

COST-CUTTING AT THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE: WHAT IMPACT HAS
DECLINING CIRCULATION HAD UPON CRIME COVERAGE?

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School

of Communication

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Kese J. Smith

December, 2011

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effect declining circulation at the *Houston Chronicle* had upon local news coverage- especially crime coverage. In 1995, it became the sole daily metro newspaper in Houston. In the ensuing years it has seen a steady erosion of paid circulation and its publishers responded, as have many newspapers in the United States, by making a series of cost-cutting moves including closing news bureaus and laying off long-time editorial staff.

Story content for the years 1996 (the first full year in which the *Houston Chronicle* became the sole daily) and 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 was examined using content analysis. Particular attention was paid to crime stories as the crime beat is an entry-level reporter position, one which pays less and requires less experience than other specialized beats. Cultivation theory postulates an increase in crime coverage, which is cheap and plentiful, can lead the public to view the world as a more dangerous place than statistics indicate.

Two constructed weeks per year were examined. Layoffs at the *Houston Chronicle* coincided with a 40 percent decrease in local stories. During that same period, stories produced by wire services or other newspapers increased, indicating they replaced some, but not all, of the shortage of local stories.

Crime stories accounted for a greater percentage of local stories, although not significantly. They were eight percent of local stories in 1996 rising to a high of 10 percent in 2009. However crime stories became significantly longer over that same

period of time, suggesting crime became a greater staple in filling the newspaper's newshole. Consistent with other literature, violent crime accounted for the clear majority of all crimes reported.

Crime stories were also individually coded to determine to what extent details were included which would allow a reader to determine the randomness of the crime and be extension his/her own possible risk. Such variables did not go down as expected, and in some years were even higher than in 1996.

This study suggests the *Houston Chronicle* has responded to declining circulation by cutting staff and local content. Crime coverage has helped fill the remaining local content, but not to the extent expected. Moreover, details which allow readers to gauge their personal risk were present in greater amounts than anticipated.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers across the United States face tough economic times. Most major dailies have seen a steady erosion of circulation, which in turn has led to thousands of journalists losing their jobs in an effort to remain profitable (Edmonds, Guskin, & Rosenstiel, 2011; Pew, 2009, 2010). Many content changes have also occurred, among them a move toward a hyper-local approach (Edmonds et al., 2011) in an effort to remain relevant to readers.

The *Houston Chronicle* has followed the national trends of declining circulation and staff layoffs. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (2009, 2010), paid circulation of the *Houston Chronicle* has dropped close to 25 percent between December 2005 and December 2009. The publisher has responded by instituting a series of layoffs and content changes.

One staple of newspapers which can also coincide with a hyper-local approach is coverage of local crime. This has been a mainstay of American newspapers since the 19th century (Dominick, 1978; Johnstone, Hawkins, & Michener, 1994) and remains one of the most reported topics in the press (Dominick, 1978; Pew, 2009; Reber & Chang, 2000). Since the police beat is often an entry-level position (Becker, Lowry, Claussen, & Anderson, 2000; Donnis, 2003; Johnstone et al., 1994), and crime stories can efficiently fill newspapers due to reliance upon police departments for information (Chermak & Chapman, 2007), it is a logical choice for editors to rely upon in tough economic times.

Cultivation theory indicates readers of the *Houston Chronicle* may already view the city as a more dangerous place than it really is (Antunes & Hurley, 1977; Crime Coverage, 1999; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Sorenson, Manz, & Berk, 1998; Yanich, 2005). This misperception could further be exacerbated if the newspaper is relying upon an ever-increasing amount of crime stories to fill its pages.

National Newspapers

Facing heavy debt and declining circulation and revenue, many newspapers have cut costs at an accelerated rate for much of the past decade. These cuts have resulted in publishers cutting staff, reducing publication days, closing bureaus and reducing the amount of news content published. A few papers, including some major dailies in large cities, have ceased publication entirely. Some, such as the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, have tried to continue as an online-only operation, while others, such as Denver's *Rocky Mountain News*, shut their doors for good (Keating, 2009). In the case of the *Rocky Mountain News*, the presses stopped after having rolled for nearly 150 years. The industry has fallen on such hard times even the comic pages have picked up the story, with the long-running cartoon reporter Brenda Starr losing her job because her fictional newspaper could no longer afford her salary (Mastony, 2009).

The economic decline has been felt by newspapers and their parent companies around the country, and it shows no signs of improvement. In 2006, newspapers had \$49.5 billion in advertising. In 2008, that number fell 23 percent to about \$38 billion (Pew, 2009) with metro papers being especially hard hit. Big metros such as the *Washington Post* and *Boston Globe* are either just breaking even or are losing money (Pew, 2009). Other national papers such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street*

Journal and *USA Today*, together with small and mid-sized papers, have fared better (Pew, 2009).

The poorly-performing newspapers cannot expect much help from their parent companies, which often are in even worse financial shape. Publicly-traded news companies dropped 42 percent between 2005 and 2007, only to lose 83 percent of their remaining value in 2008 (Pew, 2009). Some publishers, such as the Sun-Times Media Group Inc. and Tribune Company, owner of several papers including the *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, as well as the owners of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Philadelphia Daily News*, and the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, have filed for bankruptcy (Liedtke & Vanacore, 2009; Miller, 2009; Pew, 2009).

As newspapers fight to stay in operation, eliminating the salaries of experienced news staff has become a frequently-used method to meet the bottom line. It is what one media analyst terms "a kind of slow-motion suicide" (Carr, 2008). *Editor & Publisher* reports newsroom employment is at its lowest level since 1978 when the American Society of News Editors began conducting newsroom employment surveys (Saba, 2009). The American Society of Newspaper Editors census reported that 2,400 newsroom jobs were lost in 2007, 5,900 newsroom jobs were eliminated in 2008, and an additional 5,200 positions were cut in 2009 (Pew, 2009, 2010). It is believed the *Los Angeles Times* alone has cut its news staff by half since 2001 (Pew, 2009). It is not just the raw number of cuts which are significant. Often, the first journalists to be let go are the most experienced and highly paid (Pew, 2010), resulting in a loss of "institutional memory and mentoring of younger reporters" (Pew, 2010, p. 2).

These cost-cutting efforts have had a measurable impact upon newspapers' appearance and content (Pew, 2009, 2010). With the reduction in staff, many papers have closed bureaus outside their immediate coverage area and stopped delivery to and news story coverage of the more remote areas in their home market (Pew, 2009, 2010). Separate business and features sections are often eliminated (Pew, 2010), and local beats focusing on specific areas such as poverty, labor or a city's courthouse have been cut (Pew, 2009; Simon, 2008). A reduced staff has caused papers to increasingly rely on partnerships with other papers and upon wire services as the publications strive to survive by freeing up resources to focus on a "local" presence (Pew, 2009; Tsai, 2009).

Even so, many papers are reducing the amount of news printed by cutting the total number of pages and by slashing the space allocated for news, or newshole, in those pages which remain. This is both an effort to cut printing costs and because ad revenue does not support a larger newshole (Goldstrom, 2009; Pew, 2009, 2010; Tsai, 2009).

The Houston Chronicle

The *Houston Chronicle* appears to mirror the economic woes of other major metro dailies. In April, 1995, the owner of the *Houston Chronicle*, Hearst Corporation, bought the rival daily newspaper, the *Houston Post*, and promptly stopped its presses. By overnight becoming the only major daily in the city, the *Houston Chronicle* saw its Monday through Saturday circulation numbers increase from 481,172 in 1995 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 1995) to 548,416 in 1996 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 1996). Sunday circulation saw a similar increase rise from 676,080 in 1995 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 1995) to 757,008 in 1996 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 1996). Skipping forward a decade, the picture is much grimmer. From September, 2005, to March, 2010,

the newspaper has seen a steady loss of paid circulation. For example, in September, 2005, the *Houston Chronicle* had a Monday through Saturday paid circulation of 505,648 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2009). Those numbers declined every year, ending March, 2010, with a paid circulation of 355,365 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2010). In four-and-a-half years, Monday through Saturday paid circulation fell 30 percent. Sunday numbers weren't any better. Traditionally the most read day of the week, the *Houston Chronicle* Sunday edition fell from 702,533 in September, 2005 to 526,408 in March, 2010, resulting in a loss of 176,125 paid subscriptions (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2010). This was a 25 percent drop.

Facing declining circulation and a corresponding loss of revenue, the *Houston Chronicle*, like its brethren around the nation, has embarked on a series of cost-cutting moves.

During a time in which the nation has seen some of the worst economic news since the Great Depression, the *Houston Chronicle* several times a week combined its Business and City & State sections. This is in line with the national trend toward publishing fewer pages and not publishing a separate business section (Pew, 2010).

Also following national trends, the *Houston Chronicle* has been collaborating with other papers by sharing resources and content. This has happened even on major stories of a predominately local nature. For instance, in August, 2008, a bus carrying Vietnamese Christians from Houston to a religious retreat crashed north of Dallas, killing 15 people. The *Houston Chronicle* responded by informally sharing content with the *Dallas Morning News*. The Dallas paper focused on the crash and investigation while the Houston paper told the stories of the families (Pew, 2009). Both papers were able to

expand their news content without incurring the costs traditionally associated with such coverage.

