Race-Based Differences in the Chicago Sun Times
Newspaper’s Representation of Black and White Murderers and Victims

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Abstract

This thesis examines the race-based differences in the Chicago Sun Times Newspaper’s representation of black and white murderers and victims. Its research design implied collecting and analyzing data on the murder crimes in Chicago during the period between 2001 and 2011. The database of the Chicago Police Department was accessed to determine the demographic statistics of murderers and victims. In addition, the crime news covered by Chicago Sun Times were analyzed during the same period to explore the connection between the newsworthiness of murders and the race-based characteristics of their victims and murderers. The findings of this study revealed a disproportional pattern in the coverage of murders committed by blacks but did not confirm the existence of the same trend in reporting the news with black victims. It was also found that Chicago Sun Times used emotionally strong words and phrases to describe “black murderers” and often portrayed “black murderers” and “black victims” in a dehumanized and depersonalized manner. The results are discussed based on the literature review’s findings and explained with reference to the concept of newsworthiness.
1. Introduction and Aim

Specialists traditionally use the term “melting pot” to describe the history of the United States as a country that accepts all races and cultures. In her book *Race, Ethnicity, and Crime: Alternate Perspectives*, Williams (2012) argues that “[…] contrary to popular belief, the current status of the U.S. criminal justice system may prove that we are more of a tossed salad than a melting pot” (p.5). In other words, different groups of people living in the United States are geographically intertwined but the country never experienced significant social integration. This trend can be observed in the perpetuation of the residents’ division along racial lines.

The phenomenon of slavery imposed a substantial sociological impact on the U.S. society and led to the formation of discriminatory policies and stereotypes that were confirmed and repeated in media. Implications of this trend could be found even in the modern American society (Dukes & Gaither, 2017). While certain stereotypes are inherent to every race and ethnicity, not all these groups are discriminated based on them. The racial stereotyping of black criminals is an example of a situation when media spreads racial stereotypes. Through the linguistic representation of racial profiling of criminal offenders and victims, media shapes the public opinion and encourages citizens to consider blacks as potential perpetrators of crimes rather than victims (Lever, 2007).

A number of studies in the 1990s and 2000s illustrated the existence of racial stereotyping in U.S. media. The research conducted by Entman (1992) and Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) found that black people are more likely than white people to be portrayed as criminals and less likely to be pictured as victims. Furthermore, scholars also discovered a disproportional coverage of crimes committed by blacks in popular media outlets. The stories about black offenders meet many criteria of newsworthiness, including impact, human interest, and bizarreness (McLaughlin & Murji, 2001). The recent study designed by Dukes and Gaither (2017) confirmed the consistency of this trend.

Previous research on crime and justice in the news media consistently demonstrates that the media help to construct, rather than simply represent the interdependence between social reality and the problems of crime and violence associated with blacks. The biased portrayal of blacks in U.S. media is a disturbing phenomenon because it imposes a direct influence on the opinions of citizens and their behavior. For instance, the academic literature suggests that this tendency makes shop clerks pay an additional attention to black customers by monitoring all
their moves and even attempting to search them, which might be considered a manifestation of racial discrimination (Oliver, 2003).

Even nowadays, media regularly use a number of linguistic instruments to build an association between blacks and criminals. In particular, they often use such terms as “shady”, “thug”, “hood”, and “sketchy” while referring to blacks who were involved in crimes (Smiley & Fakunle, 2015). Moreover, in some situations, media portrayal of blacks who were involved in crimes was obviously inadequate, which led to catastrophic consequences, such as the lynching of Sam Hose in 2004 (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). The arguments laid out above illustrate the representation of blacks in media remains a topical research problem.

The aim of the present study is to explore the portrayal of black and white murders and victims in the Chicago Sun Times newspaper and compare them from the perspective of using linguistic constructions and strategies in relation to races. It was decided to choose the research method of a study and focus on investigating the stories covered by the Chicago Sun Times found in the News Bank. The paper will rely on two research methods. First, it is planned to utilize corpus linguistics in order to examine the “newsworthiness” of homicides committed by blacks and whites as well as those crimes in which blacks and whites were victims and compare this statistics with actual homicide data. Second, the study will employ a critical discourse analysis to investigate linguistic patterns that occur in the portrayal of black and white offenders and victims.

These two research methods will help answer the following research questions:

1. Does the Chicago Sun Times newspaper use of linguistic constructs reflect a disproportional racial bias to the disadvantage of blacks in proportion to actual crime statistics?
2. What are the key linguistic patterns in the representation of black and white murders and victims?
3. How does the social construction of race contribute to the newsworthiness of media stories covering murder cases with black and white offenders and victims?

2. Background

The previous section illustrated that the chosen research problem is significant both from the theoretical and from the practical perspectives. Prior to investigating in detail the phenomenon of black and white racial stereotyping in regards to the problem of crime and
violence, it seems justified to review the existing literature on media, race, and crime. The first subsection of this section will explore the social construction of race. By demonstrating how race is treated as a social construct, it will illustrate deep psychological factors relevant to the society’s perception of media stories about black and white offenders and victims.

Second, it is important to investigate the concept of newsworthiness and show what principles guide the choice of stories in media outlets. Finally, the third subsection will be devoted to an integration of these two concepts into a single framework that would clarify how race as a social construct can contribute to the newsworthiness of stories on crime featuring black and white offenders and victims.

The terms “black” and “white” have been chosen to represent each race just as the U.S Census Bureau does.

