

Media Coverage of Collective Violence: An Analysis of Description Bias in the 1967-1972 Race Riots*

A Research Report by:

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Several works have explored different aspects of media coverage of collective violence and protest (Wright 1967; Ornstein 1972; Lang, G. and Lang, K; Shaw and McCombs 1977; Openshaw 1987; Dufour-Gompers 1992; Pfau 1995; Heath and Gilbert 1996; Altheide 1997). Many contemporary scholars agree that the mass media has been historically biased and selective in the content and quality of its coverage (Graber 1989; Goodman 1992). In light of the influence that newspaper coverage has been shown to exert on public perception (Pfau 1995), this project evaluates the accuracy of news agencies in depicting several race riot era (1967-1972) collective violence events. I explore elements of description bias and highlight patterns of regional (north vs. south) and type variation (national vs. regional/local newspapers).

INTRODUCTION

Psychologist Roger Dufour-Gompers (1992) suggests that journalists induce within their audience specific psychological processes through the use of selective and subjective coverage. He maintains that human beings, in the absence of first hand experience, frame external real world events in a theatrical-drama framework, wherein event participants are the actors and the journalist is the narrator. The “art” of journalism, he maintains, is then to use biased and selective coverage as a photographic lens that “will not portray the bare facts of the event but will give the public yet another opportunity to feed its own fantasies, expectations, and aspirations through the ‘angle’ adopted” (Dufour-Gompers 1992). In essence, journalism fuels inherent human imagination mechanisms under the pretense of objective current event

coverage. This effect is intensified when the journal’s ‘facts’ arouse within the reader apprehensive or fearful emotions, as does news of war, violence, and crime, for example. In light of this dynamic, I suggest that biased and inaccurate media coverage can foster powerful yet erroneous psychological frameworks that influence the ways we perceive and interact with the social world.

David Altheide (1997) focuses recent works on the media’s contribution to framing processes and fear production. Devji (1996) notes the role that fear plays in people’s daily lives. “Fear stalks this nation every day. Fear of making a wrong turn in a neighborhood in Los Angeles, riding the subway or jogging in Central Park in New York, fear symbolized by locks, guns and alarms to protect ourselves” (Devji 1996). The media, through selective coverage of issues and events as well as slanted portrayals of those issues and events, plays a powerful role in creating and reinforcing such fears.

In light of this relationship, a number of works have tried to discern the mechanisms behind the connections between the mass media, public perceptions, and public attitudes, including fear (Shaw and McCombs 1977; Hirsch 1980; Gunter 1987; Sparks 1992). The nature and direction of this relationship seems as of yet unclear, however, and several researchers have suggested a cyclical causal connection. As Barry Gunter notes (1987), perceived fear of the social environment may cause people to avoid certain areas, neighborhoods, and communities; every time these people turn on the television or pick up a newspaper, they are exposed to stories that further reinforce those fears and are thus less likely to trust

those same areas. Such explorations of the causal relationships have led to further research in identifying the actual mechanisms by which the media exerts its influence in fear production and public perceptions of social issues.

Altheide proposes that the mass media, often catering to audience considerations and entertainment value, frequently creates and reproduces the “problem frame,” a thematic emphasis that collapses complex and often ambiguous social issues into straightforward and easily identifiable “problems,” replete with perpetrators, victims, and solutions (Altheide 1997). One of the dangers of having media sensationalism oversimplify these complex topics and events lies in the subsequent propensity to collapse cultural, ethnic, and gender related affairs into similarly oversimplified issues or even symbols (Altheide 1997). Applying such mechanisms in a racial context highlights the dangers of such inaccurate or biased media-driven framing processes, as they now promote simplification and generalization of race and ethnicity issues.

Considerable research has already been devoted to the means by which such simplified media portrayals “fill in the blanks” for audiences who may not have a clear position on a range of issues. Cognitive psychologists have long understood the process of schema formation. Fiske and Taylor (1991) define social schemata as cognitive frameworks that describe a concept and its attributes as well as the relationship between those attributes. Since human thought is rarely thorough at any given moment, humans often employ schemata to deal more efficiently with information about social events or environments that are ambiguous or complex (Pfau 1995).

In essence, schemata serve as simplifiers that “enable the perceiver to identify relevant stimuli quickly, chunk an appropriate unit, fill in the information missing from the stimulus configuration, and select a strategy for obtaining further information” (Taylor and Crocker 1981). As Pfau suggests, schemata can indeed be powerful and useful processing tools, yet by their simplifying nature they can also lead to severe perceptual distortions. In short, media depictions exert heavy influence on people’s perceptions in the absence of personal experience. Previous research has begun to explore the ways in which psychological simplification models correspond with biased newspaper accounts.

Michael Pfau (1995) analyzes the extent to which newspaper accounts that invoke race and class schemata that could lead to variation in audience interpretation and recall of an event. By changing only one word in the headline, Pfau is able to establish three different schemata (class, race, neutral). His results revealed that the subjects, when given the article with the race-based headline (i.e. “Black Riot”) were most likely to 1.) Rate the event as violent; 2.) Overestimate the police injuries; 3.) Ignore or underestimate the rioters’ injuries; 4.) Attribute the responsibility and provocation of the riot to the demonstrators. These patterns were not nearly as strong for the class-based (i.e. “Labor Union Riot”) event of the undefined (i.e. “Riot”) event. Evidently, the very word-choices chosen by the media can serve as powerful politicizing and educating forces, and I concur with Pfau and others that newspaper accounts can create and reinforce racial schemata. I further suggest that inaccurate and biased reports can lead to the development of corresponding

inaccurate and distorted racial schemata, making accurate and unbiased media portrayals all the more crucial, as they can lead to the formation of distorted generalizations and stereotypes. Past works (Kerner Report 1968) have already shed light on such distortions, noting how biased and inaccurate media coverage can foster inflated perceptions of the frequency, severity, and racial character of collective violence events.

Kurt and Gladys Lang suggest that sensational and biased media coverage of collective violence can produce an inflammatory contagion effect leading to the outbreak of further violence (1972). Indeed, coverage that inflates protest success or ignores counter-movements by repressive forces can easily promote the diffusion of riots. Nonetheless, the majority of media bias is slanted in support of the officials and is often highly critical of the event perpetrators, which can, at other times, lead to inappropriate or ineffective official responses. Examples include social stagnation or the perpetuation of symbolic and institutional racism—such as unwillingness toward urban intervention or even the addressing of deep-seated urban conflicts, many of which are race-oriented. Expanding on past works, I explore not only the headlines but also the content of the coverage, noting the extent to which the media depicts the underlying social issues and causal factors as well as the consequences and superficial details of collective violence events. Earlier analyses of newspaper coverage have suggested that certain papers such as the *New York Times* depict urban disorders in an objective and predominantly unbiased manner (Monti 1979). Yet without a frame of reference, bias is difficult to quantify to any great extent.

A more complete analysis of the extent to which the news media selectively depicts collective violence events would require a reliable alternative source of information about those same events.

McCarthy et. al (1996) uses police records of Washington D.C. demonstrations as a reference and concludes that demonstration size and timing (whether or not the demonstration issue aligns with current media attention cycles) play a pivotal role in determining whether or not the press covers events. Oliver and Myers (1999) employ similar techniques to explore the effects of variables such as location, sponsorship, format, and content (conflictual vs. non-conflictual) of demonstrations on media coverage. Nonetheless, these studies and many like them focus on media *selection bias*, i.e., whether an event is covered or not. Much less central to current research in media depictions are explorations of *description bias*, which probes the quality of media coverage as determined by factors such as accuracy of reporting, objectivity, and thoroughness. In addition, current research includes numerous forms of protest in its analyses, many of which bear little mechanical resemblance to collective violence events. Riots are far more sensational, disruptive, and by definition violent and conflict-oriented than other milder forms of protest. These characteristics may reduce the chances for omitted coverage and further the need for the next logical step in media portrayals, i.e., qualitative/descriptive analysis.