The *Houston Chronicle* has also followed the national model of cutting staff. In October 2008, it offered voluntary buyouts to 90 employees. When not enough employees took the buyouts, the newspaper laid off an additional 10 people. Those 90-plus eliminated positions constituted about five percent of the paper's staff, with about 25 coming from inside the newsroom (Adams, 2008). In March, 2009, the layoffs were followed by the cutting of another 90 newsroom jobs as part of an initiative to eliminate 12 percent of the paper's staff. In a memo to the newsroom announcing the cuts, the editor, Jeff Cohen, promised to continue to uphold "our mission as journalists to inform, educate and entertain the readers of our newspaper and Web site [sic]" (Chronicle Laying, 2009).

However, the staff cuts have not staunched the bleeding, and literature suggests the editorial content will be affected in some manner. If, as has been outlined, crime coverage is cheap and can be produced by relatively inexperienced and cheaper reporters, it may be hypothesized the *Houston Chronicle* would increase its crime coverage as a way of addressing its dwindling bottom line. If such is the case, cultivation theory would indicate Houston readers could be left with the perceptions the city is both more dangerous and the readers' chances of becoming crime victims are greater than crime statistics would indicate. Moreover, as the sole daily newspaper in Houston, the *Houston Chronicle* is the de facto paper of public record. As such, it can have a great effect upon city opinion makers, an effect that may be based upon an inaccurate portrayal of the city it serves.

Implications of Study

This can have real world implications in a number of ways. First, cultivation theory would suggest a *Houston Chronicle* increase in local crime coverage could cause readers to view the world, or at least Houston, as seemingly "much more dangerous than it really is" (Antunes & Hurley, 1977, p. 760; Crime Coverage, 1999; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Sorenson et al., 1998; Yanich, 2005). Second, if the *Houston Chronicle* relies upon local crime coverage to cheaply and quickly fill its pages, literature indicates those populations viewed most at risk, such as the poor or older populations (who make up a substantial portion of newspaper readership), may feel even further at risk (Heath, 1984; Heath & Gilbert, 1996). A lack of context surrounding a crime furthers this sense of risk since context allows the reader to "gain control by attributing responsibility for the outcome to some characteristic or action of the victim" (Heath, 1984, p. 264). Third, some studies have shown a perception of criminal pervasiveness can exist based upon media coverage (Heath, 1984; Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Even if members of the public do not believe themselves to be personally at risk, media coverage can create the perception an issue is of large societal concern (Tyler & Cook, 1984). This perception can lead to action by city or community leaders, independent of reality (Jones, 1976).

If crime coverage is cheap, produced by relatively inexperienced and low-paid reporters, it is logical to hypothesize the *Houston Chronicle* would increase its crime coverage as a way of addressing the bottom line.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature that relates to the effect crime coverage can have upon readers begins with an explanation of cultivation theory. The review also covers concepts of fear, the role of media in creating "moral panics" and how such events can prompt public and official responses. All are relevant to this study, as an increase in crime coverage by the *Houston Chronicle* could prompt an increase of fear from readers who may then agitate for some kind of action from official leaders.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation analysis was originally proposed by George Gerbner in 1969 and sought to establish how television viewing affected audiences' perception of reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). It was argued heavy viewers of television were more likely to have "exaggerated perceptions of victimization, mistrust, and danger, along with numerous inaccurate beliefs about crime and law enforcement" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 339). This became known as the Mean World Syndrome (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Reber & Chang, 2000).

Cultivation theory has had many critics (Hirsch, 1980; Hughes, 1980; Potter, 1993) who argued against cultivation on conceptual, methodological and analytical bases (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Even so, cultivation studies continue to this day in many forms not originally envisioned by Gerbner.

Cultivation theory was originally designed to study how watching large amounts of television affects audiences' view of the world. All television programming was

grouped together. *What* was watched was not considered as important as how *much* was watched. This has changed over the years, with many scholars now focusing on specific television genres (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010) including- talk shows (Woo & Dominick, 2001, 2003), makeover programs (Kubric & Chory, 2007), and dating shows (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007).

Despite Gerbner's initial insistence that television was a unique medium which required a new approach to research (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), cultivation studies have since expanded to now include other media such as newspapers. Studying newspaper crime content dates back almost 60 years (Davis, 1952). However, since the late 1970s, little research has been done on the quantity of crime news reporting (Antunes & Hurley, 1977). Measuring the quantity of crime reporting has given way to research focusing on the specific elements of crime reporting such as newspaper placement, the type of crime committed, what weapons were used, and victim and suspect characteristics (Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Pizarro, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2007; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007; Sorenson et al., 1998; Taylor, 2009).

Crime reporting has come under a great deal of scrutiny, with many researchers finding a heavy focus on violent crime, leaving many non-violent property crimes underreported (Crime Coverage, 1999; Gebotys, Roberts, & DasGupta, 1988; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Reber & Chang, 2001; Sorenson et al., 1998; Yanich, 2005). Echoing cultivation theory as it relates to television, this focus on violent crime has led to concerns the public has developed an unrealistic perception of crime, believing the world to be more dangerous (Mean World Syndrome) than statistics would

indicate (Crime Coverage, 1999; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Sorenson et al., 1998; Yanich, 2005).

Concepts of Fear

The concept of public “fear” has varied from study to study (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Some studies measure fear based upon the perceived amount of violence in society, while others measure the personal *degree* of fear of becoming a victim, while still others measure perceived personal risk (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). As Morgan and Shanahan (2010) explain, these are distinct categories since fear involves an active state while perceived risk is a cognitive perception. This study makes no attempt to measure individuals’ fear response, but rather the extent to which the *Houston Chronicle* provides details which can allow its readers to form judgments of personal risk and the societal level of local crime.

Factors that may mitigate fear could be the details provided in the crime story which indicate the relationship between the victim and suspect. For example, was it a random encounter? Did those involved know each other? Were they engaging in illegal behavior such as drug dealing or prostitution? This important context can reduce fear among readers by allowing them to differentiate themselves from those people in the story by assigning responsibility to the individuals involved (Heath, 1984). Moreover, Reber and Chang (2001) found this was something the public wants. In their survey, 84 percent of respondents indicated they would like to know how typical is the violence being covered. The authors found respondents "wanted to know, in essence, what their chances are of being a victim in such a crime and if there are ways to know about the types of people who are victims and perpetrators" (Reber & Chang, 2001, p. 110).

In addition to victim/suspect details, the sheer amount of crimes reported can have a strong impact upon readers. For example, Lincoln Steffens once recounted how he and a reporter at a rival Houston newspaper once "created an apparent crime wave when they decided one day to diligently report as many local crime stories as they could" (Antunes & Hurley, 1977, p. 757). Fishman (1978) defines a crime wave as crime brought to the public consciousness, but which has no basis in police statistics. Baker, Nienstedt, Everett, and McCleary (1983) agree, stating it is the *reported* crime which can cause the perception of a crime wave, not the amount of crime itself. Further, Baker et al. found crime-reporting institutions such as the media and the police play a key role in any crime wave. Even if members of the public do not believe themselves to be personally at risk, media coverage can create a perception of the societal magnitude of the issue (Tyler & Cook, 1984). Simply focusing on crime, or even a particular type of crime, can heighten the public's attention, regardless of whether or not a crime epidemic exists. As Fishman (1978) stated, "one cannot be mugged by a crime wave, but one can be scared. And one can put more police on the streets and enact new laws on the basis of fear. Crime waves may be 'things of the mind,' but they have real consequences" (p. 531).

Among those consequences is how people act when afraid. People who fear crime the most fall into four categories: the elderly, women, the poor, and ethnic minorities (Box, Hale, & Andrews, 1988; Liska & Baccaglioni, 1990; Williams & Dickinson, 1993). How the press portrays crime can further contribute to that fear (Baker et al., 1983; Box et al., 1988). Newspapers especially can contribute to fear since, according to Baker et al. (1983), "better educated individuals are more likely to perceive rising crime rates and, thus, become fearful. The relationship between education and

perception is particularly important here because better educated people are more likely to read newspapers" (p. 330). In sum, while less educated people may have a higher fear starting point (Baker et al., 1983), it is the more educated people who are most likely to be cognizant of rising crime rates. An apparent crime wave in the newspaper is notable because this perception of rising crime, independent of statistical evidence, can cause those readers to be more afraid and from that fear agitate for action.

Moral Panic

This agitation for action and extensive media coverage may generate what researchers call a "moral panic." These panics can be created by media attention on an atrocity story, such as the dragging death of the black man James Byrd, Jr. by white supremacists or the murder of Matthew Shepard because he was gay (Columb & Damphousse, 2004). Intense reporting of stories similar to the atrocity story, and the subsequent focus of media and public "can lead to the construction of a social problem where one did not previously exist" (Columb & Damphousse, 2004, p. 150). Such a panic, Jenkins (2009) argues, is characterized by "such themes as the novelty of a particular menace, its sudden explosive growth, and the menace it poses both to accepted moral standards and to vulnerable groups and individuals" (p. 35).

This focus by the media can create a spiral of public fear which in turn can prompt politicians and the police to respond regardless of the true pervasiveness of the problem (Jones, 1976; Young, 2009). Hate crimes, seemingly prevalent in the late 1990s, and the 'war on drugs' are two relatively recent examples of moral panics resulting in official response (Colomb & Damphousse, 2004).

Because policy makers can lack a direct measure of public opinion, they may tend to rely on media attention to an issue as an indirect indicator (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). That response may come in two ways: through symbolic or resource allocation (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993).

Symbolic agendas, which require no substantive action by policy makers, are quite common (Hagan, 1980; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1993). Policy makers can address an issue, such as crime, through news conferences or public meetings, without actually doing something substantial about it, such as hiring more police officers or enforcing tougher laws.

