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Blame the Media? The Influence of Primary News Source, Frequency of Usage, and Perceived Media Credibility on Punitive Attitudes

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Abstract: *Few studies examine the effect of media (particularly the Internet) on punitive attitudes of college students and none examine the credibility of sources of news that students consume. This study employs survey research to examine the effect of media in multiple news formats (i.e., national and local television, national and local newspapers, and Internet news), the frequency of news media usage, and perceived news credibility on punitiveness among 373 college students enrolled in a state university in the Western region of the United States. Of those studies that examine punitive attitudes among college students, it is rare for researchers to consider the impact of media and media credibility despite the fact there is clear evidence that media effects are strong predictors of attitudes in the general population. The results of this study indicate that although no primary news source was related to punitiveness those respondents with a higher frequency of exposure to local TV news showed significantly more punitive attitudes. Contrary to expectations, the influence of the Internet as a news source on punitiveness appears to be unimportant as is the credibility of any source of news on punitive attitudes*

Keywords: education, Internet, media, media credibility, punitive attitudes

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, crime control policies have become increasingly punitive with the intent of "getting tough" on crime. These more punitive measures are the opposite of the rehabilitative ideal that gave way to penal welfarism, which dominated penal policy in the early and mid-20th century (Cavender 2004; Garland 2001). These "get tough" policy initiatives, which include mandatory

minimum sentences, such as Three-Strikes Laws, as well as the War on Drugs, have resulted in an unprecedented number of adults being incarcerated in correctional facilities or being placed in community correctional programs in the United States (Austin and Irwin 2001; Beckett and Sasson 2000; Blumstein 2007; Costelloe, Chiricos and Gertz 2009; Currie 1998; Garland 2001; Hogan, Chiricos and Gertz 2005; Mauer 1999; Tonry 1995; Vogel and Vogel 2003; Whitman 2003). Since the

early 1980s, the heavy reliance on incarceration as a penal policy has resulted in a 373% rise in the prison population (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2009). Offenders convicted of minor crimes during this period have been subjected to more stringent sentencing policies (i.e., prison and intermediate sanctions instead of probation) than those sentenced in the mid-20th century under penal welfarism and individualized rehabilitation policies. Moreover, inmates are serving lengthier prison terms because of mandatory minimum and career-criminal statutes (Blumstein 2007).

While “get-tough” policies have prevailed in recent years, it is important to note that over the last two decades, crime has declined (at roughly 5% per year). Thus, it is difficult to understand why the American criminal justice system embraced punitive policies and embarked on the “get-tough” movement in the 1980s – a movement that continues to impact correctional populations today at both the institutional and community levels (Austin and Irwin 2001).¹

While there are various explanations for the support of punitive measures, there are scholars who feel that in the United States these policies do not operate without strong, widespread public support (Cullen, Fisher and Applegate 2000; Garland 2001; Roberts, Stalans, Indermauer and Hough 2003; Warr 1995). What can lead to an increase in support for punitive crime control policies? Factors identified in previous studies include individual background/demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, age, race, education level attained, and political ideology), regional differences among the American public, religious affiliation/religious salience, racial attitudes, and crime salience. Generally speaking, research has concluded that males, whites, southerners, conservatives, religious fundamentalists, and individuals with negative attitudes about racial minorities and those who are undereducated are more likely to support punitive policies (Applegate, Cullen and Fisher 2002; Barkan and Cohn 1994, 2005; Baumer, Messner and Felson 2000; Borg 1997; Britt 1998; Chiricos, Welch and Gertz 2004; Cohn, Barkan and Haltzman 1991; Costelloe et al. 2009; Feiler and Sheley 1999; Hogan et al. 2005; Leiber and Woodrick 1997; McCorkle 1993; Rossi and Berk 1997; Sandys and McGarrell 1997).

In addition to the extensive list of factors discussed above, when examining the increase in support for punitive crime control policies, the effect of the media (i.e., television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet) has also been considered. Without a doubt, crime is considered a serious and newsworthy issue and several studies suggest that most people receive information about crime from news reports (Barak 1994; Surrlette 1984, 1990; Vandiver and Giacompassi 1997). However, the question must be asked – are these news reports accurate and does the manner and frequency of coverage increase crime fear and crime control punitiveness among the viewing public?

The generation, presentation and accuracy of crime news have been considered for several decades. Reports vary across medium and format, as well as by region of the country (i.e., larger urban areas may be selective about which murders are reported due to the frequency of homicide and space limitations, while smaller suburban areas are likely to report on all homicides as they are more infrequent). Newsprint and electronic media tend to contain more stories that focus on sensational or bizarre violent crime (Chermak 1994; Chibnall 1975; Garofalo 1981; Humphries 1981). Furthermore, a study by Chermak (1998) indicates that crimes with multiple victims or other elements deemed newsworthy (i.e., rare victim characteristics) are given precedence over stories that involve a single victim.

As previously noted, the crime rate in the United States has declined while public support for punitive measures has increased; some argue that this is largely because media outlets portray crime as a major social problem, and emphasize violent and exceptional crime for entertainment purposes or political gain, giving the public an erroneous view of the nature and extent of crime in our society (Barak 1994; Beale 2006; Cavender 1998, 2004; Dowler 2003; Dowler, Flemming and Muzzatti 2006; Garofalo 1981; Krisberg 1994; Marsh 1991; McDevitt 1996; Oliver 1994; Pfeiffer, Windzio and Klemann 2005; Roberts and Doob 1990; Surette 1984, 1990, 1998). Given this proposed skewed view of crime in the news, it is not surprising that the media has been accused of using crime reports to generate fear among the public and even to create moral panics for the purposes of enacting legislation (Chermak 1994). Others have identified the media as the most important influence in the shift from penal welfarism to the current crime control model (Cavender 2004).

It would be erroneous, however, to state that the media act alone in generating crime news. Media outlets only have access to what criminal justice agencies provide as source material for crime stories; thus, agents of criminal justice, especially the police, have a significant influence on which crime events may become crime news (Chermak 1994; Chibnall 1975). Consumers of crime news also have an influence as media outlets cater to “perceived viewer demand and advertising strategies, which frequently emphasize particular demographic groups with a taste for violence” (Beale 2006:398). Newspapers may print crime stories in order to lure readers in and television programming – news, primetime drama programs and reality shows – highlights crime because citizens are both fascinated with and concerned about crime and criminals. Through crime coverage, the media can accomplish its responsibility of communicating information in order to help protect the public while satisfying its commercial interests in capturing more market share.