The reasons for the current research discrepancy are numerous. Current works (McPhail and Schweingruber 1998) employ complex real-time observational techniques in efforts to analyze collective action

dynamics across space and time. While such complicated and elaborate schemes are well suited to the systematic exploration of readily observable, planned demonstrations, the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of collective violence would scarcely permit the use of such systematic observational methods. Furthermore, such techniques are of little value for retrograde studies, as video footage rarely captures the full scope of collective violence events. It is my intention, therefore, to obtain a unique qualitative analysis of description bias through the comparison of newspaper article and interpersonal interview data. Such techniques have already been proven effective in a variety of riot-prone settings (Kerner Report 1968).

I hypothesize within the article accounts 1.) a pattern of omission of key causal issues and underlying tensions that precede the riots, 2.) an overemphasis on consequences (arrests, injuries, damages etc.) and event perpetrators, 3.) a de-emphasis on the counter-productive role of officials and civil authorities and 4.) frequent inaccuracies in reported information. Additionally, I explore any patterns of variation in coverage/bias by geographic region and by newspaper type. I define "accuracy" to be congruence or consensus of information and deem any misreported or inconsistent facts as evidence of inaccuracy. I define "bias" as any deliberately slanted, selective, or disproportionate allocation of coverage, including omissions, exaggerations, and de-emphases.

METHODOLOGY

In 1966, The Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis

University contracted a service that compiled newspaper clippings from local and national sources from through 1972. All articles that involved protest and/or violence along racial lines were included, although I employ only those that are collectively violent (denoted by any incidence of property damage, physical confrontation, or both). The articles vary in length and complexity, and many cover the same event (particularly large riots). To the vast majority of the general public, these articles combined with respective television coverage largely dictated public knowledge about the various race riots.

The Lemberg Center also conducted intensive interviews with 40-60 individuals in each city regarding the state of race relations. Community leaders, city officials, prominent religious figures, and others comprised the pool of interviewed individuals. I analyze a variety of racially violent events in several American cities and evaluate specific qualitative differences between the two account sources for each event. I chose both northern and southern cities in hopes of capturing evidence of any regional variation that might exist; I evaluate both local and national newspapers for similar reasons. Of particular interest regarding the southern cities is the timing in which the interviews were conducted; the majority of the Lemberg Center interviews in those cities were performed soon after the April 4th assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Due to the widespread national reaction to Dr. King's slaying, I expected to find a significant degree of newspaper coverage at that time. With interviews following directly in the aftermath of such events, the probability for finding

same-event accounts in both data sources would be maximized. Also, though interviews in the northern cities were conducted in 1967, each city had experienced at least one severe and highly publicized riot within six months prior to the interview process.

RESULTS

Boston

On the afternoon of May 26th, 1967, approximately thirty women members of the Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW) staged a sit-in at the Grove Hall division of the Boston Welfare Department in the small ghetto district of Roxbury. They were protesting what they considered to be an archaic and unjust welfare system, and their demands ranged from increased availability of welfare workers and increased benefits to the establishment a committee of welfare recipients that could contribute to policy development and case reviews. The sit-in went unnoticed by city officials and was not reported by the media in any fashion. The *Boston Globe* would admit following the first night of the riot: “It began Friday, May 26, but no one paid any attention.” Indeed, MAW felt the silent protest had procured few practical gains, so one week later, they would repeat the attempt.

On Friday, June 2nd, the group had occupied the building once again, and welfare workers began preparing to close the office for the weekend at around 4:45 p.m. The mothers demanded that they be allowed to speak with Welfare Director Daniel J. Cronin and refused to evacuate the building until such time. They locked the doors from inside with bicycle chains, trapping

some 30 workers, including a small contingent of police, inside the building with them. Cronin arrived but refused to speak to the mothers so long as he was barred entry to the building. However, the mothers, wanting to publicly clarify both their demands and Cronin’s reactions, asked him to negotiate with them in the open forum of the crowd. He refused, and soon after, police arrived, forced their way into the building, and began expelling the women. Several women were beaten severely; others were assaulted without warning. The untrained police managed to club MAW women and social workers alike, often losing sight of which women were “hostages” and which ones were protesters. A milling crowd had gathered outside, and upon hearing the screams from inside the building began to surge forward. As police called for further reinforcements, the crowd continued to grow in size and hostility. The violence escalated, confrontations between police and outraged community members increased, and a riot ensued. Four nights later, over 1700 police had been mobilized, 75 people had been hospitalized, 60 had been arrested, and the property damage estimates were well into the millions. Litigation would follow for months as the community, public officials, and the press would struggle to assess blame and propose solutions for Boston’s first full scale riot.

Probing the interview data, I find an abundance of information that paints a portrait of Boston as a volatile and even riot-prone city leading up to the summer of 1967. Ellis Ash, white administrator of the Boston Housing Authority, claims in his January 1968 interview that the Roxbury riot was an inevitable outgrowth of “the sentiment that the time had come to put on some

kind of demonstration” (B1 6). He details a variety of deep seeded tensions within the greater Boston area and the Roxbury ghetto in particular. Indeed, he was grateful that the riot focused around MAW and the welfare issue rather than the housing situation, which he summarized with this depiction of his own office: “It’s a very lousy housing authority...it’s just not professional. Personally, I have strong feelings [about] trying to upgrade the performance of the housing authority” (B1 3). According to Ash, a myriad of problems were plaguing the BHA, including but not limited to inadequate funding, incompetent leadership, and poor community relations. When asked to describe the role of police in perpetuating hostility and conflict, he states, “The police department’s style is dismal...the precinct can pretty much defy orders from above. The captain in South Boston has a reputation for being anti-negro. He was removed from Roxbury” (B1 7). Also, when asked to comment on the state of race relations in the city at large, he notes, “there are some strong feelings of [white] hostility toward Negroes...this leads to the belief that they must take vigorous steps for control and for keeping the [black] people in their place” (B1 7).

In addition to background information concerning the state of affairs in Boston, several persons interviewed provide first hand accounts of the activities surrounding the Roxbury riot. The following is from the summary interview of Mrs. Doris Bland, Chairman of the Mothers for Adequate Welfare (MAW).

MAW is the group that sat in at the Roxbury office of the Department of Welfare and was

forcibly ejected from the building. . . [Mrs. Bland] told me that approximately 25 women and some men picketed the office. . . She said that when group members took up their positions in the rooms of the Welfare building, approximately forty policemen came into the building and tried to forcibly eject them. Mrs. Bland said that Deputy Sayre issued the order “Beat ‘em, kill ‘em, just get ‘em out of here.” She said that mothers were corralled and beaten by police and that she and other mothers threw their children to safety out of the windows of the building to people who had gathered around the building on the street. She said that many of the mothers were dragged, kicked, and pulled down the halls out of the door. I asked if she had been personally injured, and she stated that she was jabbed with a riot stick by police and that her blouse was pulled and all the buttons were torn off. She said that eight of the men who were in her group were badly beaten and hospitalized and at least ten or eleven of the other mothers were arrested. . . I questioned Mrs. Bland as to what she felt the probable reason the riot of 1967 didn’t become a full blown disorder. She said that the fact that a lot of the young adults and militants had demanded that the police be taken off the streets. . . when I asked her what was the general responsiveness of the police to the problems in the area, she said that the response was, “slow, slow, slow” and that

indeed a double standard of enforcing the laws and providing protection has always been the case. She sees no reason to realistically hope that it will change short of changing those who make the decisions about police policy in the area. B6 1.

