suspects and victims may not be available or may not want to provide comment. Police provide only
part of what they know, because they do not want to jeopardize an investigation.

An example from the observations illustrates how police release minimum amounts of information at the beginning stages of the criminal justice process. Police received a call from a neighbor of an elderly woman who feared she was injured. This neighbor had not seen the woman for a couple of days which was uncommon. A Tribune reporter got a tip that the police found over $7,000 in the elderly woman’s home when investigating the call. The reporter could have produced an interesting crime story, linking the woman’s mysterious disappearance to the money. The police, however, prevented the presentation of this story by not releasing information from the preliminary investigation. The reporter did not have any other sources willing to be cited for information about the status of the woman.

News media present crimes as they progress through specific stages of the criminal justice process. Crimes are recycled as news when something new happens to an event. For example, a story about a murder may be produced when discovered by the police. If this crime makes some progress into the system, such as when police make an arrest, another story will be presented. Once arrested, another story will be presented if the suspect is arraigned. A court reporter from the Tribune discussed how she would produce a story about a suspect’s arraignment if that crime had been presented previously even though it may not have been interesting. She explained that the public wants to know when a suspect is no longer a threat to the community. The presentation of the advancement of crimes into the system gives the impression that the criminal justice system generally, and the police specifically, are effective at moving cases through the system. If a crime is reported to the police and presented in the news media, additional news coverage only occurs when the police make an arrest. If questioned about their ability to make that arrest, the police respond by explaining that the investigation is ongoing.

The crimes presented to the public are those officially known by the police and defined according to their criteria. Most crimes are never reported to the police (Elias, 1986). The news media do not present these events or discuss why so many crimes are never reported. Moreover, police departments classify events according to criteria that are beneficial to themselves, compiling statistics on performance measures such as the number and type of offenses committed as well as arrest data. Police
decide what crime statistics are compiled, how they are compiled, and what is reported to the public.

However, the ability of the police to influence the images presented in the news varies by the type of story covered. Some stories further police objectives because police personnel decide what is presented and how it is presented. For other stories, however, police have to struggle to control the images presented about themselves and expend time and resources to ensure positive portrayal and minimize hurtful information (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Kasinsky, 1994). Other stories are presented that damage the police department’s reputation, forcing them to use their relationship with news media to recover public support.

Results for the content and ethnographic analysis indicate that police departments seek public support and assistance by feeding news media stories that are promotional, define the boundaries of their work, and legitimate their role in society. Departments will use the media to inform the public about important activities of their officers. Police request coverage of award ceremonies, successful investigations, and promotions, giving symbolic value to these activities. Police also request coverage of specific crime fighting activities which further deterrence goals. Media present stories on police use of drunk driving checkpoints, holiday speed traps, and drug crackdowns to deter individuals from driving drunk, speeding, or selling drugs. For example, the police spokesperson asked the Nightly to broadcast the picture of “Johns” arrested in a prostitution crackdown to generally deter others from seeking prostitutes.

Police departments also seek public assistance to fight crime and conduct investigations through the news media. Police will request coverage of unsolved crimes, expecting that the news presentation of that crime will generate some additional leads for a stalled investigation. Crimestopper segments provide specific examples of how police seek media and public assistance to fight crime. The police will reenact the crime for the audience and offer an award for information leading to an arrest. News media assist them by presenting a picture or police sketch of a suspect to stimulate leads.

Most crime stories presented examine specific incidents. Police influence how specific incidents are presented because of their control over selection and production decisions, providing incidents that emphasize serious crimes. The images conveyed in these stories are of police as the first responders in aide to an emergency, conducting
investigations and making arrests. These stories report the facts of a particular crime, satisfying the 5Ws of journalistic writing (who, what, when, where, and why), but are removed from institutional explanations regarding why crimes occur. The content results, for example, indicate that causes of crime were mentioned in less than three percent of the stories.

Police struggle to control the images presented in crime incident stories, taking precautionary steps to influence as much of the news production process as possible to protect the organization from harm. The institutionalization of public relation spokespersons has been the most effective step taken to promote the department or respond to potentially harmful information. For example, Tribune reporters were contacted by the spokesperson about an incident where a pregnant mother was assaulted because he thought it was a newsworthy event, saving the reporter time and effort. Police had a suspect in custody and the spokesperson provided reporters with a report of the incident that guaranteed news coverage.