Neglected in previous research examining the effect of media on punitive attitudes of the public, are public perceptions concerning the credibility of the media sources they access. While scholarship in the field of communications has examined citizens' perceptions of the credibility of news sources, there currently are no published studies (of which we are aware) that examine perceptions of media credibility and the role that "credible" media outlets have on punitive attitudes.

The purpose of the present paper is to: (1) explain the link between media usage and punitive attitudes, (2) review the key sources of news that citizens utilize, (3) examine the literature published by communications scholars that discusses citizen perception of credibility of these news sources, and (4) empirically test the perceptions of media credibility and the effect that these perceptions have on punitive attitudes.

We investigate these issues among 373 college students enrolled in a state university in the western region of the United States. Among studies examining punitive attitudes of college students, it is rare for researchers to consider the impact of media (particularly the Internet) and media credibility, despite the fact there is clear evidence that media effects are strong predictors of attitudes about crime in the general population (Cavender 2004; Chiricos, Eschholz and Gertz. 1997; Chiricos, Padgett and Gertz. 2000; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Liska and Baccaglioni 1990; Pfeiffer et al. 2005). Thus, this study makes three important contributions to communications research and the punitive attitudes literature. First, it is one of a few studies that specifically examines the effect of media on punitive attitudes among college students. Second, it is the first study (of which we are aware) that explores the Internet as a form of media and its possible effects on student punitiveness. Third, this is the only study to consider assessments of media credibility on punitiveness. Perceptions of credibility are important as they may impact how one processes the content of media messages which, in turn, could impact punitive orientations or the lack thereof.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Consumption and its Effect on Punitive Attitudes: An Overview

Without a doubt, crime is a societal problem that should exact concern from the public and policy makers alike (Cavender 2004). However, it has been argued that "claims makers mobilize the media to get their concerns onto the public agenda" (Cavender 2004:337). This proves to be an effective strategy, as the more saturated an audience is with a particular issue, the more concerned they are by it (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). News consumers are indeed saturated with crime-focused stories; research

indicates that most local TV stations begin the evening news with a crime story, that one third of news stories concern crime, and that crime news is twice as common as political news (e.g., see Klite, Bardwell and Salzman 1997; Angotti 1997). In recent years, researchers have argued that crime has ceased to be reported solely for informative purposes and is increasingly presented as entertainment (Beale 2006; Cavender 1998, 2004; Dowler 2003; Dowler et al. 2006).

Violent and sensational crimes are often highlighted in news reports, serving to increase the fear of crime and/or the perceived likelihood of victimization the public may experience. Recent studies indicate the more citizens watch local television news reports, the more they consider crime to be problematic in their community (Chiricos et al. 1997; Chiricos et al. 2000; Eschholz et al. 2003). As such, they may also be more supportive of punitive criminal justice policies (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Pfeiffer et al. 2005).

Media Sources and Punitive Attitudes

Media sources vary in style and content and can, therefore, have differential impacts on how citizens view crime and criminals. National television news has increased its crime coverage since the early-1990s. Much of this shift has occurred because of the need for profit in a time of economic pressure, as local television news has increased its coverage of crime stories, making crime the number one topic addressed by local television news (Beale 2006). Similar to national television news, local newspapers have begun to feel the effects of budget reductions in the past twenty years. In efforts to work with limited funding, newspapers print sensational crime stories in tabloid form to gain readership (Beale 2006).

Prior to the 21st century, very little was known about how and how often the Internet was used as a news source (Flanagin and Metzger 2000, 2001); thus the impact of the Internet as a news source on punitive attitudes is unknown. However, it is important to consider news about crime that is communicated through the Internet because of its growing popularity with the American public. As of 2006, 74% of American adults engaged in online activity, and surveys have revealed that the Internet has improved how adults retrieve information about news and health matters, purchase merchandise, fulfill employment obligations, and pursue hobbies (Rainie 2010). Moreover, considering that the Internet is less regulated than television, newsprint, and radio, it is possible that the coverage of crime and offenders could be even more graphic, dramatized, and distorted than traditional news sources.

Public Perceptions Concerning the Credibility of News Sources

When considering the variety of media channels available to the public, it is important to examine public perceptions concerning the credibility of these sources. Contemporary communications research examines the perceived credibility that citizens attribute to these sources (Kioussis 2001; Schweiger 2000). Credibility can be defined as the level of trustworthiness and expertise to be attributed to the medium under consideration. If individuals perceive a particular form of media to be credible, they will grow to rely on this outlet, thus increasing their exposure to news from this source (Wanta and Hu 1994). News source credibility is especially important given that citizens have constraints on their time (Schweiger 2000) and, because of this, may be more likely to select one medium from which to receive news reports. Thus, the medium selected by members of the public as a primary source for news stories may be driven by perceived credibility.

Communications scholarship has delineated two important forms of credibility. The first is *source credibility*, which focuses on the key communicator in the medium of interest. For example, a news anchor may be especially adept at presenting the content of a news story, which can lead to greater trust among listeners/viewers, and a corresponding likely increase in the credibility of this news medium for these citizens (Kioussis 2001). Key components of source credibility include perceived safety, qualifications, dynamism, competency, and objectivity (Berlo, Lemert and Mertz 1970; Kioussis 2001; Whitehead 1968). The second form of credibility is *medium credibility*, whereby people judge the form of media itself. While views concerning the credibility of each medium differ, it is important to note that there seems to be an overall questioning of the credibility of each media source by the public (Johnson and Kaye 1998). The research concerning the medium credibility of major media outlets will be detailed below, as it is important to understand these differences when considering the present study.

Not as much is known about the level of credibility the public attributes to newspapers compared to other news mediums because, generally speaking, the public is judging news print as a whole, and not individual news writers. While many American citizens still read news print media, television news is generally held to be more credible than newspapers. Unlike newspapers, the public attributes their perception of credibility to the individual anchorman/anchorwoman, because seeing the person reporting an event can lead to increased trust in news reported (Kioussis 2001).