Clearly, Mrs. Bland's testimony paints an egregious portrait of the events surrounding the Blue Hill sit-in and ensuing riot.

Others had a slightly different perspective on these same events. Then acting Mayor Collins (interviewed in Jan. 1968) reports in his interview that the mothers, "2-3 days before the sit-in...had assembled in my office (or waiting room to be more exact) for hours" (B11 1). As closing time neared, however, the mayor had to send the group home as he "wasn't going to let them stay his working hours" (B11 1). His account of the MAW sit-in is as follows:

About 4:15 to 4:30, the MAWs, with several males, entered the Grove Hall Welfare Office. The men had chains wrapped around their waists, left them in the basement, but finally got them again and put them on the exterior doors from the inside. The action confined 35-45 employees in the building. The police and I were notified of what had taken place. If the people were constrained against their will, the police were to tell the mothers that they were committing an improper act and order the doors to be opened and the people removed...the police were outside and finally climbed

in to open the doors from within...the municipal employees were released. The others were bodily removed. The leaders of the group were asked personally to leave. Doris Bland, the leaders of MAW, is intelligent and she did leave because she had nothing to gain by risking arrest and jail. The non-leaders were then removed. (Interviewer: Were they arrested?) Collins: Sure as hell hope so. B1 2.

When asked to characterize the MAW, Mayor Collins described the group as one that had "proper reasons for being and which was treated as a responsible organization" (B1 4). However, he also felt they "were essentially unfriendly and did not have a liberal view" (B1 4).

Mayor Collins was also asked to describe the riot to the best of his recollection. The actual riot, according to the mayor, was a two to three day rampage wherein "young mischief makers set fires, pulling false alarms...shots fired by snipers...led to sequential looting" (B1 3). However, Collins does at one point refer to what he believed to be the motive behind what he considers "senseless" violence. "The crux of the matter were the demands for better welfare...Cronin, the director of Welfare, met with the mothers that week...some of the requests had been reasonable and others already in place so I told Cronin to give them to the people" (B11 4). When asked of the role police might have played in escalating or aggravating the situation, Mayor Collins claims "I can't tell if the police hurt anyone...my memory isn't that good" (B11 2). Overall, the mayor feels the police did not show any excessive displays of force and was pleased with

their role in de-escalating the violence and arresting the “trouble-makers.” Finally, the mayor was asked to summarize the role of black leadership in quelling the riot. He states:

There are no community leaders when trouble comes. Not only NAACP and Urban League people called me, but also Canon Freedmen. The established Negro Leadership is worthless in a crisis, they are scared. The Negroes said they had counter rioters; but the leaders stayed in the office. They used minimal effort during the situation—they didn't want to get hurt. B11 3.

Clearly, Mayor Collins' views regarding the Roxbury riot diverge significantly from Chairman Bland's. She condemns the police and praises the black leadership while the mayor condemns the leadership and praises the police. Nonetheless, he too acknowledges poor communication among police during portions of the riot and cites, as causal possibilities, various grounds for “improvement” in welfare, housing, and employment in Boston.

In light of Mrs. Bland's pivotal role in the sit-in and obvious compassion for the motives and protest actions of MAW, one could hardly ignore the inherent sympathetic bias that her testimony introduces. Similarly, Mayor Collins' views can scarcely be considered an objective and disinterested recollection of the Roxbury events due to his obvious ties to the city's political structure. Nonetheless, both are direct accounts of the Roxbury riot (one of them first hand) and do, despite their differences, contain some points of agreement.

One fairly evident shortcoming in using interview data as a reference from which to analyze media accounts is the very type of subjectivity inherent to such involved actors as Chairman Bland and Mayor Collins. My analysis therefore is highly questionable without a first hand (accurate) account from a non-affiliated (unbiased) party. Julius Bernstein, a white secretary of the Jewish Labor Council the American Federation of Labor bears similar testimony to Ellis Ash. He implicates the labor unions as yet another underlying source of tension in Boston's black community, noting that “the unions are not complying in terms of Equal Opportunity for Negroes...the Massachusetts Commission against discrimination has not been helpful...they don't want to be bothered” (B5 1). He then recalls several incidents involving clashes between Roxbury residents and Boston's political structure, noting that a group of black representatives once had to march on city hall to procure the removal of 200 tons of trash from Roxbury neighborhoods. He referred to failures in the BHA and to a trail of broken promises made to Roxbury residents ranging from an outdoor community pool to a recreation center for the children. When asked about the police, Bernstein refused to elaborate and instead jokingly stated “What are you kidding? Of course they are rotten and lousy” (B5 2).

Next, he was asked to elaborate on his involvement with the Blue Hill sit-in at Grove Hall and the ensuing Roxbury riot. Mr. Bernstein had been summoned during the afternoon when the sit-in was taking place and was on the scene by about 7:00 that evening.

I was called on the afternoon of the riot. The cops pulled out the mothers and the

building entrance was sealed off. The cops were wandering around until finally cars came with clubs and helmets for them. Traffic was blocked off...people wanted to know why and consequently, large numbers of people pointed to the area, creating a much larger crowd than was warranted. Negro kids came to see what was happening and for about an hour, it was hopelessly confused. Some kids taunted the cops and about a dozen of the cops chased the kids and one cop was hit by a bottle then about a dozen other cops chased the kid who threw the bottle...There was absolutely no move to de-escalate the problem there...The police said something about moving [people] but did nothing about it.

When asked about other instances of poor police action just before the riot, Bernstein recalled “one Negro man who lived right across the street from a cordon and the police wouldn’t let him cross the street to get his supper...complete lack of sensitivity” (B5 3). He characterized the police as being “on edge” and having a “tremendous lack of training in dealing with groups. Indeed, he believes the primary black complaint toward the police “is that they say the police treat them like animals” (B5 4). Finally, Bernstein was asked to characterize the state of police-community relations. At this he became agitated and visibly disgusted as he recalled when his brother

had went to a suburb to attend a community relations meeting only to find officers handing out bumper stickers that read “support your local police” (B4 4).

In general, the interview data, despite significant variation in testimony, converge on several key points. First, Boston has a significant number of deep seeded social ills regarding the state of employment, housing, welfare, and police/community relations in the predominantly black district of Roxbury. Key personnel in positions qualified to speak with experience and authority on these issues reach similar conclusions about these underlying tensions, many of which could precipitate riot conditions. Second, the Roxbury sit-in was handled forcefully by police, who arrived in excessive numbers, communicated poorly with one another, and brought confusion and disarray to an already volatile situation. Finally, three of four accounts implicate the police in escalating or instigating the riot, and even Mayor Collins account concedes confusion among police officers and does not directly identify the black youths as the instigating factor. Clearly, a wealth of information regarding the city’s background, current states of affairs in Roxbury, and the events surrounding the sit-in and the riot can be ascertained through the interview process. The question now becomes just how well the news media managed to capture and accurately relay that information to the general public in both Boston and the nation at large.

The Lemberg Center compiled some 50 newspaper articles covering the four-day Roxbury riot. The majority of local coverage was undertaken by the *Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*

while national coverage was provided by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Several smaller regional newspapers as well as local newspapers in other U.S. cities covered the event as well. The first distinction that need be made revolves around the positioning of the various forms of coverage. For my analysis, front-page coverage is the most pertinent area of research, as this coverage is the first to make an impression on the reader and many times sets the basis for overall tone of the coverage. For national newspapers with such a broad target audience, front-page coverage may constitute the majority of the coverage or the only coverage a riot receives.