2.1 Situational Background: The Social Construction of Race

In order to explore the usage of race as a social construct, it seems necessary to reveal the impact of slavery on social consciousness. Nowadays, race is often treated as a social construct. In the book White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812, Jordan (1968) describes the basics of American race consciousness. In accordance with this scholar, white was the only color that received a positive emotional recognition while the black color, in contrast, was related to negative associations. The Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.) refers to the word “white” as “bright, radiant, clear, fair… morally “pure” in old English. At the same time, the black color before the sixteenth century was often perceived as “deeply stained with dirt, soiled, dirty, foul… disastrous, sinister…atrocious, horrible, wicked” (Hood, 1978). Such deep associations between colors and certain emotional meanings was indicated by Wayne (2014) as one of the main reasons making English colonists in North America believe that individual qualities and human worth of people could be inferred from the color of their skin.

During the times of slavery, the perception of African Americans was largely driven by the portrayal of black slaves by plantation owners. The positive and negative evaluations of slaves became an important basis for the development of racial stereotypes. Jefferson, one of the founding fathers, offered a number of racial differences between whites and blacks based on observations of his own slaves (Jefferson & Magnius, 1999). In particular, in accordance with the third U.S. president, blacks have a number of fundamental differences from whites that go beyond the color of their skin, including the adventurous nature, an inability to experience tender and delicate love, and a reduced need for sleep.
In an attempt to justify mistreatment of slaves, many slave owners spread results of their own “investigations” that were later considered as sources of factual data on racial differences between whites and blacks. Many works pictured slaves as lazy, ignorant, and uncivilized as opposed to hard-working, educated, and moral white Americans (Strausbaugh, 2006). At the same time, it is important to point out that not all these stereotypes featured exclusively negative features of slaves. In contrast, some of them portrayed these people as physically superior to whites because of extreme strength and endurance. However, regardless of the nature of these “observations”, all of them contributed to the dominant perception in the society that blacks and whites were two different races that were characterized by a set of varied qualities (Jefferson & Magnius, 1999). The long-term influence of such stereotypes apparently to a large extent prevented an effective integration of blacks in the U.S. society even after slavery’s abandonment.

In accordance with the racial stereotypes spread in the American society, human beings representing different races are simultaneously similar to and different from one another. Specialists indicate that perceived similarities between races improve people’s attitudes towards representatives of various races and modify their social behavior towards increased cooperation, which benefits the society by intensifying compliance with the rules and conforming to socially accepted behaviors. In contrast, perceived differences between racial groups negatively influence social behavior (Chen & Kenrick, 2002). It is important to emphasize that perceived differences between races may contribute to an actual difference between the behaviors of their representatives. In particular, as Murphy (1986) reported, the feelings of rejection and disapproval encourage people to engage in deviant behavior. In this situation, racial stereotypes formed during the times of slavery could have prevented many blacks from fully integrating into the U.S. society.

Even nowadays, a disproportional coverage of stories related to black and white offenders might negatively influence some representatives of the former and shift their behavior towards deviant trends. However, the most substantial negative influence of this phenomenon is the implicit message that the concept of race is broad and includes a wide variety of factors. In accordance with the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), the term “race” refers to “any of the “putative” major grouping of mankind, usually defined in terms of distinct physical features or shared ethnicity, and sometimes (more controversially) to encompass common biological characteristics.”

2.2 Theoretical Background: The Concept of Newsworthiness
The rapid development of globalization processes, advancement of the scientific and technological progress, and a natural growth of the world’s population have significantly increased the number of stories that could be covered by media. In this situation, media choose to focus on covering those events that could be considered as “newsworthy” and, thus, draw public attention.

The focus on reporting newsworthy stories imposes a significant influence on the public opinion. For example, in accordance with the official statistical data, the number of violent crimes reported in the United States has decreased from 1,435,123 in 2006 to 1,247,321 in 2017 (Statista, 2017). However, most Americans are under the opinion that this number has been growing since 2001. In accordance with the graph published by Statista (2017) more than 60% of citizens believe that crime rates have been gradually growing, even though this opinion contradicts factual data. Apparently, an attempt to cover newsworthy crime stories in media may be partially responsible for driving this stereotype.

To date, there is no agreement among scholars on the definition of the term “newsworthiness”. Some scholars tend to view newsworthiness in the form of a cognitive construction while others associate it with the professional competencies of journalists who should select stories based on their own gut, skills and experience (Schultz, 2007; Josephi, 2012). However, regardless of the exact approach towards defining this term, it seems justified to assert that the exact approach towards defining this term, it seems justified to assert that the overwhelming majority of studies consider newsworthiness as a set of criteria that journalists and other relevant stakeholders apply to news during the process of their selection.

This thesis will operate under the assumption that newsworthiness is a cognitive construction as opposed to news, which is a social construction. Newsworthiness is an important issue that affects the formation of news and the media coverage of prominent events. In order to better understand how news reporters assess newsworthiness of criminal offences, it is relevant to discuss the criteria of newsworthiness that they use in deciding which events get covered and which issues are understated or even fully ignored. Some crime news is not covered by media at all, some is covered in a few sentences, while other news makes it to the front page and is widely spread. Apparently, there are clear criteria guiding the process of news selection in most media.

The academic literature proposes many insights into the factors contributing to the events’ newsworthiness. The twelve newsworthy categories identified by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and later reclassified into ten categories by Harcup and O’Neil (2001) represent one of
the first attempts to provide a systematic guideline of newsworthy factors. Considering that this classification has proved its effectiveness and is still used by many scholars in linguistic, marketing, journalist, and interdisciplinary studies, it seems justified to utilize in this thesis.