As of 2009, 14% of Americans “read a newspaper online yesterday,” up from 9% in 2006, with younger generations being more likely to read news online than in print (Pew Trust 2009). However, studies indicate mixed

findings about the perceived credibility of the Internet as a news source. When comparing the perceived credibility of traditional media to the Internet, some have found the Internet to be less credible as a news source (Flanagin and Metzger 2000; Pew Research Center 1996), while others have reported that the Internet is viewed as more credible (Brady 1996; Johnson and Kaye 1998). Considering the pervasive use of the Internet today, it is clear that more current studies concerning the use and credibility of the Internet as a news source are needed before firm judgments can be made.

Given that previous research has demonstrated the strong influence of media on public attitudes about crime, this study explores the role of media in multiple news formats (particularly the Internet). In particular it examines the frequency of exposure to sources of news media, and seeks to determine what effects, if any, the perception of news credibility among multiple media sources has on punitive attitudes. The potential impact of the Internet as a news source on punitiveness is also explored relative to other news sources. The influence of the Internet on attitudes about crime could be particularly salient among a population that is highly likely to utilize Internet—much like other media sources (particularly local TV news) hold influence over those with differential levels of exposure (Chiricos et al. 1997; Chiricos et al. 2000; Eschholz et al. 2003). One of the most important demographics related to Internet access and use is education (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 2004; Rainie 2010; Robinson et al. 2003). Those with a college education are more likely to use the Internet to obtain news and information than those with less education (Robinson et al. 2003). Ninety-three percent of 18-29 year olds use the Internet—the highest proportion of use when compared to any other age group (Rainie 2010). Furthermore, students pursuing a college education spend an average of 21.3 hours a week online (EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research 2009). Thus, college students are a salient population with whom to examine the impact of Internet news sources, the amount of time spent using the Internet for accessing the news, and the perceived credibility of such sources on punitive attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

A self-administered survey was conducted during the spring semester of 2008 on a university campus in the western region of the United States. The university is rated a Carnegie Engaged University and is a public, doctoral-granting four-year institution with a student population of above 25,000. The majority of students on this campus are between the ages of 19-21, 52% are female, and slightly over 13% are minorities. A wide variety of classes were purposively chosen as a source of the student sample in order to represent several disciplines,

as well as upper and lower division courses in which instructors agreed to allow researchers access to their classes. Only students who were present on the day that the survey was administered had the opportunity to participate in the study. All students were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that their responses would be anonymous. Approximately 373 students completed the survey with a response rate of 80%.

Select demographic characteristics for the sample are displayed in Table 1. As shown, there are a higher proportion of females (63.4%) than males (36.6%) in the overall sample². It is not unusual to realize greater survey participation from females (Lavrakas 1987), particularly in samples comprised of college students (e.g., see Mackey and Courtright 2000). The most common race/ethnicity was White, which was not surprising given that Whites comprise the majority of students at this campus. Minorities constitute just over 20% of the sample while representing only 13% of the total campus population.³ Most of the respondents in the sample are between the ages of 18-22. Twenty-six percent of the sample identified as a Criminology and Criminal Justice (CRCJ) major or minor⁴. Fifteen percent reported having been the victim of a violent crime and 37% reported having been a victim of a property crime.⁵

Dependent Variable

Punitive attitudes (PUNITIVE) were measured by respondent support for a variety of criminal justice policies⁶ that have been used in previous studies (Chiricos et al. 2004; Costello et al. 2009; Hogan et al. 2005). Respondents were asked “On a scale of 0-10, with 0 indicating no support and 10 indicating strong support, how much do you support the following proposals?” These included:

- Making sentences more severe for all crimes;
- Using the death penalty for juveniles who murder;
- Sending repeat juvenile offenders to adult court;
- Putting more police on the streets, even if that means paying higher taxes;
- Taking away television and recreational privileges from prisoners;
- Locking up more juvenile offenders;
- Making prisoners work on chain gangs;
- Limiting appeals to death sentences;
- Using chemical castration for sex offenders;
- Executing more murderers; and
- Using more mandatory minimum sentencing statutes such as Three-Strikes Laws for repeat offenders.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Sample

Variable	Attribute	Total
Sex	Male	36.6%
	Female	63.4%
Race	White	79.3%
	Black	2.5%
	Hispanic	14.7%
	Other	3.4%
Age	18-19	36.5%
	20-22	53.0%
	23-25	5.8%
	26 & over	4.7%
Major	CRCJ	26.8%
	Other	73.2%
Classification	First year	23.0%
	Sophomore	30.5%
	Junior	29.4%
	Senior	17.1%
Victim - violent	No	85.0%
	Yes	15.0%
Victim - property	No	63.0%
	Yes	37.0%

Since aggregate measures of punitiveness were commonly used in previous research (e.g., see Chiricos et al. 2004; Costello et al. 2009; Hogan et al. 2005), an index

Table 2. Punitive Attitude Index

Item	Mean (st. dev.)	Alpha
Making sentences more severe for all crimes	4.41 (2.72)	
Death penalty for juveniles who murder	2.98 (2.99)	
Sending repeat juvenile offenders to adult court	6.06 (2.88)	
Putting more police on streets, even if higher taxes	4.27 (2.67)	
Taking away TV & recreational privileges from prisoners	4.53 (3.38)	
Locking up more juvenile offenders	4.10 (2.78)	
Making prisoners work on chain gangs	4.53 (2.97)	
Limit appeals to death sentences	4.39 (3.08)	
Use chemical castration for sex offenders	4.61 (3.55)	
Executing more murderers	4.73 (3.40)	
Using more mandatory minimum sentencing, such as 3 strikes laws	5.58 (2.92)	
11 item total punitive index	50.21 (23.03)	.889
Index range: 0-110		

of punitiveness was created by summing the abovementioned items (Cronbach's alpha .889) with a high score constituting more punitiveness (range 0-10). Table 2 contains standard deviations and means for each specific item and for the index as a whole. The mean for the index is 50.21.