Overall, front page coverage overwhelmingly focuses more on property damage, repressive forces, arrests, injuries, and criminal allegations rather than event catalysts, causes, or underlying issues, although the local papers, due in large part to their nationally limited but locally expanded scope, did often dedicate smaller articles to such background material. In addition, a consistent temporal pattern occurs across both types of media, with the material focusing on background issues tending to emerge with greater frequency as time from the riot's culmination increases. Thus, the predicted patterns of reporting inaccuracies and biases (key omissions, little to no emphasis on underlying causes or conflicts, pro-police/anti-protestor slants) are observed in nearly all forms of printed media relative to the interview data, with the more accurate but often equally biased coverage tending to occur in the national and non-Boston newspapers.

The term "accurate" must however be qualified in accounting for

the type of coverage observed in the different sources. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, for example, were less likely to delve into specific details about the underlying community tensions, key decision-making personnel, and the riot's aftermath. This trend proceeds logically from the national reputation and limited regional scope of these papers, and the end result is coverage that is more accurate than local papers such as the *Globe* and the *Herald*; yet the accuracy flows largely from the cursory treatment afforded the riot by these papers. They depict the riot with far less detail than the local papers, and therefore commit fewer errors of inaccuracy. When the national newspapers do report background information such as riot causes and underlying community tensions, they often do so in editorial or other back-page sections. Furthermore, the additional time that passes between local coverage and national coverage of the same event clearly advantages the national newspapers in allowing them to better sort between accurate and hastily reported information.

For example, the June 4th *Washington Post* gives a fairly objective and remarkably even-handed portrayal of the riot's first (and most severe) night, evidence of which can be observed in the opening paragraph, which directly attributes the riots to "Boston's long simmering racial situation." This front-page article does cover the MAW grievances and demands as well as the local outcries of police brutality and the mayor's denial of such accusations. Nonetheless, the majority of the content focuses on the superficial, readily observable, and non-controversial aspects of the riot, such as the type of debris littering the area, number of

police that had to put in overtime, and detailed reports of the quality and quantity of damages (which windows were smashed, how many etc.). Thus, the underlying tensions are acknowledged but scarcely elaborated upon, consistent with the predicted pattern of key omissions and de-emphasized causal information. Further, the second hypothesized pattern of overemphasized superficial details is abundant and at times comical, as seen the *Post*'s elaboration into the *types of bottles and cans* thrown at police (whiskey, beer etc.). Finally, the third pattern of pro-police bias, though less obvious, is also revealed through a thorough evaluation of the article's diction and tone. Police are overwhelmingly portrayed in a neutral or positive manner, with only a small portion of one paragraph criticizing their actions in Roxbury. Even the language of the confrontation is substantially biased in favor of the police, whose aggressions are portrayed with phrases like "battled the mob" and "made arrests." The riot participants, on the other hand are depicted with words like "sniping, setting fires, hurling rocks and bottles, and looting."

Overall, The *New York Times* shares the same high level of reporting accuracy with the *Post* yet introduces even stronger evidence of the predicted bias patterns. It should be noted, also, that these general trends are not without considerable variation, for this national newspaper at times misreports information as flagrantly as the local papers. For example, the *Times* introduces a completely novel and elsewhere unreported "fact" regarding the escalation of the riot in its June 4th edition in reporting that the police officers initially summoned to the Grove

Hall Welfare Office were attacked when "young Negroes of the neighborhood closed in with rocks and bottles." This step in the riot escalation sequence is found nowhere in any of the other 50+ articles that cover the Roxbury riot.

Regarding the bias in the six *New York Times* articles, the police are overwhelmingly cast as veritable heroes while the protestors and rioters are all but blamed for violence and destruction. The June 4th front page coverage is highly sympathetic with police and leads off with a large photograph of a white policeman carrying two black children out of a burning building. The June 6th coverage, on the other hand, clearly invokes both racial and blame-assessment schemata with the title "Where the Action is in Boston: Angry Negro Youths Say, 'We're going to get' the Cops." The content of the coverage itself is not nearly as slanted as the graphics or the article titles, yet the biases of the *New York Times* writers if not the paper itself become readily apparent. Indeed, only one in six articles gives even significant focus to the potentially counter-productive role of Boston's police in quelling the riot, and this article was run nearly a full week after the riot began.

The local papers, on the other hand, certainly do contain higher levels of misreported information and biased depictions overall, yet they also provide remarkably greater detail and depth in the level of coverage, as they allocate much greater proportions of text to various forms of background information. Thus, in instances where biases and misreported facts are minimized, these sources have the potential to deliver more accurate, more detailed, and more even-handed coverage than their national

counterparts. Some of these reports, particularly in one Boston newspaper, are even nearly consistent with much of the interview data. The *Boston Herald*, for example, opens its six paragraph, Section A editorial in its June 6th edition with the following:

The riots in Roxbury over the weekend can only be compared to the symptoms of a disease that Boston has too long ignored. The pernicious effects of discrimination lead almost inevitably to the disastrous outbreaks of violence. If a man is denied an adequate education, he is denied an adequate job; if he is denied an adequate job, he is denied adequate housing; and if he is denied adequate housing, he is denied an adequate education. The cycle is almost impossible to break. When there is no hope, there is little to be lost in resorting to violence.

The writer then goes on to detail several specific incidents that occurred within the riot, including police behavior, rioter offenses, and innocent victims. Such lengthy sociological explorations into the causal mechanisms of the Roxbury riot are rare occurrences in the majority of the article data. It should be noted, furthermore, that the *Herald's* coverage, while at times opinionated, contains no clearly discernable pattern of sympathetic bias. Indeed, within the same article quoted above reads the following reflection on the events that transpired during the riot: “But to those who find the use of billy clubs and firing in the air distasteful, we cite the battered bodies and looted stores...to be even more distasteful.”

Further evidence of the *Herald's* unusually frequent background-oriented coverage can be easily seen in other article headlines. Late June coverage focuses on Boston College law students who elect to defend in court many of those arrested during the riot. The July 12th coverage, nearly a month after the riot's cessation, consists of a full page piece entitled “The Basic Reason for Riots” comprised almost exclusively of sociological commentary. Clearly, the *Herald* commits fewer of the predicted bias patterns, and the reported “facts” are consistent with other sources, suggesting an accurate portrayal as well. Of the six articles that the Lemberg Center collected for the *Boston Herald's* coverage of the Roxbury riot and its aftermath, *none* focus exclusively or even disproportionately on event consequences, portray the police in blatantly favorable manner, or fail to explore underlying issues and tensions. In addition, the coverage does not vary significantly over time and delves into background and causal material both near the time of the riot and for several weeks ensuing.

Nevertheless, the *Boston Herald* was by no means Boston's largest newspaper during the 60s. Indeed, the majority of the local coverage for Roxbury and the bulk of the Lemberg Center's archive for that particular riot (35/50 articles) can be credited to the *Boston Globe*. The majority of Boston citizens who read the newspaper are *Globe* subscribers. In summarizing the *Globe's* extensive treatment of the Roxbury Riot, the overall coverage appears to have much greater inaccuracy and inconsistency with raw numbers (arrests, injuries, police deployed etc.) and event sequences, and the bias, while extensive in both directions, is slightly

more sympathetic toward the police and city administration. The *Globe* flagrantly misreports a number of incidents, suggesting that the pressure for an expeditious printing may precipitate less precision in the reporting process. Regarding bias, the front-page coverage is rather typical of the majority of other print media sources, focusing for the most part on riot specifics rather than underlying causes or social consequences. Nonetheless, the coverage itself is at times rather even-handed and objective, even when the headlines are clearly slanted.

