

How Urban Violence is Addressed in the Media: Differences by Audience

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Researchers at Center for Public Safety Initiatives conducted phone interviews with diverse media outlets in Rochester in regards to the development of a future anti-violence media campaign through Project Safe Neighborhoods. The future campaign will focus on trying to interrupt gun disputes that escalate through retaliation. This paper is part of a series of papers that examine effective ways to devise campaigns and their messages in order to captivate the attention of the community most affected by urban gun violence and to encourage behavior change in those who might engage in gun violence. However, most of the media sources interviewed did not specifically focus on gun violence or on discouraging its use; instead they reported on unusual news and broader issues of violence. As such, this paper focuses on how stories about violence in general are portrayed in the media.

The interviews of several distinct media forums were analyzed and dissected into common themes. The variety of mediums we interviewed responded differently in regards to how they present violence to the public. However, because of the variety of mediums we interviewed such as newspapers and television, there was a shift in focus to how violence is presented in general. As a result of the interviews, we found that images are powerful tools in reporting, remaining objective is imperative, different types of media report about issues differently, media sources focus on starting dialogue within communities instead of providing solutions, audiences vary in their reactions to news, and media outlets with minority audiences tend to address the issue of gun violence more and try to focus more on positive things happening in the city more than the negative.

This paper does not include an extensive compilation of all of the media sources in the City of Rochester. The information provided by the interviewees can be used as indicators of what types of detail and information is seen as valuable and intriguing to the public, which can help make a campaign successful.

Media with Broad Audiences

In this section, we are going to discuss media sources with broad audiences, such as those whose audiences include all groups of people in a fairly large area. The media sources conversed about in this segment include a prominent newspaper and a nationally syndicated network

composed of radio, television, and news reporting. Our findings analyzed in the next paragraph include interview participants' responses to questions regarding their output of media content about violence. Violence explored throughout the interviews was not limited to street violence or violence only within urban settings.

We interviewed a newspaper company's criminal justice department, which reports about crime, criminal cases, the justice system, violence, and probation. They do not primarily focus on generating news specifically on street violence within the city, but they also write stories about other types such as domestic violence and issues happening nationally. Based on viewership, they have found that their broad audience is most interested in violence taking place in the community and unusual crime reports such as triple homicides. They try to report each crime equally and make issues in the city matter to individuals that may not be directly affected by what is happening, such as individuals in the suburbs. Displaying bigger pictures to broader audiences about crime, violence, and the justice system is one of their ultimate goals. They are primarily known to simply report news, and they try to stay away from giving the public solutions to issues in the community, such as violence. However, they do attempt to start community conversations through their reporting, which can lead to individuals taking a stand and becoming a part of the solution. They have also had projects in the past that have explicitly encouraged people to get involved, but their job is to lay out facts so people can "take the ball and run with it."

The programming network we interviewed does a lot of reporting on the economy, government, environment, arts, and entertainment. They also go out into the community and conduct surveys/polls to gain first-hand knowledge on what is interesting to the public. These surveys and any other feedback is taken into account and used in many of the shows and radio broadcastings. Their news is geared towards problems and information that affects everyone's lives. Unlike the newspaper company, they have found that their audience is interested in what they call "pocketbook issues" such as education and community events, instead of violence or crime. They try to shy away from reporting about violence because of the lack of feedback from the public in regards to such stories, but when they do, they focus on headlining stories that are horrific or unusual. Like the newspaper, they do not explicitly give advice on what should be

done about violence in the city, but they do sometimes have experts come on certain shows to talk about possible ways to address the issue of violence in the community and programs that are available. Some issues they face when reporting about violence is being objective and making sure it makes sense to the viewers and listeners. Another issue is figuring out how much detail to include in a story, especially if it is really graphic or gory. They are also focused on diverse and expanded audiences instead of just individuals in the inner City of Rochester.

The newspaper and programming service both discussed the power of images in reporting. They proposed that images taken of individuals in their natural state and setting are more powerful than those that are staged. For example, a picture of a shooting victim's mother crying as an immediate reaction to their child's death is what tends to evoke emotions in readers and viewers. Remaining objective is also important to these mediums; they have found that different people have different views and interpret a story differently. Ultimately, they do not focus on creating or examining solutions for street or gun violence in the city but mostly on the effects of violence on the community and the victims. They also shed light on available resources to address the issue of violence.

Sources with a More Targeted Audience

In this section, we are going to discuss media sources with a more targeted audience. We have defined target audiences as intended or preferred viewers based on demographics or other societal factors. The media sources mentioned throughout this portion of the paper include a newspaper, journalist association, and movie producer. Our findings are critical evaluations of their interview responses about distributing media or news about violence to the community.