Resource agendas, however, require action to be taken by public officials. This may be unwillingness by prosecutors to plea bargain highly-publicized murder cases (Pritchard, 1986) or prosecute pornography (Pritchard, Dilts, & Berkowitz, 1987). Hagan (1980) suggests the media helped to mold public opinion resulting in the passing of Prohibition in the early 20th century. However, he also notes that the media agenda only went so far, as it was the people's response to the temperance movement which ultimately led to its repeal.

Sexual psychopath laws, first passed in Michigan in 1937 and quickly followed by other states, are other examples of an official response to a moral panic created by the convergence of public outcry and media exposure (Colomb & Damphousse, 2004; Hagan, 1980). According to Hagan (1980), it is a repeating pattern:

... a community is thrown into panic by a few serious sex crimes that are given the widespread publicity; the community responds in an agitated fashion, and a variety of proposals are made; a committee is appointed to

study the situation and make recommendations; finally, the committee recommends a sexual psychopath law as a 'scientific' crime control procedure. (p. 619)

The media act as the linchpin since the laws do not "reflect political, economic or even professional interests. Rather, they are seen mainly as a response to panic, albeit a panic aggravated and focused by the news media" (Hagan, 1980, p. 619).

In a study of 10 major U.S. cities, including Houston, Heinz (1985) suggested a link between newspaper coverage of crime, public perception and a response by officials. "The crime issue is one that appears to rise or fall in part because of public concern and/or because of the political or bureaucratic benefits to be gained by the issue" (Heinz, 1985, p. 82). The newspapers' focus on crime resulted in city police reallocating manpower and mayors' increasing police budgets while state legislatures responded by revising criminal codes (Heinz, 1985). This is an example of resource allocation by police and city and state officials.

Clearly, the above examples indicate a link between newspaper crime coverage and public and official perceptions and response. This can be all the more troubling if papers such as the *Houston Chronicle* are either perceived as creating a nonexistent "crime wave" or as writing a number of superficial stories which do not include enough details to allow the reader to make judgments as to his or her personal risk.

Research Question & Hypotheses

In light of the national pressure facing metro dailies like the *Houston Chronicle*, and given examples of how the paper has attempted to cut costs of its own, this study seeks to answer the question: How, if at all, has *Houston Chronicle* news content

changed during this time of intense economic pressure? Three hypotheses seek to answer this question.

H1: The overall newshole that the *Houston Chronicle* publishes will have decreased since 1996 when it became the only major daily in the city. This will be especially noticeable since 2006 when, following the nationwide model, the *Houston Chronicle* began eliminating large numbers of jobs (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2009). Newspapers in general have not only cut jobs, but also the amount of space devoted to news resulting in less in-depth and serious journalism (Pew, 2009).

For the Houston public, decreased story count per issue can be troubling as the *Houston Chronicle* is the only major newspaper. If it is now printing fewer stories, readers will be forced to look elsewhere for their news needs or simply find themselves less informed than they would have been in years past. Moreover, while there are alternative news sources such as magazines or television newscasts, they do not offer the same "serious, accountability reporting that newspapers do more than any medium" (Pew, 2009, p. 3). The *Houston Chronicle's* online presence will not be studied, as its website frequently mirrors the print edition. Additionally, when it pertains to crime coverage, the online version will often quote television reports for breaking news, particularly if that news is crime-related, until a *Houston Chronicle* reporter can get the details confirmed. Finally, the *Houston Chronicle* continues to emphasize its print edition over its online version by touting stories and columnists seen exclusively in the print edition.

H2: The *Houston Chronicle* will increasingly rely upon local crime-related stories to provide content, and this crime coverage will result in an over-reporting of

violent crime as compared to the Uniform Crime Report (UCR). If the *Houston Chronicle* is seeking to fill its pages with local news, in a city of more than 2.1 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), there is no shortage of crime, and thus no shortage of crime-related stories. Crime news has been called “tailor-made for newspapers” (Crime Coverage, 1999). It has documents upon which to draw, public officials to use as sources, and most stories have elements of drama, conflict, and good versus evil (Crime Coverage, 1999). Moreover, because of the existence of official sources, a reporter is not required to physically cover every crime scene; instead he or she can rely upon an official news release or phone interview with an entity’s public information officer to get enough details to write a story.

This ability to rely upon crime news releases is in stark contrast to beats such as education and city and county government. Beats such as those require reporters to attend public meetings in person, interview politicians, and find citizens or organizations with opposing views. Moreover, the public meetings which form the crux of such reporting may happen at most once or twice a week. Thus, while a reporter on some news beats can go a week or more without ever filing a story, crime can be relied upon to be an almost daily turn; indeed it is not unusual for several crime stories to run in the same issue of the paper.

Increased crime coverage has serious implications. Studies have shown that news coverage of crime does not reflect reality, leading citizens to develop a skewed perception of crime in their area (Johnstone et al., 1994). Cultivation theory indicates that this reporting of crime out of proportion to crimes committed can cause heavy news consumers to view their world as a violent and fearful place (Crime Coverage, 1999;

Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Sorenson et al., 1998; Yanich, 2005). Moreover, this perception can also lead to governmental responses out of proportion to the issues (Sorenson et al., 1998). If the *Houston Chronicle* is relying upon more crime stories to fill its pages, cultivation theory would suggest that the effects are more far reaching than just the paper's bottom line.

While similar crime studies have been done in the past, no such study has been done in recent years. The decline of newspapers nationwide whether by outright closing of operations or a reduction in circulation and staffing is unprecedented. This dramatic shift in the journalistic landscape and the corresponding reduction of the accountability journalism newspapers uniquely provide (Pew, 2009) are grounds for this new content analysis. The newspaper medium's content has changed so dramatically that previous cultivation studies do not necessarily accurately reflect the current media environment.

H3: While crime coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* will often cover basic information (Who, What, When, Why and How), critical context such as the randomness of the crime, explained in part by the crime's cause and relationship of the victim to the suspect, will often be omitted. This is critical information readers can use to judge for themselves the likelihood of their being at risk of similar occurrences. It is also information less likely to appear in an official news release or to be provided over the phone, but more likely to be available to a reporter who works the story by going to the scene and interviewing witnesses, friends, and family members of the victims and suspects.

This hypothesis, that among crimes reported there will be fewer details to explain the randomness of the event, is also troubling for the public. If people cannot determine

their personal risk, they may agitate for change because they feel at risk. Community leaders and elected officials may then act upon the public outcry, regardless of the true pervasiveness of the issue. This can be problematic if the agitation and response are based upon a problem or crisis which does not exist.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Other studies have analyzed newspapers using content analysis to determine how much crime reporting exists, how much advertising is present, and how much news is local versus national or international (Edmonds, 2004; Riffe, Aust, Jones, Shoemake, & Sundar, 1994). This study built upon that research by establishing the general newshole in the *Houston Chronicle* and then determining how much of it was local content. The study then focused specifically upon local crime stories. Various elements within those crime stories were then coded to determine what type of crime was committed and what details were included which might allow the reader to make judgments as to their personal risk.

Sample

This study focused solely upon the *Houston Chronicle*. No other newspapers were analyzed. Newspapers from the years 1996, 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 were sampled. The year 1996 was chosen because in April 1995, the parent company of the *Houston Chronicle*, Hearst Corporation, bought the competing daily newspaper, the *Houston Post*, and promptly shut it down. This allowed the *Houston Chronicle* to become the sole major daily newspaper, a role it continues to enjoy to the present day. The year 1996 was the first full year since the *Houston Chronicle* became the only daily newspaper in Houston and allowed for a true comparison to the later years. The years 2006 to 2009 were chosen as this was a period during which the *Houston Chronicle* saw major circulation loss (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2009). The year 2006 was the first

full year in which daily newspapers reported circulation numbers under a revised formula (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2009). This made it difficult to form a completely accurate circulation comparison to the year 1996 but remained the only possible way to compare historical circulation data.

Only the Front Page (Section A) and the Metropolitan (later renamed City & State) sections were coded. This was where the majority of general, non-specialized reporting was found. Sections such as sports, business and entertainment constituted specialized beats. While worthy of study, this research project was focused on the general reporting that one typically found in the main news sections. Local, state, national, and international stories were found in the paper's front page section, whereas local and state news were also found in the Metropolitan/City & State section.

Also, only crimes committed in the jurisdiction of the Houston Police Department and the Harris County Sheriff's Department were considered. While the *Houston Chronicle's* coverage area was spread over several counties, the Houston Police Department and the Harris County Sheriff's Department were the largest law enforcement agencies in the region. Together the two agencies accounted for the vast majority of the *Houston Chronicle's* geographic and population coverage. The population within the city of Houston alone accounted for more than half of the *Houston Chronicle's* subscribers (Audit Bureau, 2009).

Variables

Newspaper content may be measured in column inches (Drew & Wilhoit, 1976; Edmonds, 2004) or by counting paragraphs of text (Pritchard, 1986; Riffe et al., 1994). Since all issues of the *Houston Chronicle* in this study were archived on microfiche, they

had to be printed so the pages could be reconstructed. Despite efforts to keep each page the same size when printing, a pilot study determined there were variations from page to page by as much as a quarter of an inch per column. Such variations, when multiplied by dozens of pages per issue, made intercoder reliability impossible to attain. Thus, the paragraph method of measuring content was chosen as variations in page size would not affect the number of paragraphs per page.