In a seminal study, Galtung and Ruge (1965) conducted a study that identified twelve newsworthiness factors: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons and reference to something negative, which follow the subcategorizations scheme indicated below:

12 Newsworthiness Factors by Galtung and Ruge (1965)

1. Frequency
2. Threshold
3. Unambiguity
4. Meaningfulness
5. Consonance
6. Unexpectedness
7. Continuity
8. Composition
9. Reference to elite nations
10. Reference to elite people
11. Reference to persons
12. Reference to something negative

The first criterion refers to the frequency of an unfolding event. The threshold and unambiguity denote the event’s level of intensity and clarity for the audience. In order to constitute newsworthy news, an event should be culturally close to viewers and readers, continuous and unexpected. Ideally, it should also balance the overall composition of news stories in media and reference to elite persons. By the reference to persons, Galtung and Ruge (1965) determined the event’s personification in a connection to specific individuals. Finally, a reference to something negative is a requirement that results from the human nature’s observation. A link to negative emotions can translate into the better memorization of an event and its better spread via the word-of-mouth mechanism.

A later study conducted by Harcup and O’Neill (2001) found these twelve notions ambiguous and proposed another classification that involved ten categories presented below:

10 Newsworthiness factors by Harcup and O’Neill (2001)
1. Power elite
2. Celebrities
3. Entertainment
4. Surprise
5. Bad news
6. Good news
7. Magnitude
8. Relevance
9. Follow-up
10. Newspaper agenda

The stories about power elites are dedicated to the events revolving around powerful individuals, organizations, or institutions. Power elites are different from celebrities because of the varied lifestyles and perceptions by the society; therefore, stories about celebrities were distinguished by the scholars as a separate category. The factor of entertainment refers to such topics as sex, show business, animals and unfolding dramas. The criterion of a surprise apparently derived from the Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) concept of unexpectedness. The factor called “bad news” also seems similar with the scholars’ requirement of a reference to something bad. In contrast, so-called “good news” aims to cover those events that can cause positive emotions in people. In many cases, they are accompanied by the creation of the “heroic figures” and appointment of this image to some specific individuals.

The phenomenon of magnitude denotes the impact of an event. Naturally, events with a larger impact have more chances to become newsworthy than those happenings that only influence a small number of people. In a similar manner, newsworthy events should also be ranked high across the axe of relevancy. Finally, the last criteria proposed by Harcup and O’Neill (2001) are follow-up and newspaper agenda. The former determines the ability of news to produce further news in the future, keeping the target audience interested in the eventual turn of events. Simultaneously, the criterion of newspaper agenda determines whether specific news fit into the media’s concept and strategy.

Lundman, Douglas, and Hanson (2004) argue that the article written by Harcup and O’Neill (2001) is an important contribution in refining an understanding of the elements that make minority crime newsworthy. Previous research shows that the way in which journalists choose which stories end up in the news is highly subjective since there are no actual firm rules that must be obeyed (Schultz, 2007; Josephi, 2012). In accordance with Lundman,
Douglas, and Hanson (2004) newsworthiness may be considered as an observable social action. An eventual decision regarding the newsworthiness of an event is a result of its identification and evaluation by journalists and their editors.

To date, the question of what factors determine which crime news should be covered in media and which ones will be ignored remains unanswered. At the same time, the evidence reviewed in this article illustrates that this question is topical for the American society. The representation of news on crimes with black offenders or victims might be considered an important social problem that should be thoroughly addressed by stakeholders in order to ensure effective integrations of minorities into the U.S. society. By emphasizing crimes involving offenders and victims whose race harmonizes with the dominant racial stereotypes while ignoring events that do not fall under this classification, media, “reinforce prejudiced social structures, ideologies, and social practices” (Gruenewald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009). Such situations may negatively influence the social processes occurring within the state.

The available evidence provides a premise to assume that the concept of newsworthiness reviewed in this chapter may contribute to the coverage of crimes with blacks and whites as victims and offenders. For example, homicides committed by black offenders involving white victims appear often on media because they are deeply connected with the phenomenon of racism and the white fear of black crime (Grunewald et al., 2009). In this situation, it seems justified to conclude that newsworthiness is relevant to the problem under investigation since it apparently determines the amount of coverage received by different crimes in media outlets.

2.3 Specific Background: Media and Crime

The phenomenon of crime attracts the attention of media because it meets a number of criteria for newsworthiness that have been discussed in the previous section. At the same time, a simple description of most crimes is barely interesting to most representatives of the target audience. While a typical crime may be regarded as a “reference to something negative” and a “reference to persons”, it lacks other newsworthiness factors. Because of this reason, journalists distinguish between different crime news and choose those that are supposed to be the most capturing. The issue of race in this situation is one of the factors that can make common crime news more newsworthy by adding components of meaningfulness and consonance. The academic literature suggests that crime news may misconstrue perceptions of social reality based on the matter that these stories misrepresent the portrayals of racial groups and whether they occupy positive or negative crime roles (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson,
Clark, & Roberts, 1978). In this situation, it becomes evident that possible misrepresentations of racial groups in crime news might have significant implications for the entire society.

A number of studies support the idea that the US media tend to prioritize news about those crimes that were committed by blacks. The first studies on this matter were conducted in the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, the research carried out by Dixon and Linz (2000) found that blacks were more likely than whites to be portrayed as criminals on television news. In general, the likelihood of putting whites in beneficent roles in media is much higher than in case of blacks. In turn, blacks are much more likely to be portrayed negatively. The scholars conclude that the phenomenon of white victimization is often overemphasized whilst the portrayal of black victimization is often neglected.

One of the most important qualifications for achieving and maintaining an ideal journalistic balance in an article is the requirement of having credible, legitimate, and reliable sources that provide valuable information allowing a journalist to successfully compete with colleagues from other media. Since a journalist is writing an article himself or herself, it is natural that the eventual product will always reflect a certain bias of this person as well as bias of the editorial staff. Such specifics of media might be considered as unfair from the perspective of misrepresented groups. There are no outside forces working to impose a different side of the covered issue, which turns media coverage into the one-sided phenomenon that maintains biased attitudes towards some parties.