To elaborate, the June 3rd edition following the first night of rioting leads off with the rather objective, unbiased headline “Sit-in Escalates into Riot.” The article content is rather impartial and presents the sequence of events in an objective and unbiased manner. For example, the second paragraph states in no uncertain terms that the action taken by police to remove the protestors from the Grove Hall Office triggers the riot. The Sunday, June 4th paper, on the other hand, introduces a strongly slanted, blame-assessing bias with its opening headline “Shooting of Fireman Disrupts Efforts to Ease Boston Tension.” and focuses primarily on faulting the perpetrators and sympathizing with the city and the police. Remarkably, however, the next day’s coverage opens with the *opposite* bias as it leads off with the highly protest-sympathizing headline “Collins Orders Probe of Welfare,” suggesting that both riot and protest stemmed from legitimate issues. Indeed, later articles would detail what Collins himself admits to be an obsolete an often ineffective welfare system. One qualifying concern, however, is that the slant of these clearly protest-sympathizing articles seems to be as

strongly pro-Collins as it is pro-sympathy.

In fact, the mayor and the majority of Boston’s body politic are continually shed in a favorable, universally compassionate light. The only negative coverage directed at the city concerns the welfare system. This pattern is in stark contrast to the *Globe*’s trend of otherwise impartial overall coverage of the various factions involved in the riot; from police to black community leaders to riot participants, the *Boston Globe* typically presents a variety of material both sympathetic and critical to all parties. In one column of the June 7th coverage, for example, lies and article entitled “McNamara Lauds Riot Police Action.” In the next, we see the citizen’s views: “Police at Fault.” The mayor and his office, however, are consistently portrayed as being aligned with all factions of the city and sympathetic/supportive to each of them. The mayor praises the police one day and orders an investigation into welfare on the next. He calls for restraint from the protestors yet publicly displays sympathy toward their cause.

Unfortunately, in its efforts to inflate/maintain the Mayor’s favorable reputation, the *Globe* commits some rather serious distortions of facts. From his interview, it becomes apparent that Mayor Collins held a highly critical and unfavorable view toward the black leadership, especially during the riot. The *Globe*, however, repeatedly portrays the mayor as appreciative and grateful of the pivotal role of black leadership in curtailing the riot and the violence. One June 5th article opens with following two paragraphs:

Mayor Collins had high praise today for Negro community

leaders, who, he said, “have contributed significantly” to increased communication between city officials, police, and the people of Roxbury. He said the Negro leaders were a “stabilizing influence in a difficult situation.”

Clearly, the media is misrepresenting Mayor Collins views or at minimum emphasizing views inconsistent with the mayor’s genuine opinions. Even the welfare investigation may be analyzed as a violence de-escalating political ploy, as the majority of interview data suggest that the Mayor felt the MAW demands were already consistent with Director Cronin’s policies. This rather obvious misrepresentation by as highly reputable a newspaper as the *Boston Globe* begs the question of whether or not the city’s most prominent newspaper is being in some way constrained by political affiliations with the city’s power structure.

Thus, in summarizing the disparities across the two data sources for the city of Boston, the evidence in support of the predicted patterns of description bias is overwhelming. Even the most accurate and impartial coverage such as that in the *Washington Post* or especially in the *Boston Herald* do not elaborate or focus on the background issues in a concrete manner. The editorials and reflections address general social concerns but rarely if ever delve into problems specific to Boston, such as the Labor Union inaccessibility issues outlined by Mr. Bernstein, or the BHA shortcomings outlined by Mr. Ash. The news media rarely criticizes the police directly, opting instead to merely quote community leaders who might feel inclined to do so. Despite nearly

unanimous consensus regarding the disorganization and aggravating behavior of the police sent to Roxbury, few articles detail any of the specific police errata or discuss deep-seated, longstanding tensions between the police and the black community. The mayor and his administration are consistently portrayed in a positive light despite a wealth of information suggesting habitual conflicts and confrontations. Front page coverage, with only occasional deviation, serves often as a mere violence catalogue, outlining in cursory fashion the who, what, when, and where of the riot without exploring the causes in any depth. Furthermore, I observe evidence of blatant misreporting and outright erroneous representations across all sources, particularly in the smaller local ones, suggesting that accuracy might be a concern independent of bias.

Dayton

On Wednesday June 14th, 1967, SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) Chairman H. Rap Brown spoke to a crowd of 200 in a hot, humid community center in Dayton’s west side ghetto community. The fiery speaker criticized America for involving blacks in Vietnam while discrimination persisted in the states and urged young blacks to rebel against white oppression and discrimination within their communities. Citing neighboring Cincinnati, which had experienced a riot just a few weeks prior, Brown urged blacks to “take pressure off” of that town; many considered his words to be inflammatory, and within hours of his speech, West Dayton was in flames. Roving bands of black youths set fires, looted stores, and confronted

police on and off for two and half days. When the violence subsided, over 75 had been arrested, six hospitalized, and property damages ranged from \$150,000 to \$200,000. The majority of the Dayton's leadership was quick to criticize Brown and assess blame for the riot to his fiery speech. Even prominent black community leaders declared that the youth led riot was "aimless." In the weeks that followed, charges would be filed against Brown and several rioters as community members argued about the riot's causes and possible steps that might be taken to prevent further outbreaks.

Upon initial inspection, the June 14th riot in Dayton may appear to be the simple by-product of an inflammatory speech by a fiery speaker combined with the diffusion/contagion effects of recent rioting in nearby Cincinnati. Dayton's two primary local newspapers, the *Dayton News* and the *Journal Herald*, both cover the riot in a rather objective, fact-based portrayal much like the national coverage given to the Roxbury riot. The bulk of the coverage focuses on the plain details of the riot, listing and expanding on arrests, injuries, fires, stores looted, and other events in the riot sequence.

The pattern observed in Boston repeats itself in Dayton, with the national newspapers providing less detailed but more accurate (factually correct) coverage than the local sources. The *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* provided coverage of the riot that simply repeated in truncated form the same information found in the local papers, neither of which seems to have a decisive edge in terms of accuracy, and both of which display a predominately pro-police, anti-rioter bias. Some variation in local coverage was

observed, as the *Dayton News* seems to focus much more on background information, most of which is relegated to editorial sections. Yet its treatment of the riot suggests that the writers consider the disturbance to be a social ill in itself that must be corrected.

For example, the *News* features several editorial sections that commend the police and suggest increased displays of force as the best remedy to what a June 17th editorial deems "a bunch of hoodlums taking the law into their own hands." Indeed, the *News* seems eager to write off the June disturbance as a senseless display of hostility with little purpose beyond looting and property destruction. Indeed, an article run on June 15 features two popular black clergymen who themselves are unwilling to cite civil rights as a precursor to the violence. Additional coverage focuses on policies meant to deter future riots, such as increased police funding and curfews for 14-18 year olds. The only significant pro-protest article comes in the form of an informal interview of H. Rap Brown conducted by the *News* staff writers following the riot. During the session, Brown denies responsibility for causing the riot, citing "conditions" of white oppression such as poor education for blacks and concentrated ghetto poverty in the segregated housing schemes as the true causes for Dayton's outbursts. He claims "individuals do not start riots or rebellions. You attribute that to conditions that exist. I do not create these conditions."

Dayton's other white-owned newspaper, the *Journal Herald*, features little in the way of background or follow up information with the exception of a June 22nd article that features City Manager Graham Watt urging West Dayton residents not to consider

themselves “second class” citizens and at the same time scolding them for having “a meeting at the Wesley Center spewed forth in your community hate and violence and destruction.” A small number of articles in both papers make brief reference to violence that seems to have occurred the previous September (1966), and one even mentions a specially appointed committee (McLin) designated to make recommendations following that disturbance, but no further information is found in any of the print media sources.

Overall, then, the news media seems to give little substantive background information to the June riot with the exception of Rap Brown’s highly criticized speech, the contents of which must have been unimportant, as such information is not reported by the press. The police, when mentioned, are praised for their expeditious and thorough performance in de-escalating the violence. The city is no way implicated as playing any detrimental role in black grievances; the violence is treated by the press as random, unjustified, and counter-productive, and the perpetrators are dismissed as young, irrational youths looking to stir up trouble.