Independent Variables

The relationship between media and punitiveness is the primary interest of the present study. To investigate the influence of news media consumption on punitive attitudes, we utilized variables that assessed respondents' primary media source for news, frequency of exposure, and perceptions of credibility of various sources of news.

The primary media source variable was designed to measure the salience of the news source for each respondent to determine which medium was most important to them as suggested by Weitzer and Kubrin (2004). Respondents were asked "What is your primary source of crime news information?" and then prompted to select: Internet news (INTERNET),⁷ local TV news (LOCALTV), national TV news (NATLTV),⁸ local newspaper (LOCPAPER), national newspaper (NATLPAPER) or other (OTHERNEWS) whereby respondents could only select one primary news source. Each of these items was dichotomized (1, 0) with Internet news serving as the reference category.

The frequency of media news exposure was measured by several questions that asked respondents about their media usage patterns (regardless of what they indicated was their primary news source). The first variable examined respondents' reports of whether they had ever accessed crime news on the Internet (NEWSNET). This variable was dummy coded (0, 1), with 1 indicating that they have accessed crime news via the Internet. Respondents were also asked how often they used the Internet for accessing news information (OFTENNET), with responses ranging from never to several times per day. TIMESLOCTV examined how many times the respondent watches local TV news in a typical week, while TIMESLOCPAP measured how many times they read the local newspaper in a typical week. These items, or similar variations of them, have been utilized in previous research (e.g., see Chiricos et al. 1997; Chiricos et al. 2000; Eschholz et al. 2003; Weitzer and Kubrin 2004).

Media credibility was measured by asking respondents to "rank the credibility or believability of the following news sources on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being not at all credible and 10 being very credible." Respondents ranked the credibility of the Internet, local TV news, national TV news, local newspaper, and national newspaper. This measure most closely aligns with what communication scholars call "medium credibility" whereby the medium itself is judged by its own merit (e.g., see Johnson and Kaye 1998). Due to high correlations among the media

credibility measures, to avoid multicollinearity issues in the multivariate analysis, combined measures were created to represent three central indicators of credibility that represent the Internet (NETCRED), local sources of news (LOCALCRED), and national sources of news (NATLCRED). The internet credibility measure (NETCRED) was used as is (i.e., 0-10). The average score for the credibility of local TV news and local newspaper is used as a measure of local news credibility (LOCALCRED). Likewise, the average score for credibility of national TV news and national newspaper is used as a measure of national news credibility (NATLCRED). These measures were combined based on the relevance of local news in predicting attitudes regarding crime in previous research (Chiricos et al. 1997; Chiricos et al. 2000; Eschholz et al. 2003).

Control Variables

The salience of crime is an important predictor of punitiveness with high issue salience producing more punitiveness (Chiricos et al. 2004; Costelloe et al. 2009; Garland 2001; Hogan et al. 2005). Crime salience was measured using a number of variables to differentiate between affective and cognitive indicators. These variables include: victimization, the fear of crime (a more affective indicator of crime salience), respondent concern about crime (a more cognitive indicator of crime salience), and one measuring perceptions of the prevalence of violent crime in the community (e.g., see Chiricos et al. 2004; Ferraro and LaGrange 1987).

Victimization was measured by asking respondents if they had ever been a victim of violent crime (VICTVIOL) and property crime (VICTPROP). Those respondents indicating crime victimization were coded as 1 and all others as zero for each respective type of crime victimization. Studies have produced mixed evidence on the impact of victimization on punitiveness with some finding victims are more punitive and other studies finding no effect (e.g., see Applegate, Cullen, Fisher and Vander Ven 2000; Barkan and Cohn 2005; Baron and Hartnagel 1996; Costelloe 2004; Lane 1997; McCorkle 1993; Rossi and Berk 1997). One reason for these mixed findings relates to methodological differences in these studies, the manner in which victimization was operationalized (i.e., most studies do not disaggregate by victimization type), and the sample under examination. Nevertheless, victimization continues to appear as a control variable in research on punitive attitudes.

An array of studies has demonstrated that the fear of crime is an important predictor of punitive attitudes with those who are more fearful reporting higher levels of punitiveness (Applegate et al. 2000; Barkan and Cohn 1994; Costelloe et al. 2009). For this study, the fear of crime was determined by respondent answers to "On a scale of 0-10, with 0 being not fearful and to being very

fearful, how much would you say you fear the following crimes?" These crimes included: being murdered; raped/sexually assaulted; attacked by someone with a weapon; having someone break into your home; having your car stolen; being robbed or mugged on the street; having your property vandalized/damaged; being cheated, conned, or swindled out of your money; being approached on the street by a beggar or panhandler; and being beaten up or assaulted by strangers.⁹ These items were added to create a fear of violent crime index (FEARVIOL) and a fear of property crime index (FEARPROP), with a higher score indicating more fear on both (Cronbach's alpha of .918 and .871, respectively).

To measure concern about crime (CONCERN), respondents were asked "On a scale from 0-10, with 0 being not at all concerned and 10 being very concerned, how concerned are you about crime?" The respondent's perception of crime prevalence was measured by asking if they believed violent crime in the area they lived had "increased, decreased, or stayed the same in the past year?" For the purposes of analysis, this was converted to a dummy variable (increased=1) by combining the "decreased" and "stayed the same" response options.

Those students reporting a declared or intended major or minor in Criminology or Criminal Justice (CRCJ) were coded as 1 and all others as 0.¹⁰ We control for this variable as some studies suggest criminal justice majors are more punitive (Lambert 2004; Mackey and Courtright 2000), while other studies indicate they are less punitive in their attitudes about crime (Bohm and Vogel 1991; Lane 1997; McCarthy and McCarthy 1981; Tsoudis 2000). The divergent findings in these studies are interesting given that research has consistently demonstrated that education generally tends to decrease punitiveness (e.g., see Barkan and Cohn 2005; Baumer, Messner and Felson 2000; Britt 1998; Chiricos et al. 2004; Rossi and Berk 1997).