The coverage of crime news is different from the coverage of other events. Because most journalists obtain information on recent crime news directly from prosecutors, the data they receive is already colored by the biases of these prosecutors or other relevant stakeholders. The requirement of having credible, legitimate and reliable sources is barely applicable to the case of crime news since most journalists prefer citing the official statements of law enforcement officers (Entman, 2004). Unlike policymaking issues and debates on important reforms in some critical spheres, such as education or health care services, crime news are not supposed to be controversial. Journalists must accept and report the facts that they receive from prosecutors and make sure that their own bias does not affect their articles. However, scholars argue that it is often not the case (Entman, 2007).

Ultimately, the news information on crimes is delivered by prosecutors and their biased reports, which is then modified by journalists who add their own biased opinions to this matter and decide whether to include or exclude specific crime news in their articles.
There is a common opinion in the literature that many crimes that are actually mentioned in the media include prejudicial information. This is especially applicable to those news that receive sustained media attention. Dixon and Linz (2002) argue that a substantial part of such news do not harmonize with the guidelines proposed by the American Bar Association (ABA) and, thus, could be considered as prejudicial. This organization is a voluntary association of lawyers and law students that works independently under no specific jurisdiction in the United States of America. The association has developed guidelines of model ethnic codes that enforce serving the public and the profession by promoting justice, professional excellence and respect for the law. In accordance with Dixon and Linz (2002), journalists often tend to rely exclusively on the view of law enforcement officers because they do not examine the perspective of the opposing side. In most cases, journalists do not collect the information from the defense and do not talk directly to victims of offenders. As a result, their articles become biased.

The arguments lied out above lead to a conclusion that crime news contains a pro-prosecution bias. In the opinion of Dixon and Linz (2002), this is still more credible than relying on the statements of the defense attorneys as they are likely to be viewed as more biased than prosecutors due to the fact that their job is to get their clients off on all charges. However, while pro-prosecution bias is supposed to be less disturbing to the news’ credibility than pro-defense bias, it demonstrates that many journalists do not put enough effort into developing their stories as they fail to present the perspectives of both sides. The study by Dixon and Linz (2002) measured the pretrial publicity on Los Angeles television news and concluded that around nineteen percent of the defendants in crime news reports are associated with at least one category of identifiable prejudicial examples as confirmed by the ABA guidelines. A different study found that twenty-seven percent of suspected offenders in crime news were identified in the 1990s with the help of prejudicial information (Imrich, Mullin, & Linz, 1995). These studies demonstrate that the problem of racial misrepresentation of crime news is topical.

The differences between the ways in which blacks and whites are portrayed in crime news are one of the most well-known research problems that imply using the concept of newsworthiness to analyze media coverage. In accordance with Entman (1994), who studied the representation of different races in crime news on local television found that blacks were depicted in a more dehumanized manner than whites. The researcher also emphasized that the production of mass messages by minority groups remains low, which is one of the main reasons why most news are more likely to embody the whites’ perspective. Moreover, most
newspapers attempt to reach a large audience; therefore, they choose to target the white middle class. Interestingly, Entman (1994) also pointed out that news tended to show blacks in a depersonalized manner. While being depicted in crime news, blacks are more likely than whites to be shown without their names on the screen. The arguments presented by the scholar allowed him to conclude that blacks are often viewed as an undifferentiated group while whites are considered as a group whose members have individual identities. Furthermore, black defendants are more likely than white defendants to be shown in the physical custody of policy. This pattern could result in the creation of stereotypes of blacks being more dangerous for the society than whites.

The existence of race-based differences in the portrayal of blacks and whites as victims and offenders of crimes in the 2000s is a truism in the academic literature. A number of studies confirmed that blacks were much more likely to be portrayed as criminals. Interestingly, the available evidence provides a premise to believe that racial stereotypes in this field were closely intertwined with gender stereotypes. While the image of a black man was often broadcasted as the image of a “typical criminal”, criminalization of black women barely reached the same extent (Oliver, 2003). Therefore, it seems justified to assume that the problem under investigation is primarily connected not with the criminalization of all blacks but rather with the criminalization of black men. A young black man, who may be also referred to with a number of other words, such as “thug”, was a typical image of a criminal in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s (Oliver, 2003).

Unfortunately, there is no evidence to claim that the criminalization of black males is no longer a problem for the modern-day America. To many modern scholars, the existence of racial stereotypes in US media is also an obvious trend. Therefore, they choose to explore not the degree to which these stereotypes are transmitted by media but the extent to which they influence the world outlook, attitudes, and behavior of members of the target audience. For example, Dixon (2007) found that the portrayal of blacks as criminals influences the opinion of citizens on such issues as death penalties and the dangerous nature of the modern world. Those people who were exposed to a large amount of news featuring blacks as offenders are more likely to vote in favor of death penalties. Moreover, they are also more likely to perceive the world as dangerous, trying to behave in a more cautious way.

The study carried out by Dukes and Gaither (2017) is one of the few recent studies on black stereotypes in the depiction of crime news. The scholars carried out an experiment among 453 participants in which they exposed respondents to the crime news in which the race of a victim and an offender was randomly selected. Results of this research demonstrated
that the race of offenders and victims significantly influences the perception of crime news. This impact is substantially mediated by the previous exposure to news. In case if a person learns about a crime committed by a black offender with a white person as a victim, he or she often perceives such news in line with previously formed racial stereotypes promoted in media. The scholars argue that people are more likely to recommend justifiable homicide in a situation with a black offender than in the situation with a white offender. In other words, the non-proportional coverage of crime news largely affects the perception of American citizens.