The number of stories per page was counted, then each was coded by whether or not it was a local story. A local story contained at least one of the following: a *Houston Chronicle* byline; a Houston or Harris County suburb dateline; or lack of attribution to another newspaper or wire service. If the story was found to be local, then it was determined whether the story was crime-related. A crime story had the act of breaking the law as a central theme and could be either violent or nonviolent in nature. Crime content was then measured as a percentage of the overall news content. Pictures were not measured. Only the Front Page and the Metropolitan (in 1996) or the City & State (after 1996) sections were examined. These were the sections where most local crime coverage could be found. In particular, the Front Page section also included a great deal of non-local news coverage; however, those stories were counted only to help determine overall newspaper content.

Reconstructing a Two-Week Sample

For each year studied, one constructed seven-day week was examined per six-month period, for a total of 14 days per year of study. In all, 70 days, or 10 weeks, were constructed for the years 1996 and 2006 to 2009. Constructed weeks are created when one random Monday is selected after all the Mondays in the six-month period are

identified. The same is done for Tuesdays, etc., until a week is "constructed" ensuring all seven days are represented (Lacy, Riffe, Stoddard, Martin, & Chang, 2001; Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). One constructed week per six month period has been shown to be an adequate sample (Lacy et al., 2001; Riffe et al., 1993). Use of a constructed week aids in eliminating news cycles caused by spikes or lulls in crime caused by weather or by certain stories capturing the public interest. A random numbers table was used to determine the days of the week to be studied.

A total of 70 issues of the Front Page and the City & State (formerly known as Metropolitan) sections were coded. For each year, 1996 and 2006 through 2009, two constructed weeks (14 issues) were examined. Using a random numbers generator, a random month was selected for Sunday through Saturday of January through June of each year. After consulting a calendar for the month of that year, that day's dates were written down. Again, using a random numbers generator, numbers were randomly selected using that month's range (e.g., 1 through 30 or 31, excepting February which was 1 through 28 or 29), until a number matched a date written down. In this manner, the month and date could be randomly selected for inclusion. For example, the first date selected was a Sunday between January and June in 1996. A random numbers generator set between 1 (January) and 6 (June) selected 6 (June). A check of the calendar for Sundays in June 1996 determined the dates for possible inclusion were the 2nd, 9th, 16th, 23rd and 30th. A random numbers generator produced the number 23 as the first of those numbers (2, 9, 16, 23, 30) to be selected. Thus, Sunday, June 23, 1996 was the first date selected for inclusion in the study. This process was repeated until a full week was constructed for January through June 1996. The process was repeated once again for July

through December 1996 to allow for two constructed weeks for 1996. Sample weeks for the years 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 were selected the same way.

All *Houston Chronicle* issues were printed from microfiche for coding. In three instances, the microfiche roll containing the randomly selected date was missing. The decision was made to then choose the next same day of the week in that month. For example, Wednesday, August 7, 1996 had been randomly selected but was unavailable, so the following Wednesday (August 14) was used. The month, day of the week, and the year always remained constant. Given this only happened three times out of 70 issues, and the initial missing date was randomly selected, it is unlikely that this significantly impacted the randomness of the sample.

Coding Categories

Crime stories were coded by type of crime and then compared to Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data to determine whether the stories offered a true reflection of crime in the city. UCR data are crime statistics reported by law enforcement agencies to the FBI and are broken into violent and non-violent categories. Following the model used by Heath (1984), randomness of crimes reported was coded using the relationship between the victim and suspect (e.g., family members, friends, business associates). This helped indicate whether the victim took some action which caused him or her to be more vulnerable to being targeted by crime. Location and time of crime as well as gender, race and age of victims and suspects were also coded. This did not affect the random component of the story, but since the elderly, women, poor, and ethnic minorities fear crime the most (Box et al., 1988; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990; Williams & Dickinson, 1993), these were attributes which could help readers (with the possible exception of the

poor) determine their own similarity to the victims. Crime story placement (page one of the Front Page or the Metropolitan/City & State sections) as well as whether the story was accompanied by a photograph was also coded. This was because story placement and inclusion of a photograph can signal the prominence of a story and incite emotion in readers (Grabe, Trager, Lear, & Rauch, 2006).

Articles were coded by the author with another coder randomly coding 10 percent of the articles to determine intercoder reliability (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). This was more than some studies, in which a second coder coded as little as five percent of the total content (Arendt, 2010).

Data Analysis

Past newshole studies have measured story length by counting the number of paragraphs of text (Riffe et al., 1994) or by using a ruler to measure the amount of content (Edmonds, 2004). As explained, this study used the paragraph method.

Crime stories were measured as a percentage of both the total paragraphs and the total number of stories published in the Front Page and Metropolitan/City & State sections. The stories were also coded for randomness (Heath, 1984). The amount of Houston and Harris County crime news reported in each issue was also coded. The years in which those crimes were reported were then compared to each other. This indicated whether the proportion of Houston and Harris County crime reporting significantly increased, decreased or remained constant as the years progressed. The number of crime stories, by type, was also compared to the Houston Police Department and Harris County Sheriff's Office Uniform Crime Report (UCR) numbers for that specific year. This comparison to the UCR allowed for the possibility that a heavy crime cycle could account

for a larger crime story count. It also helped determine if reporters and editors had created an apparent crime wave (Antunes & Hurley, 1977) in a time when crime rates remained the same or even went down. Pictures, if included as part of the story, were counted as they could be another indication *Houston Chronicle* staffers went to the scene or engaged in follow-up reporting as opposed to rewriting a news release.

Operational Definitions

Several terms must be defined.

Crime story: any news story in which an act of breaking the law was a central theme. Only crimes mentioning the Houston Police Department or Harris County Sheriff's Office as either an investigating agency or quoting their spokesperson as a source of information about the crime were coded. Crimes handled by other law enforcement agencies were not coded.

Local story: any story having a *Houston Chronicle* byline. Even if a reporter was reporting on events out of Washington, D.C., or Austin, Texas, it was assumed that the reporter was looking for story angles, events or people with ties to the Houston metro area. These stories, while not having a Houston dateline, were coded as local. If no reporter byline and no alternative newspaper or wire service was listed, then that crime or government meeting or event which took place within the Houston metro area was considered local. Even if an article appeared to be Houston centric, but contained a wire or newspaper reference source other than the *Houston Chronicle*, then the story was not coded as local. As an example, the *New York Times* coverage of the Enron collapse in 2001 was featured for several days in the *Houston Chronicle* even though it had a Houston dateline.

Wire story: any story having a wire or newspaper reference source in the dateline. If no wire service or source (other than the *Houston Chronicle*) was present, the story was assumed to be local. If a story was sourced to wire services, but mentioned *Houston Chronicle* staffers contributed to the story, that story was coded as a wire story, as the majority of the reporting was assumed to have been done by an entity other than the *Houston Chronicle*.

Story count: any article appearing in the Front Page and the Metropolitan or City & State sections of the newspaper was considered. A story was defined as having its own headline. Multiple stories appearing in a box, such as crime stories physically clustered together but separated by individual headlines, were treated as individual stories. Obituaries, although they appeared in the Metropolitan/City & State section, were not considered stories if they were part of the obituary pages. These were usually written and paid for by family members. If an obituary had a wire service source or a *Houston Chronicle* reporter byline, then it was considered a news story since a journalist, either local or with a wire service, was responsible for its generation. It was then coded either as local or non-local just as any other story. Articles written by columnists, traffic maps, weather maps, teases and winning lotto numbers were not coded.

Story page: any page containing news content. Only pages from the Front Page and the Metropolitan or City & State sections were counted. Only pages containing at least one news article were considered. This eliminated full-page ads and obituary pages and allowed only pages with journalist-created content to be counted. Editorial and Opinion pages were not counted.

Newshole: all non-advertising content, measured in paragraphs, of the Front Page section and the Metropolitan/City & State sections, excluding obituaries and opinion page articles. Pictures, captions, and headlines were not counted as news content as they were not paragraphs.

Intercoder Reliability

In keeping with Wimmer and Dominick (2006), 10 percent of all issues (7/70) were coded by a second coder to establish intercoder reliability. In order to train the second coder, the author explained the above methods and operational definitions. A sample news page was then coded and compared to the same news page as originally coded by the author. Likewise, a small number of crime stories were selected and coded by the second coder and then compared to the original coding of the same stories by the author. Once it was determined the second coder had a clear understanding of the process, she then coded the seven newspaper issues which were randomly selected from the study years to construct a week (Sunday through Saturday).

It should be noted the second coder was the spouse of the author which may be a factor in what was often an extremely high degree of intercoder reliability. For more than a year, the second coder not only discussed this project with the author, but as a former television news producer, she was familiar with not only the agencies being studied but likely some of the individual stories themselves. Also, as a former journalist, she was very knowledgeable about news coverage of crime and how crime stories should be written. Finally, as a long-time Houston resident, she was often familiar with many of the locations and neighborhoods described in the *Houston Chronicle* stories.

To determine intercoder reliability, the lowest score provided by a coder in each category was divided by the highest score provided by the other coder to determine the intercoder reliability.

Overall, intercoder reliability was quite good. As stated, seven *Houston Chronicle* newspaper issues were coded by both the author and the second coder. In those issues, the author coded 250 non-local stories while the second coder coded 253 non-local stories ($250/253=.988$) resulting in a .988 intercoder reliability. Local stories ($125/127=.984$) resulted in an intercoder reliability of .984. Non-local paragraphs ($1989/1993=.988$) had a .988 intercoder reliability. Local paragraphs had an intercoder reliability of .994 ($1956/1967=.994$). The crime story category was lower ($7/8=.875$) with an intercoder reliability of .875. Crime story paragraphs ($89/126=.706$) was the lowest category of all with an intercoder reliability of .706.