The influence of college experience is argued to decrease punitive orientations, although this can vary by major and the punishment policy under examination (Farnworth, Longmire and West 1998). Others disagree indicating that on many campuses over half of first-year students drop out of school by their senior year and those students "who survived until their senior year were more liberal to begin with" (e.g., see Eskridge 1999). To explore whether student rank had an impact on punitive attitudes, we include dummy variables for student status (FIRSTYR, SOPH, JUNIOR, SENIOR), with seniors serving as the reference group in the regression models.

Religious fundamentalists are generally thought to be more punitive (Barkan and Cohn 2005; Borg 1997; Britt 1998; Howells, Flanagan and Hagen 1995; Ellison and Sherkat 1993). To measure religious fundamentalism (RELFUND) we relied on an established indicator (Barkan and Cohn 2005). Respondents were asked, "Do you agree with the following statement: The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally?" Respondents who

agreed were coded as 1=religious fundamentalists, while those who did not agree were coded as zero. Respondents were also queried about their religious preferences and a dummy variable (RELIGION) was computed with 1 indicating those with a stated religious preference and 0 representing those respondents who were agnostic, atheist, or had no specific preference.

Individuals with a conservative political ideology often espouse more punitive beliefs (Applegate et al. 2000; Barkan and Cohn 1994; Baumer et al. 2000; Borg 1997; Chiricos et al. 2004). Thus, political Ideology (POLITICAL) was established by respondent assessment of their level of conservatism or liberalism, "On a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being very conservative and 7 being very liberal, how conservative or liberal would you rate yourself?"

Punitive attitudes are often associated with racial prejudice and our measure of racial prejudice was created from a series of indicators (Chiricos, Welch and Gertz 2004). Respondents were asked, "On a scale of 0-10, with 0 indicating strongly disagree and 10 indicating strongly agree, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

- It would be okay if a member of my family wanted to bring a friend of a different race home for dinner.
- It would bother me if a person of a different race joined a social club or organization of which I was a member.
- It would bother me if I had a job in which my supervisor was a different race than me.
- It would be okay if a family of a different race with an income similar to mine were to live nearby.
- It would be okay if a person of a different race were to marry into my family.

These indicators were added together to create an index of racial prejudice (Cronbach's alpha .685), with a high score indicating high levels of racial prejudice. Before construction of the index, the last two questions and the first question were re-coded to be consistent with detecting indicators of racial prejudice across all items.

A respondent's region of origin is often an important predictor of punitive attitudes with Southerners in the United States representing the most punitive group (Barkan and Cohn 1994; Baumer et al. 2000; Chiricos et al. 2004; Rossi and Berk 1997). As such, respondents were asked to report their home town and home state. Census categories were utilized to classify respondents into regions, with those from Southern states (SOUTH) designated as 1 and all others 0. Other included variables are sex (females=1, males=0); age, and race. Due to the predominance of white respondents in the sample, only the

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Media Variables

Variable	Attribute	
Primary News Source	Internet	39.8%
	Local TV News	23.2%
	National TV News	19.9%
	Local Newspaper	11.6%
	National Newspaper	1.5%
	Other	4.0%
Ever read crime news on Internet	Yes	80.9%
	No	19.1%
How often use Internet for news	Never	6.6%
	Less than once per month	5.5%
	Once per month	8.3%
	Several times per month	7.2%
	Once per week	16.3%
	Several times per week	20.2%
	Once per day	24.1%
Times watch local TV news	Several times per day	11.6%
	0	16.8%
	1-3	50.3%
	4-6	20.7%
	7-10	11.0%
Times read local paper	14-25	1.1%
	0	16.8%
	1-2	30.0%
	3-5	44.0%
Internet news credibility	6-10	9.2%
	0-3	14.9%
	4-6	40.0%
Local news credibility	7-10	45.1%
	0-3	6.8%
	4-6	29.3%
National news credibility	7-10	64.0%
	0-3	6.3%
	4-6	19.9%
	7-10	73.9%

dummy variable for whites (WHITE) was entered into the regression models.

Analysis

Through the use of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression this study examined the effect of media in multiple news formats (i.e., national and local television, national and local newspapers, and the Internet), frequency of usage, and perceived news credibility on punitiveness. Despite the dearth of research in this issue among college students, we examined several *exploratory* hypotheses. First, it is reasonable to argue that the Internet, as a relatively new source of news, may be related to punitiveness given its relatively unregulated nature, what passes as “news,” and the increasing number of young people that obtain news from the Internet. Thus, it is

hypothesized that those who prefer the Internet as a news source, and use it frequently, will be more punitive. Second, it is also expected that those sources of media that are perceived as most credible will have the most influence on public (in this case student) opinion about crime.

FINDINGS

As shown in Table 3, the most commonly reported news source for our student sample was the Internet, with almost 40% of the sample identifying this as their primary source of news. Approximately 23% identified local TV news as their primary news source, while 20% identified this as the national TV news. Almost 12% reported that a local newspaper was their primary news source, 1.5% indicated a national newspaper (e.g., *USA Today*) was their

primary news source and 4% identified some other news source. The most common news sources included in the other category was friends/family.

With respect to whether respondents utilized the Internet for news (NEWSNET), 19% of the sample reported never having accessed crime news on the Internet while 81% reported that they had done so. For those using the Internet for news (OFTENNET), 24% of respondents reported using the Internet daily to access their news while 20% report accessing the Internet several times a week for news. About 16.8% of the respondents report that they do

not watch local TV news in a typical week and approximately half of the respondents watch local TV news (TIMESLOCTV) 1-3 times in a typical week, 21% watch 4-6 times, 11% watch 7-10 times, and 1% watch 14-25 times. Almost 17% of the sample report that they do not read the local newspaper in a typical week (TIMESLOCPAP), 30% report that they read the local paper 1-2 times per week, 44% report that they read the paper 3-5 times, and 9% report that they read the local paper 6-10 times in a typical week.¹¹