As expected, the interview data paint an entirely different portrait of Dayton altogether. As it turns out, the September 1966 violence was a rather severe riot sparked the murder of a black West Dayton man by a white city worker. Damage was extensive and the National Guard was called in to finally subdue the rioters. Following the riot, the city responded with “Operation Response,” a comprehensive program created under the recommendations of C.J. McLin, a black member of the Ohio Legislature and Dayton native appointed

by the mayor to investigate the riot’s causes and propose solutions. Operation Response would seek to create recreational and educational opportunities for underprivileged black youths, improve sanitary conditions in West Dayton (street and alley cleaning, street-light installation etc.), and work to provide jobs for dropouts or summer vacationing youths. The actual implementation of such changes, however, was plagued by shortcoming, as moneys were instead diverted to “beefing up” the police department. Indeed, by the time of the June 14th riot, the only significant change that had been imposed was an expanded transportation system that bussed youths from the ghetto to a downtown community pool on Sundays and Mondays.

In addition, much like Boston, personnel in key positions within Dayton’s educational, housing, and labor organizations cite a variety of deep-seated and longstanding sources of hostility, tension, and frustration between the city and it’s west-side black residents. Robert Schell, a white city commission member, notes the extreme white backlash against the Fair Housing Act, which is attempting to de-segregate the ghetto and move toward a more integrated population. Another white city commissioner, Joseph Wine, gives a lengthy tirade over the failing educational system in Dayton:

I think education lies at the heart of the matter. And I’m very passionate about this. I think of all the forms of discrimination, and of all the harmful effects of ghettoization, and of all the harmful effects of the racist tendencies in the community, that the most greatly manifest is

the educational system, which has failed to recognize the cultural disparity that exists between one segment of the community and another. Where they fail to accommodate the need for differential treatment, where they fail to take into account the cultural deprivation and its impact on the life of a student, and the preparation of a small child, where they have failed to make the curriculum malleable and conform to the need, this is the height of discrimination...the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Antioch College did this social cohesion study as a follow-up onto our Dayton Social Profile, that said in the remarks that these two sections of Dayton, the eastern and western sections of the city—are as unlike lingually, ethnically, culturally, civically, and spiritually as Paris and Chicago. And indeed they are. Now how in the hell do you deliver a uniform pattern of educational services to a community which contains that disparity? D12 8.

In short, Dayton was plagued by a variety of strenuous conditions, all of which contributed to the volatile atmosphere from which Rap Brown delivered his June 14th speech. Given the circumstances, the development of riot-level tensions was highly probable during the summer of 1967. The average Dayton citizen, however, would have scantily been aware of these issues, and would have dismissed the June 14th riot in much the same way the cursory newspaper coverage portrayed it. If

asked whether or not Dayton's state of community affairs could lead to another riot, the typical Dayton dweller would probably find little evidence to support such a protest. Ironically, just three months after the "aimless" June 14th riot, this is precisely what happened.

On the night of Saturday Sept. 19, 1967 Robert E. Barbee, a black Social Security Administrator, was walking from his parked car to his brother's home after a 125 mile drive to Dayton. He was approached by two husky white men dressed in plain clothes. As the men moved to confront him, Barbee turned and fled. One of the men, who would later claim Barbee had been carrying a gun, pulled a revolver and shot the agent twice in the back. Within minutes, Barbee lie dead on the street, shot by off duty Dayton police. The "gun" he was alleged to have been carrying turned out to be his tobacco pipe. Robert S. Collier, the murdering officer, ran home in a panicked state to gather one of his own guns, which he would later claim to have found in Agent Barbee's hand. After being arrested, Collier would be released on bond by a sympathetic white judge who reduced the charges to manslaughter on account of Collier shooting Barbee in the back. Dayton, on the other hand, experienced its third major riot following a fiery rally meant to protest Barbee's murder.

Remarkably, the local newspapers again cite the *rally* as the direct cause of riot, suggesting at most an indirect link to the murder on which the rally was based. Dayton's mayor and city officials once again "discounted the racial overtones of the situation...describing the rioters as a 'bunch of kids out on a lark'" (*Washington Post* 1967). It appears as though the same political alignment

dynamic that plagued Boston's leading newspaper affects Dayton's print media in a similar fashion, although the Chief editor of the *Dayton News* would deem his paper extremely liberal and in "full support of the Negroes' battle for dignity and for equal human rights and for racial justice" (D22 1). According to Mr. Fain, such progressive views are found principally in the papers editorial sections, from which the following excerpt is taken.

I'm back of our policemen 100%. We need their protection, and they should have more power over people. This day and age their lives are often in danger. They have to be fast on the trigger. Detective Collier was all shook up after he found out the man he shot did not have a gun. I really think he meant only to wound the man and protect himself. I don't blame him. With all these riots going on, you can't trust anyone. The man should have stopped when Detective Collier told him to halt. That should be a warning to others to obey a policeman. CATHERINE BAUGHMAN, Dayton.

As the following depictions will show, the levels of description bias observed in Boston and Dayton are by no means exclusive to northern cities.

Nashville

For Nashville, Atlanta, and Memphis, the interview/article discrepancies were fairly consistent across all three cities, one of which I now present in detail. In Nashville, several riots occurred following the April 4th assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, for which the

Lemberg Center collected nearly two-dozen articles in the weeks ensuing. 54 buildings were set on fire, several arrests were made, multiple injuries were reported, and costs, including damage estimates and National Guard expenses, neared \$1,000,000.

In evaluating the articles, I observe the predicted bias patterns in both local and national newspapers, with the most accurate but limited coverage appearing in the latter sources. Once again, article writers overwhelmingly focused on property damage, repressive forces, arrests, injuries, and criminal allegations rather than event catalysts, causes, or underlying issues. Also, interview data again contradicts or at minimum clarifies much of the information left uncovered or unexplained by the newspaper articles. In some cases, the discrepancies are so evident that one would be hard pressed to believe he/she is reading about the same event in both sources. Certain article headlines clearly invoke the racial schemata. The April 19th issue of the *Tennessean*, for example, highlights the vast expenses accrued by the National Guard during the riots: "Racial Trouble Duty Halves Fund of Guard."

Remarkably, despite the nationwide apprehension following the shooting death of Dr. King, only three articles (two local and one national) link the slaying of the civil rights leader with possible motives behind the violence. In the *Nashville Banner*, such coverage is relatively diminutive (one sentence in the opening paragraph) and insignificant, as the majority of the article focuses primarily on listing specific incidences of violence, highlighting the magnitude of the presence of civil and military authorities, and praising the brilliance of city officials, state troopers, and

National Guardsman for curtailing so much of the violence. This pattern of emphasizing the positive role of civil and military authorities is evident in the article headlines themselves, as in the April 12th acclamation of local police in the *Nashville Banner*, entitled “Experience Pays Dividends.” One article in the *Tennessean* reports a few incidents of police excessiveness, but the Mayor’s Human Relations Commission is said to be ardently investigating the grievances. In fact, of the 20 articles collected by the Lemberg Center for Nashville ’68, just one depicts the police in an even remotely unfavorable or critical manner, suggesting that either the Nashville Police Department was doing an exemplary job following Dr. King’s death, or the media was simply failing to convey police behavior accurately.

Furthermore, several local and even national newspapers seemed to function only as property damage/personal injury catalogues. The April 9th edition of the *Tennessean* lists three columns of bullet-marked events one right after another:

- Asst. Police Chief John Sorace was reported in satisfactory condition at St. Thomas Hospital after being struck Thursday night by a rock.
- Windows in a Television-radio shop on Decatur Street were smashed out and several items were taken, police said.
- About midnight, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at a white-owned liquor store at 1207 Jefferson St.
- The Campus of Tennessee A&I State Univ. remained calm after the

ROTC building was destroyed by fire Sunday Night.