News media are constrained to sacrifice their relationship with police personnel because they fear losing information access. Reporters will overlook questionable behavior and not critically evaluate police behavior because of the information police can provide. Results from the content analysis revealed that police effectiveness was evaluated in less than four percent of the total number of stories. If police contacts are unwilling to cooperate, then reporters have difficulties constructing a news story. An example from the ethnographic analysis illustrates how reporters are adversely affected if they choose to push a particular issue when evaluating source performance. One reporter interviewed for this research discussed a story he had done on police officers that fixed tickets for friends. After the story was aired, the reporter could no longer use his contacts in the police department and eventually was moved to cover stories for a different beat.

Reporters that work the police beat tend to be either very inexperienced or veterans of their trade (Blau, 1993). Young reporters are unlikely to question the activities of police officials because they are in the process of developing contacts in the department. They need police information to satisfy daily story requirements. Veteran reporters are so ingrained in the news production process that they do not produce negative stories because they fear sacrificing their reliable contacts.9

There are exceptions, however, where news organizations will present stories that damage public perceptions of the police. Reporters
will sacrifice their relationship with police if they think a story is important. For example, numerous news media presented stories about a group of police officers arrested for drug and gambling violations. This story damaged public trust of the police. All of the local media attended the press conference organized by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This story was on the front page of the Tribune and was the lead story on all of the television stations. This negative presentation of sources provides benefits to the news organization because it helps them maintain themselves as a credible public voice. If the news media did not present these exceptions, then their role as an organizational propaganda tool would become obvious.

The local police department did, however, use its relationship with news media to limit the impact that this story had on the department. The chief of police was part of the press conference organized by the FBI. The police chief was given prominent space on the front page to react to his officers being arrested, and stated that he did not think the officers were part of the department anymore. Though these officers had not yet been convicted of any crime, they were nonetheless sacrificed as “rotten apples” by the chief rather than allow the story to damage the entire department. His response did cause some organizational strife among the rank-and-file who criticized the police chief, but this was a small price to pay relative to losing public support.

**DISCUSSION**

News media can hold the police accountable to the public by critically evaluating current responses to crime, promoting alternatives, and informing the public. News organizations are in a strategic position to educate the public about the effectiveness of police responses to crime because the public uses media sources to develop opinions about crime. Graber (1980), for example, found 95 percent of the people she interviewed cited the news media as their primary source of information about crime. Skolnick and McCoy (1984) stressed that the news media are an important institution that could be an effective monitor of the police.

However, news organizations are also businesses with profit-making goals. Ratings, readership, and circulation affect news production and presentation decisions. News media improve profits by adapting to the demands of their audience, providing news that will attract consumers
and increase advertising revenues. Moreover, the economic health of news organizations depends on their ability to cut production costs. Media use decentralized news beats, wire services, and suburban news bureaus to lower costs and increase the story output of reporters.

News media rely on willing participants, such as police sources, to produce crime stories in an efficient and cost-effective manner. News organizations have offices at police headquarters so reporters are near police sources. This convenient location exposes reporters to official knowledge of crime, selecting a variety of potentially newsworthy crimes from what is known to the police. Furthermore, reporters use police contacts to collect information to produce stories. Numerous police personnel are available to provide comments about an incident, resulting in the frequent citation of police sources in all types of crime stories.

Police sources respond to media inquiries to reaffirm their status in the community as enforcers of the law. Individuals cited as sources in news stories are considered “experts,” worthy of shaping public perceptions of crime (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). These sources are given an accepted public forum to define what is important about crime, respond to limitations in their response, and market proposed solutions. Police gain power, authority, and legitimacy by manipulating the news production process in a way that results in positive news presentation.

Police departments invest their own resources to assist media organizations with the production of news, influencing the presentation of the beginning stages of the criminal justice process. Police departments categorize crimes in a way that is self-promoting and supportive of traditional responses to crime. They decide when story information should be released, limiting access to reports and diverting attention from specific events. In addition, departments assign public relation officers to cultivate relationships with reporters to guarantee consistent news coverage, training these spokespersons how to generate positive news images.