Table 4. Variables Included in OLS Regression Equations

Variable	Description	Mean	S.D.	r w/ DV
PUNITIVE	Punitive attitudes index - 11 items	50.21	23.03	1.00
INTERNET	Internet is primary news source (0=no; 1=yes)	.40	.49	-.066
LOCALTV	Local TV is primary news source (0=no; 1=yes)	.23	.42	.020
NATLTV	National TV is primary news source (0=no; 1=yes)	.20	.40	.205***
LOCPAPER	Local paper is primary news source (0=no; 1=yes)	.12	.32	-.089
NATLPAPER	National paper is primary news source (0=no; 1=yes)	.02	.40	-.017
OTHERNEWS	Other primary news source (0=no; 1=yes)	.04	.20	-.155**
NEWSNET	Ever read crime news on Internet (0=no; 1=yes)	.81	.39	.027
OFTENNET	How often Internet is used for accessing news	5.36	2.02	.042
TIMESLOCTV	Times local news is watched in a typical week	2.34	2.41	.261***
TIMESLOCPAP	Times local paper is read in a typical week	2.96	2.19	.117*
NETCRED	Credibility of Internet as a news source	5.96	2.08	.008
LOCALCRED	Credibility of local news sources	6.58	1.89	.112*
NATLCRED	Credibility of national news sources	7.11	2.16	.193***
VICTIMVIOL	0=not victim; 1=ever been victim of violent crime	.15	.36	-.033
VICTIMPROP	0=not victim; 1=ever been victim of property crime	.37	.48	-.076
CONCERN	Concern about crime	6.23	2.06	.254***
FEARVIOL	Fear of violent crime	22.14	15.64	.324***
FEARPROP	Fear of property crime	17.05	10.23	.265***
CRINC	0=crime decreased/stayed same; 1=crime increased	.16	.37	.049
RELFUND	Bible to be interpreted literally (0=no; 1=agree)	.26	.44	.177**
RELIGION	Religious affiliation	.65	.48	.181**
POLITICAL	Political ideology	4.55	1.46	-.231***
PREJUDICE	Racial prejudice	3.24	6.61	.192**
SOUTH	Home state in South (1=South)	.05	.22	-.013
SEX	Sex of respondent (0=male; 1=female)	.63	.48	-.014
AGE	Age of respondent in years	20.62	3.28	-.004
WHITE	0=non-white; 1=white	.79	.41	-.027
FIRSTYR	0=other; 1=first year student	.23	.42	.059
SOPH	0=other; 1=sophomore	.30	.46	-.041
JUNIOR	0=other; 1=junior	.29	.46	.023
SENIOR	0=other; 1=senior	.17	.38	-.001
CRCJ	CRCJ major/minor (0=no; 1=yes)	.27	.44	.185**

***p<.001

**p<.01

*p<.05

The frequency distribution for each of the three credibility measures (NETCRED, LOCALCRED, NATLCRED) is displayed in Table 3. Although the variables are measured continuously from 0-10, they are displayed in this table as categorical variables for the ease of display. As shown, almost 15% of the respondents rate the credibility of the Internet as 0-3 (low), 40% rate it as 4-6 (medium), and 45.1% rate it as 7-10 (high). Respondents appear to place more credibility in local news, with 6.8% having an average score 0-3 (low), 29.3% having an average score of 4-6 (medium), and 64% reporting an average score of 7-10 (high). The credibility ranking for national news is slightly higher, with 6.3% reporting an average score of 0-3 (low), 19.9% reporting an average score of 4-6 (medium), and almost 74% reporting an average score of 7-10 (high).

Table 4 contains the means and standard deviations for each variable and the correlation of that variable with the punitive index. Many of the variables are significantly correlated with punitiveness, and are consistent with the findings of previous research on punitive attitudes. Both religious fundamentalism and religious affiliation are significant predictors of punitive attitudes. Political ideology is also significantly correlated, with conservatives being more punitive. Respondents with higher scores of racial prejudice are more punitive as well. CRCJ majors are also more punitive. None of the demographic variables (home state, sex, age, classification) are significantly correlated with punitiveness. Some of the crime salience measures are significantly correlated with punitive attitudes, in particular, concern about crime, fear of violent crime, and fear of property crime are positively related to punitiveness. However, other crime salience variables were not significantly correlated with the dependent variable—the perception that crime has increased and both measures of crime victimization experience are not significantly correlated with punitive attitudes. This is not surprising given the inconsistent findings in the literature regarding victimization experience. Contrary to expectations, none of the Internet variables were significantly associated with punitiveness, although several other media variables were significantly correlated with punitiveness. In particular, respondents who report national TV news as their primary news source are more punitive, whereas those with a different primary news source are less punitive. Respondents who watch local TV news more frequently and who read local newspapers more frequently are more punitive suggesting the importance of the local context of news. With respect to credibility, those who view local news sources as more credible and national news sources as more credible were more punitive. Respondents rated national news sources as more credible, on average, than either local news sources or the Internet, with a mean of 7.11 for national news, 6.58 for local news, and 5.96 for the Internet.

The full theoretical regression model and the best fit regression model, without consideration for any of the media variables, are displayed in Table 5.¹² There are four

Table 5. *Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients of Punitive Attitudes Control Variables Only (standard errors in parentheses)*

Variable	Full Model	Best Fit Model
VICTVIOL	-2.28 (4.17)	
VICTPROP	-6.23* (3.01)	-5.41* (2.59)
CONCERN	0.39 (0.80)	
FEARVIOL	0.45** (0.17)	0.54*** (0.09)
FEARPROP	0.14 (0.22)	
CRINC	-1.57 (3.96)	
RELFUND	3.98 (3.44)	
RELIGION	3.36 (3.16)	
POLITICAL	-2.74** (1.03)	-3.29*** (0.83)
PREJUDICE	0.30 (0.22)	
SOUTH	-3.26 (6.42)	
SEX	-5.40 (3.35)	-7.48** (2.89)
AGE	0.45 (0.48)	
WHITE	-0.59 (3.77)	
CRCJ	8.31* (3.29)	7.56** (2.85)
FIRSTYR	-0.64 (5.05)	
SOPHOMORE	-3.28 (4.48)	
JUNIOR	5.01 (4.39)	
adj R ²	.198	.183

***p < or = .001

**p < or = .01

*p < or = .05

significant predictors of punitiveness in the full model: (1) property victimization experience, (2) fear of violent crime, (3) political ideology, and (4) being a CRCJ major or minor. Similarly, those same four variables along with sex are significant predictors of punitiveness in the best fit

model. Most of these variables are significant in a way that is consistent with previous research, although the findings concerning crime victimization are more difficult to assess. More specifically, respondents with property victimization experience are significantly less punitive. Given that property victimization is often unreported and relatively less serious, it is perhaps not surprising that property victims are less punitive. Given the inconsistent findings in the literature concerning crime victimization and punitive orientations, it is clear that this is an area worthy of additional exploration. Women, and those with a more liberal political ideology, are also less punitive. Those with a higher fear of violent crime are more punitive. The CRCJ majors and minors are more punitive as well and understanding why this is the case should be the focus of future research.