The academic literature suggests that racial stereotypes that had been prevalent in the US media in the 1990s could still be found in modern media. Creighton, Walker, and Anderson (2014) conducted a large quantitative study in Nebraska in which they sought to investigate the content of crime news reported by four television networks from Omaha. The author also used data on actual crime rates in the state. Results of the research provide a number of interesting insights into the problem under investigation. First, they show that crime stories account for more than 60% of all news depicted by television networks. This conclusion supports the statements made above about the newsworthiness of crime news in comparison with most other stories. Second, they confirmed the existence of evident race-based differences in the Chicago Sun Times’ representation of black and whites crimes. While only 31% of people arrested in Nevada during the last three years were black, approximately 70% of crime news of the four chosen television networks depicted crimes with blacks as the main subjects (Creighton, Walker, & Anderson, 2014). These numbers illustrate that the depiction of crime news remains highly disproportional from the perspective of race-based differences.

It is of paramount importance to emphasize that the depiction of blacks in crime news should not be considered as an isolated incident. As any other social phenomenon, crimes are closely connected with the global social stereotypes that exist in a society. Thus, the popularity of crime stories with Blacks as the main offenders may be regarded as a part of the bigger problem. The study by Punyanunt-Carter (2008) revealed that Americans are much more likely to perceive stories about low-achieving blacks as realistic news than those featuring high-achieving blacks. In other words, the US society expects blacks to comply with negative racial stereotypes. This phenomenon imposes a negative influence on media. In an attempt to secure a high number of viewers and readers, they try to satisfy the need of the target audience in consuming news where blacks are depicted as criminals. In this situation, the race-based differences in the Chicago Sun Times newspaper’s representation of black and white crimes might be a result of the global racial stereotypes that still exist in the US society.
From the perspective of the problem under investigation, it is crucial to emphasize that not all the US media demonstrate the same racial stereotypes in their coverage of crime news. Weaver Jr. (2016) argues that online streaming platforms propose a much more culturally diverse content than traditional media. Shows from Netflix also are characterized by certain underrepresentation and misrepresentation trends; however, the degree to which they embrace them is much lower than in case of traditional media. Moreover, this number has been decreasing on an annual basis. Despite such a promising trend, the author points out that the situation is still disturbing. A disproportional depiction of black and white crimes affects the behavior of citizens, which, in turn, influences the reality.

The report published by the Topos Partnership (2011) highlighted five crucial problems related to the blacks’ representation in media: limited positive associations, numerous negative associations, the “problem” frame, missing stories, and the overall underrepresentation. As a result of these factors, the public is more likely to embrace more punitive approaches to problems and less likely to analyze structural problems. Most people develop exaggerated views on the phenomena of criminality and violence as well as exaggerated expectations for race-based disparities.

3. Design of the Present Study

3.1 Research Design

This study has a research design. The phenomenon of newsworthiness has been widely explored in the academic literature. Moreover, many scholars have successfully applied it to analyze the portrayal of whites and blacks in various US media. At the same time, an analysis of the literature demonstrated that there is an evident need for further research in this field. Most studies on the chosen research problem were conducted in the 1990s and the 2000s. Considering a rapid pace of the societies development and the advancement of globalization, it seems of paramount importance to examine to what extent modern media in the United States maintains racial stereotypes when depicting crime news. In this situation, the choice of a research design seems rational. It is planned to choose publications of one media and describe all the relevant aspects of the chosen problem with the help of examples drawn from this media.

The study will adhere to the research of pragmatism. It might seem that realism, which stipulates that the reality may be analyzed exclusively via the sensations and images that could be drawn from people’s perceptions, is optimal for this investigation. However, the
main goal of this study is to use objective information to confirm or reject the existence of racial stereotypes in the way in which the Chicago Sun Times newspaper reports crime news. Thus, it is of paramount importance to use exclusively, objective data, such as the number of certain stories in media’s news or the number of offenders from different races who were involved in murders during a specific period of time. The philosophy of pragmatism will ensure that the study is not biased and does not make any conclusions that do not directly derive from the data collected in its empirical part. At the same time, unlike positivism, it will allow the author to integrate qualitative research methods into the investigation.

Even though this thesis will investigate the depiction of crime news on a long timeline, it is planned to carry out this research in one installment. As stated above, it was crucial to ensure that the eventual results of the study would be bias-free and rely exclusively on objective data that are independent from people’s perceptions and opinions. Because of this reason, it was decided to select a quantitative research methodology for collecting data. Simultaneously, the process of data analysis will be driven by both quantitative and qualitative methods.

3.2 Research Methods

The present study uses a mixed method research (MMR) design, combining critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) and corpus linguistic analysis. Corpus linguistics is used to examine the “newsworthiness” of homicides committed by blacks and whites as well as black and white victims in comparison to actual homicide statistics, and critical discourse analysis is used to investigate linguistic patterns that occur in the portrayal of black and white offenders and victims. By using both methods, the research gains in breadth and in depth of understanding through the approach from different vantage points. In this case, quantitative methods enable the conduction of an analysis through the existence of the true differences in race in context (beyond random variation) in the prevalence of themes within the articles. Once the difference is found, qualitative methods can fill the gap left by numerical data by providing context to the overall analysis and addressing the meaning conveyed by these quantitative variations.

The quantitative data will be collected from the Chicago Police Department’s Detective Division that has a database with information pertaining to murders that occurred in the city during the period between 2001 and 2011. This database contains various types of information on each type of crime, including murders. In particular, it provides sufficient details on the demographic characteristics of victims and offenders. An analysis of this
information will allow making a conclusion about the justification between racial stereotypes related to crimes.