The news media’s ability to monitor the police and inform the public is limited by their relationship with them. Police officials play a prominent role in each stage of news production and actively submit organizational propaganda. Reporters are generally not critical of the police – unwilling to sacrifice the relationship that allows them to produce crime stories. The news organization profits because space is filled with minimum costs; reporters benefit because they get their stories prominently placed.
Police have conformed to the pressures of news production and provide news media with images consistent with their needs (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). Police departments provide events that are of interest to reporters. However, the preferred media image that is supplied by the police is highly consistent with their goals. News media are not critical of what police sources submit as news because the stories provided are not inconsistent with what helps the news organization sell news.

Organizations that package a newsworthy product are given the opportunity to use the news media for free advertisement. These business objectives have historically existed alongside other objectives, such as social responsibility, education, and setting the boundaries of a democratic society (Lasswell, 1948; Hulteng & Nelson, 1971; Severin & Tankard, 1992). The tension that occurred because of the conflicting nature of these objectives merged to determine the final news product presented. Profit motives were circumvented regularly and without question to accomplish an alternate goal. Newspaper chains, broadcast conglomerates, and the success of tabloid news have affected the presentation of crime in mainstream news media. Police departments have taken advantage of the opportunity to cut media costs, influencing their presentation in the news and securing public and political support in the process.

NOTES

1. Newspaper content was coded for every-fifth-day of the first six months of 1990. Thirty-six days of content data were collected per newspaper. Newspaper content from the Cleveland Plain Dealer was coded for an additional eighteen days across a three-month period in 1991 for comparison to the 1990 sample. Content analysis of late evening television newscasts complements findings from the print analysis. Local evening broadcasts in Albany, Cleveland, and Dallas for seven nights a week were coded across an eight-week time span from May to July 1991. In each city, the most popular station according to its rating was selected. A total of 168 broadcasts was recorded and viewed in its entirety. Television crime stories were transcribed and then content-coded.
2. Crime incident stories were those that discussed a specific event, i.e., a story that involved a suspect committing a crime. Policy stories included those stories that discussed legislative activities involving the police and stories on specific police programs, i.e., a story describing a drug sting operation.

3. Newspaper stories were measured in column inches and television stories were timed.

4. The names of the organizations are fictitious to protect confidentiality.

5. A number of characteristics have been found to increase the likelihood that a crime is presented to the public. Past research indicates that seriousness, characteristics of the individuals involved, salience, periodicity, and uniqueness of an event contribute to the newsworthiness of a crime (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989; Surette, 1992).

6. Only information that was directly attributed to a source was coded. For each crime story, up to nine sources were coded: three who commented about the actual incident (results provided above), three who provided information about the victim, and three who provided information about the defendant. If more than three sources provided information on either the incident, victim, or defendant, the first, third, and fifth sources for each type of information were coded.

7. Tertiary newspaper stories were those under 6 column inches, secondary newspaper stories were between 7 and 13 column inches, and primary stories were over 14 column inches. Television tertiary stories were under those under twenty seconds when timed, secondary were over 21 seconds, but shorter that 60 seconds, and primary stories were over 60 seconds in length.

8. The size of the newspaper stories in the sample ranged from three column inches to 120 column inches. Television stories ranged from 10 to 300 seconds. This analysis was done for a variety of sized stories without significant differences in the distribution of law enforcement sources used in crime stories.

9. It is important to note that this study is of one type of media organization that transmit images about crime. This study examines local news media who have a significant stake in
maintaining a relationship with local criminal justice sources. Ericson (1989) distinguished the activities of reporters that work for different types of media organization. Specifically, he discussed differences in the behavior of inner- and outer-circle reporters. Inner-circle reporters were those with close ties with news reporters. Outer-circle reporters were willing to sacrifice their reliance on the police, present stories that adversely affect the police, and criticized inner-circle reporters for their reliance on police sources. Future research needs to examine how these conflicting images affect public opinion about police.

REFERENCES