Table 6. *Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients of Punitive Attitudes (standard Errors in parentheses) with Primary News Source Variables*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
VICTPROP	-6.05* (2.90)	-5.66 (2.92)
FEARVIOL	0.51*** (0.10)	0.51*** (0.10)
POLITICAL	-2.22* (0.93)	-2.30* (0.93)
SEX	-8.91** (3.13)	-9.67** (3.15)
CRCJ	7.17* (3.32)	7.12* (3.32)
LOCALTV	-0.64 (3.42)	-3.16 (3.61)
NATLTV	5.97 (3.62)	4.52 (3.66)
LOCPAPER	-4.00 (4.63)	-5.54 (4.75)
NATLPAP	-4.12 (14.98)	-3.34 (15.12)
OTHNEWS	-12.37^ (7.43)	-12.94 (7.45)
NETCRED		-1.29 (0.77)^
LOCALCRED		-0.71 (1.17)
NATLCRED		1.59 (0.98)
adj R ²	.180	.186

***p < or = .001

**p < or = .01

*p < or = .05

The models in Table 6 assess the impact of the various media variables on punitiveness while retaining control

variables from the best fit model. Model 1 includes the primary news source variables and model 2 includes those variables plus the measures of media credibility. None of the primary news source variables (i.e., news salience) significantly impacted levels of punitiveness in relation to the Internet as a news source, and perceptions of credibility were also not significant predictors.

The regression models reported in Table 7 examine the frequency of media use variables in model 1 and the frequency and credibility variables together in model 2. One of the media frequency variables, times that respondents watch local TV news in a typical week, was a significant predictor of punitiveness, such that punitiveness increased as the number of times watching local TV news increased. This variable remains significant when the credibility variables are added to the model (model 2), but none of the credibility measures are significant predictors of punitiveness. In all six models reported, the adjusted r-squared values are modest, yet higher than past research on college students and punitiveness (e.g., see Hensley et al. 2002; Mackey and Courtright 2000; Tsoudis 2000).

Table 7. *Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients of Punitive Attitudes (standard errors in parentheses) with Media Frequency Variables*

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
VICTPROP	-5.84* (2.77)	-5.69* (2.77)
FEARVIOL	0.52*** (0.10)	0.52*** (0.10)
POLITICAL	-2.69** (0.91)	-2.63** (0.91)
SEX	-8.35** (3.09)	-9.02** (3.11)
CRCJ	8.53** (3.07)	8.12** (3.07)
NEWSNET	0.12 (0.68)	0.53 (0.71)
OFTENNET	3.03 (2.80)	2.99 (2.79)
TIMESLOCTV	1.44** (0.56)	1.34* (0.58)
TIMESLOCPAP	0.71 (0.64)	0.56 (0.64)
NETCRED		-1.03 (0.74)
LOCALCRED		-1.60 (1.14)
NATLCRED		1.71 (0.94)
adj R ²	.220	.228

***p < or = .001

**p < or = .01

*p < or = .05

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study explored the effect of media in multiple news formats (i.e., national and local television, national and local newspapers, and the Internet), the frequency of exposure, and perceived news credibility on punitiveness among 373 college students enrolled in a state university in the Western region of the United States. Among studies examining punitive attitudes, it is rare for researchers to consider the impact of media and media credibility despite clear evidence that media effects are strong predictors of attitudes in the general population. As argued earlier, college students are a salient population for an examination of the impact of Internet news and its perceived credibility on punitive attitudes given that they are more likely than other groups to use the Internet and access news there (e.g., see ECAR 2009; NITA 2004; Rainie 2010; Robinson et al. 2003).

Among this college student sample it appears that punitiveness does not vary by the primary source of news, suggesting that news source salience is not an important predictor. Alternatively, considering the work of Chiricos and colleagues (1997; 2000), the *frequency of exposure* to specific sources of crime news is an important predictor of public attitudes about crime. To this end, the frequency of using the Internet as a news source, of watching local TV news, and of reading the local newspaper were examined in relation to punitive attitudes. The only frequency variable that was significant was the frequency of watching local TV news. This is consistent with previous research which has shown that local TV news has more impact on attitudes regarding crime than other media sources (e.g., see Chiricos et al. 2000; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Pfeiffer et al. 2005). One explanation for this finding is the freedom consumers can exercise while reading papers or skimming stories online, as they can avoid crime news while they are less able to choose what they are exposed to when they tune in to local television. Another explanation is that consumers of news may select the type of news source that provides them with information and/or imagery that reinforces their worldview (i.e., punitive-oriented people watch more local TV news).

Diverging from stated expectations, the media credibility variables were not statistically significant in any of the models. The relative lack of importance of the media credibility may suggest that college students are more immune to media factors than are the general public, although this study (and our sample) does not allow us to test this point of conjecture. Indeed, as argued by Heath and Gilbert (1996) the impact of how the media portrays crime is often dependent on characteristics of the audience receiving the information. It is interesting that national news sources were rated as highly credible while the Internet was rated as the least credible source of news even though it was the most reported news source (see Table 4).

This suggests that students may favor convenience over credibility in terms of accessing the news.

Contrary to suppositions articulated earlier, it appears that the role of the Internet on punitive orientations is not important regardless of how media was examined (primary use, frequency, or credibility). It is possible that this null finding can be attributed to how the Internet was operationalized in this study. Although commonplace in previous research (e.g., see Weitzer and Kubrin 2004), the Internet measure employed in this study was an aggregate indicator that did not allow for differentiation between types of Internet news people were accessing. For example, it is possible that the sources of Internet news accessed were from national or local sources that also happen to post their news stories online. If this was the case, then one would not expect major differences between Internet news versus the other mediums. Conversely, if the type of online news being accessed was from more sensationalistic sources like blogs, politically affiliated Internet “news” sources, then differences in punitiveness might be observed. Improved measures of Internet usage for news and even social purposes may assist researchers to better understand the potential influence of the Internet on attitudes about crime.