At the same time, the data on media coverage will be retrieved from Chicago Sun Times from the World News Bank. It is planned to choose the same timeline and collect the information on all the local crime news that were depicted by this newspaper. A simple comparison between the percentage of murders committed by blacks and the percentage of murders committed by blacks that were depicted in the newspaper will show whether the media continue maintaining the same stereotype.

4. Results

The first stage of the empirical part of this research entailed collecting information on the number of murders in Chicago during the period between 2001 and 2011 with an emphasis on the demographic characteristics of murderers and victims.

![Figure 1](image.png)

Figure 1. Number of Victims by Their Race 2001-2011

Figure 1 is taken from the Chicago Police Department’s Detective Division database and it shows that there is clearly a vast difference between the black and white victims. From 2001 to 2011 it shows that there are less then 50 white victims every year however, there are over 400 black victims from 2001 to 2003 and from 2004 to 2011 that number decreases to under 300. It is crucial to emphasize that the demographic data on some murder victims was missing; therefore, the figure lacks information about the race of a small part of murder crimes’ victims for each year.
The data demonstrates there are around 300 black murderers every year from 2001 to 2011. In contrast, there are less then 50 white murderers every year from 2001 to 2011. An analysis of the crime news published in Chicago Sun Times provided a significant amount of qualitative data. The next stage of the study was to determine those results that met the required criteria. The results that were picked out clearly specify the race of the offender or victim. All other articles either: 1) do not deal with murder cases, 2) happened outside of the 2001-2011 time span, 3) the race is not specified, or 4) general statements without facts.

Chicago Sun Times was chosen because it is a tabloid newspaper so they can use language more freely. Also, in most of the white searches race is not specified, one just assumes that the murderer/victim is white because it is the “standard race”. Eventually, the following searches were discovered:

Black murderer (457 results, 14 found),

Black murder victim (1,781 results, 9 found),

White murderer (67 results, 8 found),

White murder victims (799 results, 12 found)

The importance of these data is connected not only with the number of times when murderers or victims of different race groups have been mentioned but also with the exact words, phrases and sentence structures with which journalists referred to them. All the 43 reports with relevant data can be found in the Appendix 1.
An analysis of the stories depicting victims of murders shows a substantial difference between the ways in which white and black victims have been portrayed. The first and most evident aspect of this difference is connected with the phenomenon of depersonalization. In accordance with Entman (2004), blacks are often depicted in media in a depersonalized and dehumanized manner. Empirical data support this statement as Chicago Sun Times clearly stated the names of only three murder victims depicted in nine stories about black murder crimes’ victims. Moreover, it seems justified to assume that two of these stories prioritized the race of a person as its key quality. In particular, the news about the deaths of Jack Moore and Anthony Stuckey was finished with the phrase:

(1) “No excuse can explain why a group of young black men beat two other black men to death over a traffic accident”.

Such a phrase provides readers with an erroneous impression that the fact that the victims were black was an important reason of their death. In contrast, almost all the news with white victims of murders refer to these people as personalities and clearly state their names, ages and occupations.

The second essential issue relevant to the research problem is that Chicago Sun Times clearly considers the fact of belonging to the white race as an automatic assumption. In other words, journalists are likely to mention that a victim is black but not likely to mention that he or she is white. The race is usually mentioned only in those situations when it is critical for the story. In particular, journalists explicitly point at a victim’s race when describing the body of a person who has not yet been identified.

The third most important matter is the language that is used when describing the victims. None of the stories with white victims contain any information that could undermine the image of this person in the eyes of a reader. At the same time, the descriptions of black victims are sometimes characterized by such attempts. Such phrases as:

(2) “All three victims were African-American and had a history of prostitution, police said.”

negatively affect the perception of crime news by the target audience. Moreover, in many cases, news about these people take a generalized form with phrases such as:

(3) “another black man prone to violence” or “a group of black men…beat two other black men”.
This is another argument in support of the statement made above about the depersonalized manner in which media report murders of blacks.

While the language used in regards to describing black victims does not contain such evident patterns as the one utilized to portray black offenders, there are still some interesting signs of racial discrimination in it. From this perspective, it seems relevant to demonstrate the pattern that can easily be found in this phrase:

(4) “the victim was an unarmed black man shot 50 times on the eve of his wedding”.

A reference to the fact that this victim was unarmed is barely relevant for the story’s content. At the same time, for some reason, journalists and editors decided to put it into the message. It seems justified to assume that this aspect conforms to the findings of Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak (2009) in regards to arguing that racial stereotypes are present even in modern-day media. This specification about the “unarmed” status of a “black man” illustrates that readers are apparently expected to assume that any black victim of a murder is supposed to be armed.

An analysis of the coverage of murders in Chicago Sun Times demonstrates a significant difference between the portrayals of white and black offenders. The fact of belonging to the black race is emphasized in the description of all the murders committed by blacks. In most cases, it is justified because journalists described suspects who hypothetically could help the police in finding these people. However, in two situations, this mentioning was not only unjustified but also offensive for the black race. In one story, journalists pointed out that:

(5) “He came over to harass me. He was very aggressive," Deem said. Then again, as a 6-foot-3, 300-pound black man in an interracial marriage, Baker might have made a lot of people nervous in DuPage County”

In other words, the fact of belonging to the black race was for some reason supposed to make people “nervous”. This statement harmonizes with the findings of Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak (2009), who believe that modern media popularize the myth about the “White fear of the Blacks”.