This inflated level of objectivity coupled with the complete lack of exploration or even commentary into publicized or speculated sources or the conflict could leave a first time reader to conclude that the riots were simply random acts of sporadic violence. National newspapers were even more restrictive in their coverage than the local sources. A *Washington Post* article provides little more than an arrest estimate (350 as of April 16th). An April 7th *New York Times* article mirrors many of the local papers as an aggregate violence tabulation, and the Associated Press spends only three paragraphs summarizing the riot, mentioning Dr. King only with reference to the number of National Guardsman (1000) that were standing by during his funeral. It seems rather evident that the national newspapers, despite their nation-wide scope, are far less likely to devote or ascertain in-depth coverage of Nashville than northern cities such as Dayton and Boston.

In contrast, a probing of the interview data reveal a much more detailed picture of the causes behind the violence, rather than a simple tabulation of event sequences or statistics. Reverend T. Barnes, a white minister of the Edgehill Methodist Church, brings to light a myriad of deep-seated social conflicts that had existed between the Nashville Police Dept. and the greater black community. He begins by characterizing the department as abusive, exercising “misconduct and stepping beyond the legal bounds of policeman in the city. I think this is a very important issue right now” (G1 2). In addition to the long festering

police/community relations problem, Barnes also suggests the rather obvious event catalyst that so few of the newspaper articles were able to capture: “The genesis of this [rioting]...part of a kind of very widespread reaction to King’s death” (G1 3). He recalls reports from friends and colleagues of “homes entered, people seized for no reason” (G1 3). Barnes then quickly asserts that his experience with the police is not merely hearsay and delves into his first hand account of the April 7th violence following Dr. King’s murder:

The phone call came close to 8:30, it came from a Negro woman who lives in the project up here, who called to say that there was a youth, a Negro youth, being beaten by policemen with billy clubs in the yard in front of her apartment, and she was terrified that it was a kind of apartment ‘raking’ of the project there...she called to say ‘Is there anybody who can come up here and do anything to cut this off?’ and Jim Davis, one of the assistants here, went up...and 15 minutes later I went up to an apartment there, where there were about 15 people gathered. Jim was there, and Jim was on the phone trying to get Dr. Ed Mitchell, who was Chairman of the Mayor’s Commission on Human Relations...who might have some influence on the kind of excessive behavior that apparently was going on. Jim had already seen a number of youths put into paddy wagons, being kicked on their seats—I got there—I really knew of nothing to do—I just was reminded at

that point of how helpless I felt, and what a terrific sense of injustice I felt (G1 4).

After witnessing first hand some of the atrocities, Rev. Barnes decided to make a plea with the local media in hopes of calling attention to such grievances. Surely, he suspected, the press would capitalize on the opportunity to cover such an event as it was unfolding.

My reaction at that point was to call the local newspaper, and to get one of the reporters on the phone. When I told him about what was happening, he said, “Well, there’s not much we can do.” He said, “I don’t have a staff person that can be sent out.” [Interviewer]: The Tennessean or the...[Barnes]: The Tennessean yes. He said, “I don’t have a staff person I can send out, or a photographer.” He said, “Besides, there’s little I can do” (G1 4).

Barnes then goes on to detail first hand accounts of women and children being slapped and beaten by police, a man being arrested in his own bathroom for ‘loitering’, and the attempted murder of a lone youth being chased and shot at by 12 helmeted troopers. Mayor B. Briley himself noted during his interview that his officers were in a heated and irrational state of mind during the riots: “I felt like the emotional condition of my police officers...was such that they weren’t capable of ‘investigating’ themselves (tape interruption)” (G4 4).

After citing various other incidents of police brutality and abuse,

Barnes then goes on to criticize the powerless and apathetic Human Relations Commission. He asserts that what few grievances actually do get filed have little chance for effecting any policy changes or decisive sanctions of the police department.

What ever happened to you in a situation like that [riot], there would probably be little or no recourse. I say this because of a good bit of past experience...it seems rather clear to me that the black community in Nashville has absolutely no confidence in any kind of grievance procedure. [Interviewer]: The Mayor's Commission on Human Relations doesn't serve in that capacity? [Barnes] Well, my understanding is that there's a great deal of frustration at this point from them. They have signed affidavits and statements ad infinitum to the police department without any indication of effective action on any of these (G1 7).

Overall, Rev. Barnes and other interviewed community leaders paint a drastically different view of the civil authorities and city administrators so highly lauded by local newspapers like the *Tennessean* and shed light on the various sources of underlying tension between black residents and the city's political and police structure. Other interview data also help explain the burning of the ROTC building—an event covered by the newspapers only with regard to the amount of damage caused and the number of firefighters sent to quell the blaze. The *Washington Post* offered as explanation only that the

students at “the predominantly Negro Tennessee A&I University” had started the fire. Several Nashville interviewees, however, supplied much more informative causal reasoning, noting the student outrage over excessive force exercised by many of the some 8,750 National Guardsman dispatched to Nashville and Memphis. According to the persons interviewed, students simply associated one repressive faction of the military (the National Guard) with another that resided on their campus—an ROTC unit that had already been under heavy scrutiny in light of the Vietnam War. Despite the straightforward and generally well-known character of this underlying factor, it managed to completely escape the media's attention when the building was destroyed.

Overall, each predicted bias pattern is observed in Nashville, with perhaps the most extraordinary discrepancy lying in the atrocious behavior of the police department coupled with the relatively unblemished coverage afforded the police by the news media. In addition, there appears to be a significant fall-off in the already shallow level of national coverage by the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, suggesting that regional location may play a role.

One unanticipated finding from the Barnes interview is the direct pronouncement of the ineptitude of the local press; it seems that in addition to providing sizably greater detail than the articles, the interview content at times contradicts and even directly addresses media shortcomings. Two other cities analyzed reveal dynamics for which I had never really accounted or intended to find in great detail, i.e., complete selection bias (omission).

New Orleans

Upon initial inspection, New Orleans paints a very promising picture in terms of race relations and riot susceptibility by nearly all accounts. Interview content is overwhelmingly positive, even across races. Lack of violence is commonly attributed to open communication and good race relations between the black community and the city's political administration. In fact, I found no articles for New Orleans whatsoever, even following the assassination of Dr. King. According to the Lemberg Center's *article* tabulation, collective violence was simply a non-entity in New Orleans. However, a police report from April 7, four days after the assassination, divulges the destruction of four vehicles, the firebombing of grocery store, and roving bands of blacks with group estimates as large as 200 participants. Surely such violence, especially in city that supposedly experiences so little, would be considered newsworthy (if not extraordinary) and covered in great detail. Yet I find not one report in any of New Orleans' four local newspapers or any national newspapers including the *Times* and the *Post*. The event literally disappears from the records, and just four weeks later a prominent community leader can make no recollection of it ever having occurred.

Instead, United Fund Chairman D. Grayson sights several progressive and favorable attributes of his fine city, such as good communication and commendable police/community relations. When describing the recently appointed Human Relations Committee, for example, Grayson notes that the mayor has just selected a "young, leading Negro" (3) to the staff. Interestingly, however, Grayson remarks

regarding this new appointment that "this has been written up in the papers quite extensively" (3). He then goes on to comment further about New Orleans' favorable race relations.