Our results also indicate that students majoring or minoring in criminology and criminal justice tend to hold more punitive orientations than students pursuing other areas of study. This is consistent with published literature (e.g., see Austin and O’Neill 1985; Lambert 2004; Mackey and Courtright 2000; Merlo 1980). However, it is still unclear as to why this is the case. Understanding this trend in relation to media influences and other factors such as institutional, programmatic, instructor, and student characteristics should be considered as possible explanations. In particular, it is important to understand whether the higher levels of punitiveness among these students are related to elements of their CRCJ education or whether they exist prior to their choice to major in CRCJ. This is a salient issue for future research given that many of these students will go on to occupations within the criminal justice system and or be in a position to influence criminal justice practice, and in some cases, criminal justice policies.

The current study relies on a non-random sample of students from one university. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to the public or to other college students, as this sample of college students might differ from students at other universities. In addition, this particular sample over-represents females and minorities (who tend to be less punitive) and criminology and criminal justice majors (who tend to be more punitive), limiting our ability to make generalizations. Even so, knowledge can still be acquired from a limited sample and it is not uncommon in criminology and criminal justice to see published research on punitive orientations based on non-random samples of college students (e.g., see Austin and O’Neill 1985;

Benekos, Merlo, Cook and Bagley 2002; Farnworth et al. 1998; Giacomassi and Blankenship 1991; Hensley, Miller, Tewksbury and Kockeski 2002; Lambert 2004; Lambert, Hall, Clarke, Ventura and Elechi 2005; Lane 1997; Mackey and Courtright 2000; Mackey, Courtright and Packard 2006; McCarthy and McCarthy 1981; Merlo 1980; Payne, Time and Gainey 2006; Tsoudis 2000). Future research should examine students at multiple campuses (using random samples when possible) to ascertain what differences, if any, might be seen across samples of students at different universities. Universities located in different regions of the country may have student populations that are more or less punitive given differences in news media preferences and frequency of exposure, local culture, social norms, student characteristics, and institutional differences. Only through comparative analysis can we ascertain whether or not this is the case.

CONCLUSION

This research makes three important contributions to the punitive attitudes literature and communications research. First, it is one of few studies that explore the effect of media on punitive attitudes among college students. Second, it is the only study (of which we are aware) that examines the Internet as a form of news media and its potential impact on student punitiveness. Furthermore, it is the first study to consider perceptions of media credibility on punitiveness among students or the general population. Although the Internet variables and all indicators of credibility (i.e., medium credibility) were never significant predictors of punitiveness, it is still prudent for subsequent research to consider improved measures of Internet news and additional dimensions of credibility (i.e., source credibility) in studies involving college students and the general public. Developing a better understanding of public perceptions of credibility and how the content of media messages is accessed and processed is important for the study of punitive attitudes. As argued by Smith (1984:292), the influence of news “depends as much on the context to which it is received as on the circumstances from which it was issued.”

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Endnotes

¹ Some get tough policy advocates have noted that more punitive correctional policies are the reason for the declining crime rate because of incapacitative correctional practices (Levitt 1998).

² Fifty-two percent of the campus population is female and 48% is male. The sample over-represents females.

³ Females and minorities are overrepresented in this sample. Given that females and minorities are generally less punitive than whites and males, we could be underestimating punitive attitudes.

⁴ In terms of the total student population, CRCJ students are overrepresented since they constitute less than 2 percent of the students on this campus. Yet, it is important to explore the views of criminology and criminal justice majors/minors since they have more interest in crime related topics and thus may be differentially influenced by media coverage on crime. In addition, in some studies it has been suggested that they are more punitive than other majors (Mackey and Courtright 2000; Lambert 2004) and are more punitive compared to other majors in this sample.

⁵ Given that we are examining a sample of young adults it should not be surprising to see this amount of self-reported victimization as data from the National Crime Victimization Survey indicates that younger individuals are at higher risk for criminal victimization, particularly violent victimization (Turner and Rand 2010).

⁶ Some of these policies are no longer in practice (i.e., death penalty for juvenile offenders) or are not practiced in all jurisdictions (i.e., chain gangs). The punitive attitudes literature not only focuses on how individuals view current punishment policies but is also interested in understanding how much support more punitive policies may garner in the public. In addition, many of these policies may or may not be consistently highlighted in the media; however, the focus of this paper is to explore how crime news *sources* and the frequency with which one is exposed to that source may influence punitiveness (and not the content). A content analysis of news coverage that specific respondents were exposed to would be a worthwhile endeavor for future research.

⁷ The internet news variable does not differentiate between types of Internet news (i.e., online newspaper, online local TV news stations, etc.) utilized by Internet users. Given the relatively unexplored impact of the Internet, it is important to see if it has impact as an aggregate measure. Future studies should explore how disaggregated aspects of Internet news usage may impact punitive attitudes. In the limited studies on the Internet and crime, most do not disaggregate forms of Internet news usage (e.g., see Weitzer and Kubrin 2004).

⁸ This variable did not differentiate network national news from cable news channels. In past research, national news

has not been differentiated in this way although it may be prudent to do so in future studies.

⁹ These items have been used in previous research (e.g., see Chiricos et al. 2004).

¹⁰ It should be noted that the Western university does not have an official CRCJ major but rather Sociology major/minor with a concentration in criminology and criminal justice. These students were specifically asked if they had a declared CRCJ concentration in Sociology to allow us to separate out Sociology majors without the CRCJ concentration. CRCJ concentrators constitute well over 70% of Sociology majors at this university.

¹¹ The quantity of national TV news and newspaper exposure was not examined since they were not measured in the survey.

¹² All regression assumptions were tested in all models. Each assumption was met. Hence, there were no issues with heteroscedasticity, multicollinearity, interactions, or outliers within any of the models.

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