Individual crime stories pulled from this 10 percent sample had a high degree of intercoder reliability, although a small sample size. Of the four crime stories which matched, most categories established 100 percent intercoder reliability. Those categories scoring 100 percent included: front page placement (1), picture presence (1), whether the crime, as defined by UCR data categories, was violent (Violent=4, Non-violent=0), the type of crime (Murder=1, Aggravated Assault=3), victim gender (4), whether the relationship between victim and suspect was provided (2), suspect gender (4), suspect age (2), location (3), date (4), circumstances as defined by what the victim was doing when the crime occurred (3), and whether a motive for the crime was included in the story (1).

The only two categories not scoring 100 percent intercoder reliability were victim age ($3/4=.75$) and time of occurrence ($2/3=.666$).

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine if the *Houston Chronicle's* news content has changed since 1996. Specifically, the amount of local and non-local content in the Front Page and the Metropolitan/City & State sections was examined. Crime coverage was also studied in an effort to determine to what extent crime contributed to the overall content of the newspaper. Details which would allow readers to gauge the apparent randomness of the crime such as victim participation (what the victim was doing which might have caused him or her to be targeted) and the relationship between the victim and suspect were also coded. All data were then collected in Microsoft Excel to determine frequency and proportions.

Changing Newshole

The newshole of the *Houston Chronicle* was measured by story count and by paragraphs (Table 1).

Table 1
Non-Local Story v. Local Story Comparison by Year

Year: 1996	Non-Local Stories	Local Stories	Total Stories	Non-Local Paragraphs	Local Paragraphs	Total Paragraphs
Total	474	437	911	4,613	6,164	10,777
Percentage of Total	52%	48%		43%	57%	
Avg. Story per Issue	34	31				
Avg. Paragraph per Issue	10	14		330	440	
Year: 2006	Non-Local Stories	Local Stories	Total Stories	Non-Local Paragraphs	Local Paragraphs	Total Paragraphs
Total	562	369	931	4,050	5,050	9,100
Percentage of Total	60%	40%		45%	55%	
Avg. Story per Issue	40	26				
Avg. Paragraph per Issue				289	361	
Avg. Paragraph per Story	7	14				

Year: 2007	Non-Local Stories	Local Stories	Total Stories	Non-Local Paragraphs	Local Paragraphs	Total Paragraphs
Total	612	290	902	4,347	4,549	8,896
Percentage of Total	68%	32%		49%	51%	
Avg. Story per Issue	44	21				
Avg. Paragraph per Issue				310	325	
Avg. Paragraph per Story	7	16				
Year: 2008	Non-Local Stories	Local Stories	Total Stories	Non-Local Paragraphs	Local Paragraphs	Total Paragraphs
Total	566	287	853	4,104	4,849	8,953
Percentage of Total	66%	34%		46%	54%	
Avg. Story per Issue	40	21				
Avg. Paragraph per Issue				274	347	
Avg. Paragraph per Story	7	17				

Year: 2009	Non-Local Stories	Local Stories	Total Stories	Non-Local Paragraphs	Local Paragraphs	Total Paragraphs
Total	483	266	749	3,396	2,959	6,355
Percentage of Total	64%	36%		53%	47%	
Avg. Story per Issue	35	19				
Avg. Paragraph per Issue				243	211	
Avg. Paragraph per Story	7	11				

Newshole by Story Count

In the two-week period coded for 1996, the *Houston Chronicle* published 474 non-local stories. The years 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 saw the number of non-local stories slightly increase (562, 612, 566 and 483 respectively). This resulted in an average increase per issue from 34 non-local stories in 1996 to about 40 non-local stories in 2006 through 2008. In 2009, non-local stories fell to 1996 levels with an average of 35.

However, it was a different case for the number of local stories. Those fell every year, never again approaching the 1996 high of 437. Each year, beginning in 2006 with 369 local stories, the number of local stories declined, ending in 2009 with a low of 266. This resulted in a decrease of almost 40 percent from the 1996 high. The average number of local stories per issue reflected this decline. In 1996, the *Houston Chronicle* averaged

31 local stories per issue. Beginning in 2006, that average fell every year, with the exception of 2008 which exactly matched 2007 with 21 local stories.

Even though non-local stories did increase in the years following 1996, the decline in local stories was so precipitous it could not offset the increase. The year 2006 saw a 20 story increase from 1996 in the combined number of local and non-local stories, however no subsequent year ever returned to the 1996 level of 911.

Newshole by Paragraph

Another measurement of a newspaper's newshole, or amount of space dedicated to news, is the number of paragraphs written. In 1996, the *Houston Chronicle* had 10,777 paragraphs of story content with more than half of the newshole (6,134 paragraphs) attributed to local content.

Although, the number of non-local stories increased in the following years, the amount of content contained in them did not. Non-local paragraphs went from a high of 4,613 in 1996 to a low of 3,396 in 2009. This is a decline of nearly 25 percent. This coincided with a non-local story running an average 10 paragraphs in 1996 but only 7 paragraphs in the years 2006 through 2009.

The amount of local story paragraphs shrank even more dramatically, ending in 2009 with less than half (2,959) of those printed in 1996 (6,164). Moreover, as Table 1 illustrates, this was a steady downward trend from 2006 through 2009. The only exception was an increase in 2008, which saw local paragraphs rise 300 paragraphs from the year 2007's 4,549 paragraphs. The average paragraph per local story did not establish as clear a pattern as the non-local stories. From 14 per local story in 1996, the paragraphs averaged 14 in 2006, 16 in 2007, and 17 in 2008 before falling to a low of 11 in 2009. It

is unclear whether the decrease in 2009 was the beginning of a trend or simply an abnormally low year.

Crime Coverage Newshole

Following the standard established above when comparing local versus non-local stories, the newshole of *Houston Chronicle* crime coverage was coded in three different ways. First, out of each year's two week sample, the total number of crime stories, which by definition were local, was measured as a percentage of the local story count for that year. Second, the number of crime paragraphs was measured as a percentage of the local story paragraphs. Third, the average length of a crime story was compared to the average length of a local story (Table 2).

Table 2
Local Story v. Crime Story/Paragraph Comparison

Year	Local Story Count	Crime Story Count	Crime Percentage of Local Stories
1996	437	35	8%
2006	369	27	7%
2007	290	25	9%
2008	287	25	9%
2009	266	26	10%

Year	Local Paragraphs	Crime Story Paragraphs	Crime Percentage of Local Paragraphs
1996	6,164	260	4%
2006	5,050	213	4%
2007	4,549	281	6%
2008	4,849	313	6%
2009	2,959	229	8%

Year	Avg. Paragraph per Local Story	Avg. Paragraph per Crime Story	Crime Percentage of Local Story
1996	14	7	50%
2006	14	8	57%
2007	16	11	69%
2008	17	13	76%
2009	11	9	81%

In 1996, 35 crime stories comprised eight percent of the local stories printed. Between 2006 and 2009, each two-week sample contained an average of 26 stories. As a percentage of local stories, crime stories dropped slightly from the 8 percent seen in 1996 to 7 percent in 2006. Crime stories then rose to 9 percent in 2007 and 2008 and to 10 percent in 2009.

Crime content, as measured by paragraphs, doubled between 1996 and 2009. It started out as four percent in 1996 and remained the same in 2006. In 2007 and 2008, crime paragraphs represented six percent of local content while in 2009, crime paragraphs were eight percent of local content.

The average length of a crime story, as compared to the average length of a local story, also changed over time. In 1996, a crime story was seven paragraphs, half the length of a local story's 14 paragraphs. In 2006, the local story average remained the same, however the crime story average gained a paragraph. In 2007 and 2008, local stories grew slightly, however crime stories grew more. In 2007, a crime story was 11 paragraphs, or 69 percent the length of a local story. In 2008, it was 13 paragraphs, or 76 percent the length of a local story. In 2009, the lengths of both a local and a crime story fell, although not by the same degree. A local story was the shortest recorded, 11 paragraphs, and a crime story was nine paragraphs long. This resulted in a crime story being more than 80 percent the length of a local story.

Crime Content versus UCR Data

The Uniform Crime Report contains the crime numbers each United States law enforcement agency reports to the FBI. Those numbers are broken down by violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault) and non-violent crime (burglary, theft,

auto theft). Under the Texas Freedom of Information Act, UCR data for 1996, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009, were obtained from the Harris County Sheriff's Office and the Houston Police Department (Table 3).

Table 3
UCR Data for Violent and Non-Violent Crimes 1996, 2006-2009

Violent Crimes

Year: 1996	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault
Harris County	56	378	1,297	4,325
Houston	261	1,002	8,276	12,917
Total	317	1,380	9,573	17,242

Non-Violent Crimes

Year: 1996	Burglary	Theft	Auto Theft
Harris County	8,930	18,888	4,743
Houston	25,402	65,080	22,391
Total	34,332	83,968	27,134

Violent Crimes

Year: 2006	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault
Harris County	67	338	2,214	4,920
Houston	376	854	11,371	11,648
Total	443	1,192	13,585	16,568

Non-Violent Crimes

Year: 2006	Burglary	Theft	Auto Theft
Harris County	11,543	25,710	5,751
Houston	26,869	73,091	21,093
Total	38,412	98,801	26,844

Violent Crimes

Year: 2007	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault
Harris County	65	354	1,980	4,332
Houston	353	694	11,479	12,040
Total	418	1,048	13,459	16,372

Non-Violent Crimes

Year: 2007	Burglary	Theft	Auto Theft
Harris County	13,293	28,446	6,654
Houston	29,044	74,817	19,465
Total	42,337	103,263	26,119

Violent Crimes

Year: 2008	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault
Harris County	74	351	2,441	5,058
Houston	295	750	10,603	13,132
Total	369	1,101	13,044	15,661

Non-Violent Crimes

Year: 2008	Burglary	Theft	Auto Theft
Harris County	13,017	28,560	5,855
Houston	29,467	68,598	15,214
Total	39,964	97,158	21,069

Violent Crimes

Year: 2009	Murder	Rape	Robbery	Aggravated Assault
Harris County	96	281	2,975	5,087
Houston	292	823	11,367	13,118
Total	388	1,104	14,342	18,205

Non-Violent Crimes

Year: 2009	Burglary	Theft	Auto Theft
Harris County	15,053	33,921	5,929
Houston	29,279	77,058	14,596
Total	44,332	110,979	20,525

It can be seen the combined levels of violent and non-violent crime increased for 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 from 1996 levels.