These results are particularly disturbing. There seems to be no media evidence of any racial hostility being manifest in collective violence in the city of New Orleans in the year 1968, even during times when nearly every city in America was experiencing some sort of riot (*Post* King-Assassination). Police reports indeed confirm that violence is occurring, but Mr. Grayson and other civilians would have been unlikely to have access to police files. Anything that the public needed to know about the latest happenings in New Orleans, they would have to find in the local paper or on the nightly news. And when they pick up the daily newspaper, they read only of admirable cases of racial integration, such as the formation of a Human Relations Committee or the appointment of a young black man to the mayoral staff. And yet a probing of New Orleans' history prior to the riot years reveals a long and textured saga of protest-centered violence such as the "blow up regarding school integration in 1960" (H4 7). In addition, interviews of prominent black leaders reveal a slightly different story of New Orleans' political and economic structures. Although speaking optimistically about New Orleans overall, NAACP leader F. Chapital reveals a much more adverse picture of police/community relations.

There's only one area that I know...that might arouse the Negroes to flare up. And that is the action of our police officers in not handling the situations as they should. They're still

handling them in the Gestapo fashion. And White policemen...with power "Nigger, don't talk back to me, Nigger don't ask me no questions; do as I say to do, you don't have any voice." And that's one area that I'm afraid that something may happen (H6 3).

Overall, the New Orleans pattern reveals an unforeseen twist and enhancement of the media bias dynamic, for it highlights the detrimental consequences of media non-coverage rather than slanted or oversimplified coverage. Clearly, this extreme case of local selection bias of riots would have severe repercussions on public opinion, depicting a city with far more favorable race relations and socio-economic conditions than it truly possesses. Furthermore, if not for the absence of local coverage as well, the lack of national coverage would certainly add credence to the north/south coverage discrepancy.

Birmingham

The situation in Birmingham seems on initial inspection to be quite similar to that in New Orleans. Again the Lemberg Center seems to have collected not one single article, nor could I locate a police report or any other alternative source of information that might reveal the occurrence of collective violence. Once again, it seemed as though I had discovered conflict-free city. After thorough inspection, however, I found a far more interesting scenario in Birmingham than that which I observed in New Orleans. Indeed, my findings suggest one the most striking instances of political/mass media alignment imaginable. It seems

as though the greater Birmingham power structure in the late 1960s had literally commandeered the local press. The first evidence I found in support of this theory lies in the McGinty transcripts. McGinty, a Birmingham native, was a white Unitarian Minister, described by the interviewer as "a young man, painfully honest" (B4 1). Interviewed just over one month following the murder of Dr. King, McGinty had the following to say when questioned about whether any violent incidents of civil disturbance occurred following the assassination:

There may have been. They were not given any public attention, which is not uncharacteristic of B. [Birmingham-coded "B" in the interviews]. In the past they have often, in newspapers—kind of censorship has taken place on things that happened here...I don't know-so there could have been. I did hear that a car lot in Woodlawn, I believe, was-- someone threw Molotov cocktails into it after Dr. King's death and damaged some cars...You may be able to uncover other incidents, but I was not aware of any-and certainly none were reported in the communications media (B4 6).

Indeed, the Birmingham interview data display a flagrant media blindness that may suggest a right-wing conspiracy on the part of city officials and authority leaders. In Lemberg Center interviewer Marie Lyons' 33 page Birmingham Profile, a summary tabulation of all thirty-five interviews conducted in the city, she notes the following:

The Birmingham public evidently does not know...some of the news about racial disturbances is being controlled. The policy of playing down news of local disturbances such as occurred after the Martin Luther King assassination meets with the approval of the conservatives. They are fairly well satisfied...There seems to be a tacit agreement that anything is better than the kind of national publicity Birmingham had in 1963, when it was made to look like the "city of hate." One gets the impression that the public prefers the calm, unprovocative handling of the news (21).

Furthermore, she also suggests that the greater black community leadership is well aware of the deliberate selection bias:

In general, the Black leaders who were interviewed understood the effort to "relegate to obscurity" incidents that might encourage repetition. Birmingham has a real public relations problem of changing its image, and "they just can't shoot the bull in the newspapers." They know that the news media are under the pressure of "Operation New Birmingham" to exercise controls over anything that would damage the image of the city (22).

Clearly violence had indeed been occurring in Birmingham following the King assassination and perhaps even before. Nonetheless, like their counterparts in New Orleans, a vast

number of Birmingham citizens probably lived out their days without ever having substantial knowledge of the violent racial tensions that were playing out in their own city. Even if Birmingham citizens found other means to keep apprised of such conflict, the rest of the country, with absolutely no national coverage, most certainly would not have.

DISCUSSION

In summary, the disparities across the two data sources for all cities provide convincing evidence in support of the predicted patterns of description bias. Even the most accurate and impartial coverage does not elaborate on background issues to anywhere near the extent of the interpersonal interviews. Often, editorials and reflections do address general social concerns but rarely if ever delve into problems specific to the cities, particular if such explorations would cast a negative light on the city's political administration. Overall, the news media rarely criticizes the police, and when such coverage does occur, it too is usually relegated to editorial sections. Front-page coverage, with only occasional deviation, is often most likely to focus on the sequential and mechanical details of the riot without exploring the causes in any depth. Furthermore, I observe evidence of blatant misreporting and outright erroneous representations across all sources, particularly in the smaller local ones. With regard to bias, I can conclude no consistent pattern across newspaper type. Regarding regional variation, however, it is painfully evident the southern cities in the 1960s were plagued by massive effects of description *and* selection bias, revealing

a far more dangerous potential for distorted public opinions and consequentially misinformed attitudes and behaviors relative to the northern cities. Clearly, the effects of political ties, economic growth concerns, or other commercial pressures such as those explored by Phyllis Kaniss (1991) seem to be exerting much stronger influence on the southern newspapers.

Indeed, in Birmingham and New Orleans, the media deliberately abandoned coverage of collective violence and racial tension due to political and financial pressures. In addition, the observed trend of more limited yet often equally biased coverage in national newspapers suggests that mainstream Americans in the late 1960s were exposed to oversimplified and highly tainted views of racial conditions in distant cities.

In light of these findings, we as scholars are hard pressed to consider the depictions portrayed by the media as accurate or even reasonable portrayals of collective violence in the 1960s. The same press that in theory purports objective coverage, representing minority issues with the same fervor and tenacity as issues concerning the greater population at large, fails in my study to meet such ends in the face of political and economic pressures. Research implications are far reaching, as we must consider calling into question the viability of newspaper article data as the basis for qualitative analysis. Articles may still serve as valid measures for riot tabulation or quantitative analysis, yet the New Orleans and Birmingham examples call even that functionality into question.

I do not propose to conclude that interpersonal interviews are by any means *better* data sources regarding

considerations of accuracy or bias.

Indeed, as much as the news media may over-focus on superficial characteristics or riots, the interviews often *do not* detail these same facts. This shortcoming combined with the inherent subjectivity of any personal interview can only lead me to conclude that, taken by themselves, interview data may not reduce errors of inconsistency or bias any more than article data. However, I can assert that if an accurate qualitative portrayal of historical events is desired, such analysis must include *both* types of data.

In addition, the implications of this study may extend well beyond my current research. Michael Pfau (1995) began to explore the effects of racially framed events with reference to the effects they have on invoking psychological schemata. While such tests lie beyond the scope of this study, further analysis using such measures on my data might reveal similar patterns. One can but imagine how tainted and biased a viewpoint various city officials and policy makers would receive if they relied too heavily on accounts from local newspapers, which seemed dangerously allied with the interests of the local police authority and power structure. Such officials would be unlikely to get a truly objective and even-handed depiction of community grievances; rather, they would be just as likely as the papers to avoid addressing or confronting the underlying motivations and causal factors that underlie collective violence.

Another limitation of my study and an area that future studies might explore includes a modern day analysis of various print media sources for usage in a comparative study. An in depth exploration of media portrayals of Los

Angeles 1992 or Seattle 1999 might reveal a changing trend in the accuracy and quality of media coverage over the past 30 years.

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