Unlike the descriptions of black offenders, descriptions of white offenders usually mention the names of suspects whenever possible but do not point at their race. Apparently, journalists and editors are under the impression that the white race of a person is assumed by readers by default. Only two stories mention the white race of offenders. The first one used
this approach to emphasize a distinction between the white race of the offenders and the black race of a victim while the other one did it to help the police detect a suspect.

In a number of stories, journalists chose to use emotionally strong words and phrases to describe African American offenders. Such phrases as:

(6) “the brutal murder”, “beat other black men to death”, and “300 pound black man…who might have made a lot of people nervous”

influence readers, encouraging them to develop distrust for blacks. Sometimes journalists used even stronger phrases, such as “an African American garbage man”. The available evidence provides a premise to believe that by keeping words such as “a garbage man” right after the race of a person in a sentence, media ensure that the target audience has a negative attitude not only towards a specific offender but also towards the entire race that he or she represents. This man’s job description is not relevant to the fact that he has committed a murder and can be seen as a negative description because of that.

(7) “Three years later, an African-American garbageman named Christopher McCowen is arrested and subsequently found guilty after a sensational trial.”

The academic literature suggests that this instrument is one of the prevailing mechanisms of creating and conserving social stereotypes about races. (Oliver, 2003).

While the actions of specific offenders might qualify for the use of such terminology, it is important to emphasize that Chicago Sun Times does not use the same language when depicting the murders committed by whites. In contrast, journalists and editors prefer utilizing neutral language, such as:

(8) “gave his guilty plea” and “was arrested in the murder of his family”.

Even murders with shocking details that were committed with extreme cruelty, such as the killing of a 9-year old girl who has been stabbed thirty times by her own father to death, described as:

(9) “Richard L. Lyons struck his 9-year-old daughter with a lockbox, stabbed her in his van 30 times— and then took her to the hospital in the same van and claimed “she may have been bitten by a dog,” prosecutors alleged. (Prosecutors: Dad stabbed girl 30 times)”,
with the help of neutral language without using any emotionally saturated words to characterize the white offender.

Apparently, this regularity might be explained with the help of the concept of newsworthiness. In line with the principles discovered by Harcup and Neill (2001), it seems rational to assume that the use of strong epithets filled with negative emotions towards black offenders aims to increase the newsworthiness of an event. By doing so, journalists ensure higher values of the news’ threshold and unambiguity. Regular coverage of murder crimes committed by blacks has been increasing the parameters of meaningfulness and frequency. In contrast, the use of emotionally strong words to characterize white victims could make news more ambiguous as it would contradict the opinions of some readers on the social situational and crime statistics in the country.

5. Discussion

Results of the study illustrate that Chicago Sun Times had a clear tendency towards considering crime news with black murderers as more newsworthy than those with white murderers. The same tendency was also reported for white victims as compared to black victims. The official statistical data reported by the Chicago Police Department stipulates. The number of murder crimes with white victims constituted approximately 24%-35% of the overall number of crimes committed in the city whilst around 65%-76% were committed by blacks. Similar numbers could also be found in data in the news reported in Chicago Sun Times. The number of news with clearly identified black victims that were covered by this newspaper during the period under investigation constituted almost 69% of the overall number of murder crimes covered by it. In other words, journalists and editors paid an adequate amount of attention to the crimes with white victims while underreporting the crimes with black victims.

This finding contradicts to the inferences made by many other authors investigating the same problem, including Dixon and Linz (2002), Entman (2004), and Creighton, Walker, and Anderson (2014). In accordance with many studies, crime victims who represent the black race remain underrepresented in media, which is a part of the overall underrepresentation problem described in the Topos Partnership’s report (2011). This trend has disturbing implications for the society as pointed by Chen and Kenrick (2002) and Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak (2009).

An analysis of the data on crime news with the clear depiction of the offenders’ race demonstrated that Chicago Sun Times tends to exaggerate the percentage of murders
committed by blacks to a significant extent. During the period between 2001 and 2011, approximately 25%-30% of murders conducted in the city were committed by white people. However, they accounted for 14.66% of all the news on murder crimes reported by Chicago Sun Times during the researched period. In other words, the tendency towards underreporting crimes committed by whites is still evident, but its extent is not as substantial as reported by many other empirical studies.

To date, the overwhelming majority of empirical studies on the reporting of crime news in the United States demonstrated a clear tendency to report news about crimes committed by blacks rather than those committed by whites, which led to the disproportional coverage of news. Such conclusion could be found in numerous studies, including those carried out by Dixon and Linz (2012), Entman (2004), and Creighton, Walker, and Anderson (2014). Based on the existing evidence, it is barely possible to determine the reasons behind the fact that this study showed a certain tendency to exaggerate the number of murders committed by blacks but did not show a pattern of underreporting the killings of blacks, although one may put forward several assumptions on this matter.

First, it is possible that the coverage of murders is different from the media coverage of other types of crimes. Application of the concept designed by Harcup and O’Neil (2011) illustrates that murders are a-priory supposed to generate more newsworthy messages than other types of crimes, such as thefts or robberies. The aspect of “bad news” is more significant in them than in any other type of crime. Second, one might speculate that the fact that a black person becomes a victim of such a crime may be considered as “unexpected news” from the perspective of many US residents driven by stereotypes. As a result, the element of unexpectedness strengthens the newsworthiness of such news, making them promising stories for newspapers.

The second important finding of this study is connected with the use of linguistic patterns in the representation of black and white murder offenders and victims. Stories that can be found in the Appendix 1 demonstrate that Chicago Sun Times tends to use different linguistic constructions for depicting white and black parties of murder crimes.