The murder rate in particular rose 28 percent from 317 in 1996 to 443 in 2006. It then fell the following three years but never again to the 1996 low. Aggravated assault on the other hand, fell from 1996 levels every year except for 2009. Reported rapes occurred less often in 2006 through 2009 than in 1996. Meanwhile, robberies trended up every year with the exception of 2008, which was down from the year before.

Non-violent crime increased in the years following 1996 and also accounted for the clear majority of all crime reported to law enforcement authorities. For example, in 2006, which saw the highest murder rate of any year studied (443), total violent crime was only 16 percent of the total crime reported.

Crime Story Prominence

A crime story's prominence was coded using story placement (the newspaper's Front Page section or the front page of the Metropolitan/City & State section) as well whether it included a picture (Table 4).

Table 4
Crime Story Placement

Year	Story Count	Front Page	Front Page Percentage	City & State	City & State Percentage	Picture Present	Picture Percentage
1996	35	2	6%	3	9%	2	6%
2006	27	0	0%	2	7%	4	15%
2007	25	2	8%	4	16%	5	20%
2008	25	3	12%	1	4%	7	28%
2009	26	1	4%	4	15%	1	4%

The overall number of stories featured on the front page and on page one of the Metropolitan/City & State section did not vary greatly through the years, averaging two and three stories respectively. Even when measured as a percentage of the total number of stories, no pattern emerged. The use of accompanying pictures increased from 1996 levels with the sole exception occurring in 2009. Given the reduced number of crime stories that also accompanied the years following 1996, this meant a greater percentage of crime stories was accompanied by a photograph.

Violent versus Non-Violent Coverage

Although UCR data show non-violent crime was the vast majority of all reported crimes, a comparison to violent crime stories indicates violent crime comprised the clear majority of crime stories covered in the *Houston Chronicle* (Table 5). Moreover violent crime reporting saw a minimum of a 15 percent increase from 1996 in the 2006 through 2009 years. In most years the rise was at least 20 percent (2006 and 2008) and almost 30 percent in 2007.

Table 5
Violent & Non-Violent Stories

Year	Violent Stories	Violent Percentage	Non-Violent Stories	Non-Violent Percentage	Other Stories	Other Percentage
1996	23	65%	4	11%	8	23%
2006	23	85%	0	0%	4	15%
2007	23	92%	0	0%	2	8%
2008	22	88%	1	4%	2	8%
2009	21	81%	1	4%	4	15%

Of the violent crime garnering *Houston Chronicle* coverage, murder was the most prevalent (Table 6). Murder was the subject of 43 percent of crime stories in 1996, increasing to 63 percent in 2006 and then to 72 percent in 2007 before falling in 2008 and 2009.

Table 6
Violent Stories by Type of Crime

Year	Murder	Murder Percentage	Rape	Rape Percentage	Robbery	Robbery Percentage	Agg. Assault	Agg. Assault Percentage
1996	15	43%	2	6%	4	11%	2	6%
2006	17	63%	0	0%	0	0%	6	23%
2007	18	72%	2	8%	0	0%	3	12%
2008	15	60%	1	4%	1	4%	5	20%
2009	13	50%	0	0%	2	8%	6	23%

Rape was infrequently reported, regardless of the year, and was never more than 8 percent of all crimes featured (2007). Likewise, there were years in which robberies were not reported. The most robberies covered were in 1996, which saw four stories. This represented 11 percent of the total crime coverage seen that year.

Murder coverage is particularly noteworthy when compared to the population of Harris County. By definition, all murders investigated by the Harris County Sheriff's Office would take place there. Likewise, Houston (and by extension the Houston Police Department) is located almost entirely within Harris County. Between 1996 and 2009, Harris County added almost one million residents (Texas Department of State Health

Services, 2011). Even so, the murder rate (Table 7) indicates Harris County was actually safer in 2008 and 2009 than in 1996.

Table 7
Harris County Murder Rate per Resident by Year

Year	Murders	Population	Murders per Resident
1996	317	3,117,376	1 per 9,834
2006	443	3,830,130	1 per 8,646
2007	418	3,891,420	1 per 9,310
2008	369	3,965,716	1 per 10,747
2009	388	4,044,032	1 per 10,423

Population Source: Texas Department of State Health Services

Non-violent crime was rarely reported by the *Houston Chronicle* (Table 8).

Table 8
Non-Violent Stories by Type of Crime

Year	Burglary	Burglary Percentage	Theft	Theft Percentage	Auto Theft	Auto Theft Percentage
1996	2	2%	2	6%	0	0%
2006	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2007	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2008	0	0%	1	4%	0	0%
2009	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Two burglaries were reported in 1996, and burglaries were not reported at all during the following years. Thefts were reported twice in 1996 and only once after, in 2008. Auto thefts were never reported.

Victims and Suspects

Victim and suspect descriptions were coded to allow readers to draw conclusions as to their personal similarities with the victim. Were they the same age, race or gender? Did they know someone who was the same age, race or gender as the suspect? There were a handful of so-called victimless crimes such as running red lights or prostitution arrests or a speeding driver who lost control of his/her vehicle and killed him-/herself. In these cases, the person central to the story was treated as a suspect and no victim information was coded, since this person's illegal actions apparently led to his/her own death or arrest (Table 9).

Table 9
Victim/Suspect Demographic Information by Year

Year	Gender Provided	Gender Provided Percentage	Race Provided	Race Provided Percentage	Age Provided	Age Provided Percentage
1996	25	71%	0	0%	17	49%
2006	23*	88%	1	4%	15	58%
2007	18	96%	0	0%	16	64%
2008	22**	96%	0	0%	15	65%
2009	18***	75%	0	0%	15	63%

Suspect Information

Year	Gender Provided	Gender Provided Percentage	Race Provided	Race Provided Percentage	Age Provided	Age Provided Percentage
1996	28	80%	0	0%	22	63%
2006	19	70%	2	7%	13	48%
2007	20	80%	1	4%	13	52%
2008	23	92%	1	4%	13	52%
2009	19	73%	0	0%	10	38%

* 2006- 26 stories in which victim was present. One story in which suspect only was present.

**2008- 23 stories in which victim was present. Two stories in which suspect only was present.

***2009- 24 stories in which victim was present. Two stories in which suspect only was present.

The gender of the victim was usually provided, with 1996 seeing the lowest and the years 2007 and 2008 seeing the highest reportage. Likewise, suspect gender was reported a low of 70 percent in 2006 and a high of 92 percent in 2008. Victim age reporting was not quite as high, but was present almost 50 percent of the time in 1996 and almost 65 percent in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Suspect age was lower, but still averaged close to 50 percent in 2006, 2007 and 2008. It was almost 65 percent in 1996 but only approached 40 percent in 2009.

Crime Descriptions

Additional information on the crime itself was also examined. In addition to the "who" (see Table 8 for victim and suspect information), the "what," "when," and "why" were also coded. Whether the story included what the victim was doing at the time and a possible motive for the crime were also coded. The relationship between victim and

suspect was coded if present. These factors allow readers to assess their similarity to the victim. For example, do they frequent the same locations at the same time of the day or do they engage in the same type of behavior such as drug dealing, jogging through the park, etc. (Table 10)?

Table 10
Crime by Location/Date/Time and Year

Year	Location Provided	Location Provided Percentage	Date Provided	Date Provided Percentage	Time Provided	Time Provided Percentage
1996	31	89%	32	91%	21	60%
2006	23	85%	25	93%	19	70%
2007	20	80%	22	88%	12	48%
2008	24	96%	24	96%	22	88%
2009	23	88%	25	96%	16	62%

Year	Victim Actions Provided	Victim Actions Provided Percentage	Relationship Provided	Relationship Provided Percentage	Motive Provided	Motive Provided Percentage
1996	24	69%	12	34%	28	80%
2006	13*	50%	3	12%	14	52%
2007	14	56%	8	32%	11	44%
2008	20**	87%	7	30%	19	76%
2009	20***	83%	7	29%	16	62%

* 2006- 26 stories in which victim was present. One story in which suspect only was present.

**2008- 23 stories in which victim was present. Two stories in which suspect only was present.

***2009- 24 stories in which victim was present. Two stories in which suspect only was present.

Location and date were included in stories with a high degree of consistency. The lowest year for including the location of the crime was in 2007, which still included it in 80 percent of the stories. The highest year was 2008, which included the location in 96 percent of the stories. Likewise, the date the crime occurred was consistently in the low-to-mid 90th percentile in all years except for 2007, which featured it in 88 percent of the stories.

The time at which the crime occurred was provided almost half of the time in 2007. In all other years it was higher, ranging from 60 percent in 1996 to almost 90 percent in 2008.