The movie producer that we interviewed created a movie in Rochester and Buffalo about street violence experienced in inner city communities all over the world. The goal of the movie was to discourage youth from violence and life in the streets. The overall theme of the movie is to stop killing and start talking about ways in which the community can be made better and safer for everyone from all walks of life. The producer was born and raised in Rochester. He utilized his experiences from the streets and what he witnessed in the movie to capture the attention of different audiences, specifically those in the street or headed down that path. In having

experienced this, he wanted to create a movie that brought about dialogue in the community and that more importantly sparked change. The movie has received an ample amount of praise for its powerful message, perfect timing in the midst of the violence happening now, and the relatable story it tells to youth in the community. He presented violence as a community issue that can be remedied by the community coming together and fighting back against the issue of violence which affects everyone, both directly and indirectly. The movie illustrated a story that tried to put the audience in the shoes of different characters who struggled with the street life and outsiders that tried to help them. The message that the producer wanted the community to receive about stopping the violence was promoted through the use of real-life experiences in the movie and the positive dialogue from the characters to stop violence. He ultimately believed that people could help end violence by being a part of the solution instead of the problem, promoting positivity, holding forums with the community on the issue, and helping youth understand that there are other ways to deal with problems amongst peers that are more effective than retaliation or gun violence. The producer focused on filming situations that were realistic and promoted a message of non-violence, but there was little emphasis placed on any specific filming style to portray the message.

The journalist association is primarily comprised of African Americans. They write pieces geared towards the interest of the community based on what is happening in the inner city and how it is impacting families and young people. The stories selected about violence are usually chosen because of their recentness and impact on individuals in the City of Rochester. This association also focuses on other forms of violence such as domestic disputes. They look for information regarding what to do about violence and positive programs within the community addressing this ongoing issue. They have found that the powerful thing about being a journalist and writer is being able to create awareness about a topic to the public by doing so honestly and letting readers decide on the information they have received. Similar to other mediums interviewed, though their focus is somewhat different, they use their reporting of news to create dialogue within the community so the public can come together and formulate a plan of action for change.

The newspaper in this section primarily targets minority audiences, more specifically African Americans. Most of their publications are about issues that affect this specific group of individuals such as violence. Reporting about violence is often an issue for them because of the scrutiny African Americans get in association with it. There is also the issue of finding the right story and a way to not reinforce preexisting stereotypes about the minority community. Their background and racial identities allow them to produce news from a first-hand perspective, which they believe many other news outlets lack. They also try to change the negative image of African Americans and Latinos and focus more on the positive things being done by this specific community. Informing the public about events and beneficial conferences is another way in which this newspaper disperses current findings. Stories to report about are chosen based on their relevance and importance in the lives of minorities. They also try to partner with similar organizations that aim to help diverse minority groups with problems within the city.

All three of these forms of media believe that images are important assets to reports and should tell a story, even when the written part is missing. They should also elicit a cognitive and emotional response from their target audience. There is also a common consensus that minorities are often portrayed in a negative way, and they work to improve these beliefs. They also focus on ways of dealing with street and urban violence within the city and try to create dialogue amongst individuals to make changes in the area. They aim to promote more positivity while remaining objective and inclusive to audiences that are not from the city or a minority.

Discussion and Conclusion

Although the information gained from interviewing these mediums was valuable, we did not find a lot out of information about how media addresses gun violence in particular. The sources discussed throughout this paper were all concerned and conscious of the issue of gun violence and violence in general taking place within the City of Rochester. However, minority mediums that focused on generating news to the minority population took the issue of violence more personally because of the negative impact it has had on this specific community. Minority-targeted mediums also try to heavily promote and report positivity in the African American and Hispanic community because of how negatively they are often depicted and portrayed in the

news, especially in regards to violence. Mediums whose audiences were not directly affected by violence reported more from a neutral ground and focused on simply reporting the facts of stories pertaining to violence. Images were highly recognized as important assets to reporting about violence across all mediums, especially ones that are candid and not staged.

Addressing violence from a local level can often be a struggle for many media outlets. Even though different media sources have a variety of differences in terms of how they relay information about violence to the public, their ultimate goal is to keep the community, whether broad or targeted, informed so that there can be a creation of change by individuals in Rochester. However, as stated before, explicitly providing solutions to the issue of violence is not a goal of any of these mediums, except the producer of the movie who used the movie medium to promote the message of “stop the killing and violence.” They only aim to encourage behavior change by informing community members about how they could get involved in some initiatives; they do not aim to directly address the behavior of those actively involved in gun violence.

Prior to conducting research for the creation of an effective anti-violence media campaign, we had hoped to discover how we could effectively communicate a message of non-violence to individuals likely to be involved in retaliatory gun violence. However, because some of the media sources we interviewed had broader audiences that extended beyond the boundaries of the City of Rochester, we did not find a lot of information on what media reaches this high-risk group. As a result, future research and additional efforts will be needed to understand what mediums and messages are effective for the community as a whole. We will also need to examine what messages and mediums are effective for groups of individuals that are very likely to be involved in gun violence directly. This research on media campaigns applies to the entire community, which may ultimately form a broad media campaign that will address both groups (those involved in gun violence and the community as a whole) in different ways.