In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of this difference, it seems justified to discuss the specifics of representing victims and offenders separately.
6. Concluding Remarks

This thesis was dedicated to the race-based differences in the Chicago Sun Times newspaper’s representation of black and white murderers and murder victims. An analysis of the data collected in this research shows that the pattern of racial discrimination was relevant to the coverage of murder crimes in Chicago Sun Times during the period between 2001 and 2011. The use of linguistic constructs reflects a disproportional racial bias for the disadvantage of blacks in proportion to actual crime statistics. This tendency was observed both in regards to black offenders and to black victims. In accordance with the Chicago Police Department’s database, around 65%-75% of victims and offenders in murder crimes during the period under investigation were blacks. At the same time, in the murder crimes covered by the newspaper, 87.21% of offenders and 68.61% of victims were blacks. In other words, the newspaper does not have a trend of underreporting the killings of blacks but tends to exaggerate the problem of murders committed by black offenders. Simultaneously, it is important to emphasize that this disproportion is not as significant as in most studies on the matter, which may be explained by the gradual evolution of the US society and the attractiveness of murder crimes from the perspective of newsworthiness.

The study supports the academic literature’s findings in arguing that the media use emotionally strong words and phrases to characterize black offenders and do not utilize them when describing white criminals. Moreover, news about the murders with black offenders are often analyzed from some general perspective when one case is considered a manifestation of the global trend whilst there are no signs of this tendency in regards to the coverage of murders committed by whites. Chicago Sun Times often portrays black victims and offenders in a dehumanized and depersonalized manner whereas white participants of murderers are usually referred to as personalities with names and surnames. Finally, the last relevant issue related to the use of linguistic constructs is the use of sentences filled with strong emotions when depicting white-black incidents. A substantial number of them aim to encourage the “White fear of Black”.

The available evidence provides a premise to believe that the differences between the representation of black and white offenders and victims in murder crimes can be explained with the help of the newsworthiness characteristics. By using patterns described above, journalists and editors ensure the news’ frequency, unambiguity, meaningfulness, and threshold. In general, results of the study support the hypothesis that the social construction of
race contributes to the newsworthiness of media stories covering murder cases with black and white offenders and victims.

The current study may be considered a valuable research that generates a number of findings for further investigation of the problem. At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that the scope of this study is limited to one newspaper, one city, and one type of crime. There is not enough evidence to assert that the patterns discovered in this research could be used to describe the media representation of black and white crimes throughout the United States. In further research, scientists are recommended to adapt broader scopes and implement large studies that would target various media and different audiences.
References


Topos Partnership. (2011). Media representations and impact on the lives of Black men and


Appendix I

1. "There is no making sense of the rage that killed Jack Moore, 62, and Anthony Stuckey, 50. No excuse can explain why a group of young black men beat two older black men to death over a traffic accident. (Neighbors are stunned—but some can understand)"

2. “Leslie Brown, Eureka Jackson and Siobhan Hampton were found strangled in abandoned buildings in the area bounded by 113th and 120th streets and from Michigan to Harvard avenues, according to a community alert issued by police.

The body of Hampton, 30, was found naked March 30 in an abandoned first-floor storefront that was once a fast-food chicken restaurant at 11322 S. Michigan, police sources said.

Jackson, 38, was found in November 2008 in an abandoned building at 34 E. 120th St., and Brown was found murdered in January.

All three victims were African-American and had a history of prostitution, police said. (Man charged with murder of 3 women strangled on South Side three women on South Side)"

3. “Just as he’s pulling the trigger, cop bullets whiz through the window and kill him. That’s what we need in the media, another dead black man prone to violence and killed by the cops in suburbia. (A ‘Desperate’ cry for help)"

4. The victim was an unarmed black man shot 50 times on the eve of his wedding. (AP Engages Pastors, Parishoners About Racism In US)

5. "He came over to harass me. He was very aggressive," Deem said.

Then again, as a 6-foot-3, 300-pound black man in an interracial marriage, Baker might have made a lot of people nervous in DuPage County.
Baker married Doreen, who works for the West Chicago Police Department, in Las Vegas in 1995. They separated in 1997. She got custody of their son, but he had visitation rights and regularly had the boy in Carol Stream. He also had a previous marriage. (What drove Willie Baker to murder?)

6. “Channon Christian, 21, and Christopher Newsom, 23 were white and their alleged killers are black, the couple's brutal murder has been fodder for people who are convinced that the "mainstream" media conspired to keep this sickening black-on-white violence out of the news. (No conspiracy, just another heinous crime - Media didn't try to cover up black-on-whitemurders)”

There is no making sense of the rage that killed Jack Moore, 62, and Anthony Stuckey, 50. No excuse can explain why a group of young black men beat two older black men to death over a traffic accident. (Neighbors are stunned-but some can understand)

7. “Three years later, an African-American garbageman named Christopher McCowen is arrested and subsequently found guilty after a sensational trial. (True Crime Roundup)"

8. Jesk, a 24-year-old Army vet, gave his guilty plea to Judge John J. Hynes Wednesday in a Bridgeview courtroom full of his relatives and his in-laws, according to his attorney.

He and Heather argued in the basement of their home in the 4600 block of 101st Street in Oak Lawn on Feb. 27, 2010, after attending a fund-raiser with other family members. (Iraq war vet gets 17 years for killing wife)

With his wife and three children in caskets nearby and his parents watching, Christopher Vaughn was arrested by police here Saturday morning in the murder of his family. (Dad arrested just before burials home - Crime scene evidence leads to 8 charges of 1st-degree murder in shooting of Oswego family)

9. Richard L. Lyons struck his 9-year-old daughter with a lockbox, stabbed her in his van 30 times — and then took her to the hospital in the same van and claimed “she may have been bitten by a dog,” prosecutors alleged. (Prosecutors: Dad stabbed girl 30 times)