The victim's actions at the time of the occurrence were provided in almost 70 percent of the 1996 crime stories. This number then fell to the low-to-mid 50th percentile in 2006 and 2007 before rising to the 80th percentile bracket in 2008 and 2009.

Motive was provided a high of 80 percent in 1996 before dropping to 52 percent in 2006 and 44 percent in 2007. The number then rose to 76 percent in 2008 before again falling to 62 percent in 2009.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the changing content of the *Houston Chronicle* since it became the city's only major daily newspaper in 1996. Given its decreased circulation in the years 2006 through 2009 and resulting cost-cutting moves, the years 1996 and 2006 through 2009 were studied using content analysis. The goal was to determine if local news had been affected during a time of unprecedented belt tightening. Particular attention was paid to local crime stories as an over-reporting of them could potentially cause readers to believe their city was a much more dangerous place than reality would indicate. To this end, stories in the Front Page and Metropolitan/City & State sections were coded as either local or non-local. They were then measured by paragraph and compared to the other years to determine the changing newshole of the *Houston Chronicle*. Local crime stories were coded in the same manner, however additional elements were examined to determine the randomness of the crime and whether details were included which would allow readers to determine their similarity to victims or suspects.

Newshole

Hypothesis 1 posited the newshole of the *Houston Chronicle* would shrink in the years following 1996.

So how does the *Houston Chronicle* in 2009 compare to its 1996 counterpart? To begin, the Front page and Metropolitan/City & State sections were much thinner since

news coverage in both sections had decreased noticeably. The total newshole was measured in two ways: story count and paragraphs.

The average number of non-local stories per issue actually increased after 1996. The exception was 2009 which, at 35 stories per issue, almost matched the 1996 level of 34 stories per issue. During those same years, the average number of local stories per issue fell dramatically. In 1996, there was an average of 31 local stories per issue. In 2009, there were 19 -- an almost 40 percent drop.

However, story count is not the whole story. A more complete picture can be gained by including a measurement of the newshole by paragraph. For example, 10 stories, each one paragraph long, would still fill a smaller newshole than two stories, 20 paragraphs long.

Although not quite so drastic, examining the pattern of non-local paragraphs through the years shows this is what happened. While the number of non-local stories in 2006, 2007 and 2008 went up from 1996 levels, their length actually went down. In 1996, the average non-local story was 10 paragraphs, while in 2006 through 2009 it was seven paragraphs. What is more, in 1996, non-local stories averaged 330 paragraphs an issue which was larger than every successive year. The year 2007 came the closest to returning to 1996 levels but still fell short by 20 paragraphs per issue. The year 2009 showed the most extreme disparity, with about 25 percent fewer non-local paragraphs (243) than in 1996 (330). In other words, there may have been more non-local stories printed as the years progressed, but they were shorter and as a result were presumably not as in-depth.

Local stories showed similar, although even more pronounced results. In 1996, the average length of a local story was 14 paragraphs. This number remained constant in 2006 and then increased two paragraphs in 2007 (16) and another paragraph in 2008 (17) before falling to 11 paragraphs in 2009. When coupled with the decline in total local stories per issue, this still resulted in the average number of local paragraphs per issue demonstrating a steady decline almost every year of the study. In 1996, there were an average of 440 local paragraphs per issue, a high never again matched. In the succeeding years, 2008 had the highest number of local paragraphs (347) but remained only about 70 percent of what it was in 1996.

This would seem to be a direct result of the *Houston Chronicle's* circulation declining and local editorial staff being laid off. In order to fill the newspaper, the publishers appeared to increasingly rely on wire services or other newspaper stories to offset the reduction in stories laid-off local reporters once generated.

While the number of local stories fell each year, it remains to be seen if the shortness of those stories, especially in 2009, is a trend or a one year aberration. The local story length actually increased in 2007 and 2008 before falling below the 1996 levels in the final year of this study.

Regardless of the local story length in 2009, the pattern of a reduced number of local stories and fewer combined local and non-local paragraphs per year clearly supports Hypothesis 1 that the newshole of the *Houston Chronicle* would decrease in the years following 1996.

Crime Coverage

Hypothesis 2 held that the *Houston Chronicle* would increasingly rely upon local crime stories to provide content and this would result in an over-reporting of violent crime compared to UCR data.

Using the same process that established a local versus non-local newshole, crime stories were coded by total number of stories and paragraph length. Since all coded crime stories were local, these were then compared to similar local story statistics.

The results show the number of crime stories remained relatively constant over time, dropping from 35 in 1996 to 26 in 2009. However, this occurred as the amount of local stories was dropping from 437 in 1996 to 266 in 2009. As a result, crime stories became an ever increasing percentage of local stories, rising from eight percent in 1996 to 10 percent in 2009. Although, the crime story percentage did increase, a two percent increase in the final year (and one percent in 2007 and 2008) is not regarded as significant.

Crime by paragraph is a different case, with results showing an increased percentage of crime content in local news coverage. In 1996, crime represented 4 percent of all local story paragraphs. It remained the same in 2006, then rose to 6 percent in 2007 and 2008 before doubling to 8 percent in 2009. While remaining less than 10 percent of all local story paragraphs, the upward trend, with a doubling the final year, is believed to be significant, as more local stories were about crime.

Finally, the length of the average crime story in 1996 was compared to the other years in the sample. In 1996, a crime story was seven paragraphs long, half the average local story length of 14 paragraphs. Local stories grew progressively longer every year

except for 2009, where stories averaged only 11 paragraphs. Crime stories followed the same trend, rising to eight paragraphs in 2006, 11 paragraphs in 2007, and 13 paragraphs in 2008 before falling to nine paragraphs in 2009. This resulted in crime stories, which had been half the length of the average local story, growing to a little more than 80 percent of a local story length. In other words, the length of crime stories was outpacing the growth of other local stories.

Crime Compared to UCR Data

Combined violent and non-violent crime investigated by the Houston Police Department and the Harris County Sheriff's Office increased from 1996 to 2009.

When it came to violent crime, murders in particular were higher every year following 1996's reported 317. They rose to 443 in 2006, then dropped to 418 in 2007 and 369 in 2008, before rising again in 2009 to 388. Rapes were never again as high as the 1,380 reported in 1996. Likewise, aggravated assaults fell every year from 1996 levels, with the exception of the final year, 2009. Robberies bucked the downward violent crime trend, rising in every year except for 2008.

Non-violent crime not only went up every year following 1996, it accounted for the clear majority of all crimes reported. Even when murders were highest in 2006, total violent crime was only 16 percent of all crime reported.

Despite 21 out of 25 crimes reported being non-violent, in most years non-violent crimes received either no coverage or less than 5 percent of all crime stories. The exception was 1996, when non-violent crimes accounted for 11 percent of all crime stories.

Although murders represented a small fraction of all violent crime, they were still the number one crime story covered in the *Houston Chronicle*. For example, at its highest (2006) the murder rate was 443, or less than 1.5 percent of all violent crime. That same year, murders accounted for 63 percent of all crime stories. This over-reporting of murders compared to both violent and total crime is a trend seen in every year studied. The years 2006 and 2007 were the highest, although 2008 and 2009 still remained above 1996 levels. The focus of crime coverage upon murders is particularly significant when measured against the murder rate, which indicates 2008 and 2009 were actually the safest years in the study.

The prominence of these stories, as measured by where they were placed in the newspaper, was also studied, with no clear pattern emerging. In 1996, 15 percent of all crime stories were placed on either the paper's front page (A1) or the front page of the Metro section. This dropped to 7 percent in 2006, then rose to 24 percent in 2007, fell to 16 percent in 2008, and went up slightly to 19 percent in 2009. Crime stories were more likely to be on the front page of the *Houston Chronicle* or the front page of its Metro/City & State section in the years following 1996, although not significantly so.

Crime Coverage Results

Hypothesis 2, which stated the *Houston Chronicle* would increasingly rely upon local crime-related stories to provide content and this crime coverage would result in an over-reporting of violent crime as compared to the Uniform Crime Report, was only partially supported. Compared to the UCR data, the *Houston Chronicle* did over-report violent crime, particularly murders. However, the newspaper did not significantly increase the prominence of crime story placement. Nor did it dramatically increase the

percentage of crime stories. Nevertheless, the length of those crime stories did increase, going so far as to double the final year. Moreover, the length of crime stories compared to local stories increased every year following 1996, indicating publishers or editors were relying upon crime stories to increasingly fill the local paragraph newshole. To what extent those longer crime stories contained more details can be seen in the next section.

Crime Randomness

Hypothesis 3 held that crime coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* would cover basic information such as who, what, when, why and how, but would often leave out context such as the randomness of the crime as determined in part by the crime's cause and the relationship of the victim to the suspect.

Factors which could allow a reader to engage in fear reduction and to determine the randomness of the crime were coded. The gender, race and age of both the victim (if present) and the suspect were all examined. Additional information such as date, time and location of the crime were also coded. These factors may allow the reader to compare his/her own similarity to the victim and to establish whether he/she would frequent a particular location at a particular time on a particular day. It is one thing for a daytime downtown office worker to read about a murder downtown at a restaurant he frequents for lunch. It is another for him to realize the murder happened overnight and on the weekend, when he never eats there. Likewise, what the victim was doing, his/her relationship to the suspect and what the motive was for the crime were coded. This was done to help establish the randomness of the crime by conveying whether the victim engaged in actions which could have contributed to the crime occurring in the first place. For example, if the victim was dealing drugs to a "friend" and was robbed, it is less likely

to be a random crime than if a family was robbed while leaving a restaurant. The first scenario involves the victim placing himself in greater harm's way by engaging in risky behavior (dealing drugs) while the second involves a crime of opportunity.

Victim/Suspect Descriptions

Victim gender information fluctuated through the years, but was usually provided at least 75 percent of the time. In 2007 and 2008, it was reported the most -- 96 percent of the time. Likewise, suspect gender information was reported often -- always at least 70 percent and sometimes as much as 92 percent of the time. In both cases, there is no pattern as to which years would have the highest reporting rates.

The same holds true for victim and suspect ages. Both were provided almost half of the time, with the exception of suspect age in 2009 which was only 38 percent. As with gender, there is no apparent pattern when it comes to victim age reporting. Suspect age reporting went down from the 1996 high of 63 percent. In 2006 it was 48 percent, while in 2007 and 2008 and it was 52 percent. As mentioned, 2009 saw the lowest point of 38 percent. This could indicate reporters were writing stories using preliminary information, when suspect information might be at its scarcest, and not following up on the stories to get a more complete picture of the case.

Race was almost never reported in a crime story. For example, out of all the crime stories reported in 1996, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009, only one story included the victim's race. A suspect's race was reported a little more often, although not much. Out of all the years studied, suspect race was mentioned just four times. Even when race could be germane to a story, such as when the public's help was sought in finding a missing person or a suspect and a detailed description was provided, race was rarely, if

ever, included. Since a check of news releases in recent years provided by the Houston Police Department often turned up a suspect description which included race, not reporting race would seem to be an editorial decision on the part of the publisher of the *Houston Chronicle*. If so, this could be in response to studies which indicate news stories concerning race and crime can lead to racial stereotyping, causing certain individuals of certain minority races to be perceived as criminals in larger numbers than is statistical reality (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Gorham, 2006). An example would be news coverage in Boston of a reported rape of a pregnant white woman, allegedly by a black man. This was ultimately proven to be a hoax and led to Boston media promising to overhaul their racial news coverage, although with limited success (Johnson & Dixon, 2008).

Crime Details

Some of the basic tenants of journalism include telling "who, what, when, where, why, and how." The above victim and suspect information establishes the "who" and the previously described coding of crime type establishes the "what." Coding for location, date, and time help establish the "where" and "when." This information was consistently provided throughout the years of the study. Location was presented at least 80 percent of the time and often almost 90 percent or more. The date of occurrence was reported at least 88 percent of the time and usually more than 90 percent. The time a crime occurred was lower, but with one exception it was still provided at least 60 percent of the time and rose as high as 88 percent. The sole exception was in 2007 when it was 48 percent. There was no pattern as to which year might have a higher or lower reporting number.

Establishing the why (and helping in the process to establish randomness) was the purpose behind coding the victim's actions, relationship with the suspect, and the motive

for the crime. If someone was shot in a bar while arguing with an acquaintance over a woman, a reader can deduce this was a less random crime than a man being shot while simply walking down the street. The first scenario would not appear to be random since the victim and suspect were known to each other and were arguing over a known topic. Alcohol usage may also be inferred, but not necessarily be a given. In the second scenario, the crime appears to be random as the victim was presumably minding his own business, walking along, when he was shot.

The victim's actions were provided at least 50 percent of the time, and often almost 70 percent to more than 80 percent. The relationship between the victim and the suspect was provided about 30 percent of the time in all years except for 2006, when it was only given 12 percent of the time. Reporting the motive also varied by year, with it being provided 80 percent of the time in 1996 and only 44 percent of the time in 2007. The other years were higher than in 2007, although never as high as 1996. Again, no apparent pattern was established.

Hypothesis 3 was only partially supported. It stated that while crime coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* would often cover basic information (Who, What, When, Why and How), critical context such as the randomness of the crime, explained in part by the crime's cause and relationship of the victim to the suspect, would often be omitted.

The basic information, such as date, time and location, remained remarkably consistent and were often reported. This can help a reader with fear reduction by comparing his own circumstances and haunts to those of the victim.

However, the elements which might help determine randomness such as the victim's actions, motive, and relationship to the suspect do not support the hypothesis

which stated these additional details would often be omitted. Some were frequently present and in some years following 1996 were even higher than the initial year of the study. Moreover, the lack of a clear pattern or trend does not support the hypothesis that such content would be omitted in later years.

Observations

From this study, it is apparent the *Houston Chronicle's* staff reductions have had a distinct impact upon the newspaper's daily content.

There are more non-local stories, provided by other papers and wire services since the cost-cutting measures went into effect. This is one way to continue cost-effectively filling a newshole when the number of local reporters available to provide content has been reduced. However, while the number of non-local stories published since 1996 has gone up, the amount of paragraphs per issue devoted to non-local stories has not followed suit. This gives readers the impression of greater content through a higher story count, although the in-depth substance from longer non-local stories has decreased.

Most disturbing for a local paper, the number of local stories decreased every year since 1996. In many years, those stories remaining were longer than in 1996; however, they could not equal the total local paragraphs published that year. This means Houston's only major daily was not only reporting fewer stories, likely in less depth, but it was not providing an equivalent amount of local news.

As expected, crime coverage played a very real role in local content. The number of crime stories decreased in the years following 1996 even as crime in general increased. However, crime coverage by paragraph increased quite a bit from 1996 to 2009, accounting for an ever growing percentage of all local paragraph content. Moreover, in

2009, the length of crime stories increased to almost four-fifths of a local story up from one-half in 1996. It would appear, not only does crime remain a staple of the *Houston Chronicle* but more content (by paragraph) is devoted to it as a means of compensating for less local reporting on other beats.

No great surprise, but violent crime, especially murders, represented a large part of all crime coverage. Violent crime has conflict, drama, and sometimes pathos. As such, it holds an interest and fascination that non-violent crime, for example a laptop stolen from a car, cannot often match.

Implications for Cultivation Theory

This study indicates the opportunity exists for further cultivation theory research. While it established the diminished state of the *Houston Chronicle*, the study did not measure the degree of fear felt by *Houston Chronicle* readers.

Given the propensity for the *Houston Chronicle* to cover crime, to make its crime stories longer, and to dwell on violent crime, it seems logical to conclude that readers could increasingly fear the city in which they live. However, the paper does establish the non-randomness of crimes by often providing details such as time and location as well as motive and victim/suspect relationship. These factors may allow the reader to engage in fear reduction. Using this study as a base, cultivation theory researchers can now measure the impact the *Houston Chronicle's* changing crime coverage has had upon its readers.

Limitations

As with any study, there are limitations and areas for improvement.

Intercoder reliability was very high, approaching 100 percent, for story and paragraph counts. It was lower when comparing crime story count (.875) and crime paragraphs (.706). This was likely due to a small sample size. Likewise, crime details had 100 percent intercoder reliability in all categories except victim age (.75) and time (.66). This too, was likely due to a small story count.

The inclusion of photos, in an attempt to determine whether a reporter went to the scene of a story, was not as definitive as hoped. For example, a mug shot was coded as a picture. This is something, like a news release, which is provided by a law enforcement official. A better method would have been to code if a photo had a photographer byline, as that would indicate it had been shot by a *Houston Chronicle* staffer or freelance photographer, not a law enforcement agency. Also, photo distribution was much easier in 2006 through 2009, with the increased use of digital cameras by government agencies and thus the greater ease of emailing such mug shots. It must be remembered the internet was still in its relative infancy in 1996.

In regards to race, a story would be coded as not providing the race of a suspect or victim unless it was explicitly stated. However, race can often be inferred from names, for example if they are obviously Hispanic or Asian. Likewise, a photo can sometimes indicate a victim's or suspect's race. Given the inability to consistently and reliably tell this, it was deemed best to err on side of caution by excluding these cases unless race was definitively provided.

Sloppy writing proved problematic as well. The coding of crime coverage would likely have been more accurate if not for the poor writing of some reporters. For example, there were stories in which no location or investigating agency was provided.

In some cases the author knew the story to be about a crime investigated by the Houston Police Department or the Harris County Sheriff's Office, but because required information was not included, it could not be coded.

A surprising number of stories were not included in this study because they either did not list an investigating agency or they took place in areas near Houston but were not investigated by the Houston Police Department or the Harris County Sheriff's Office. Future studies could expand the criteria for a local crime to include other law enforcement agencies as well as crimes prosecuted by the Harris County District Attorney's Office. Adding these agencies, however, would not allow for an accurate comparison to UCR data unless that data was obtained from each agency mentioned.

Sloppy reporting was also seen in other cases, such as when a driver was charged in a fatal collision (Driver Charged, 2009). In this story, charges had been filed against a suspect and yet there was no information provided on the suspect's age or relationship to the victim. Likewise, the victim's basic information such as gender and age were omitted. If charges had been filed, the story should have matured enough to provide some of these other basic "who, what, when, why, or how" details.

It should be noted, the crime statistics coded are conservative in nature due to the two scenarios outlines above: law enforcement agencies other than the Harris County Sheriff's Office or the Houston Police Department investigating crimes and the omission of basic facts by the reporter. Had information known to the author, but not included in the omitted articles, been allowed to be coded, the crime statistics would have been higher. How much higher is unknown.

The decision to exclude teases may have reduced the number of local stories. For instance, a particularly egregious example involved the Sunday, July 19, 2009, issue. This edition had not a single story on the front page; instead it contained nothing but teases for such stories as how Houston became a space city, home beer brewing, and traveling to Colonial Williamsburg. It was felt such teases did not constitute the bulk of a reporter's work, instead they merely pointed a reader to where the teased story might be found.

Certain events may have artificially skewed the results. For example, 1996 was a presidential election and local resources may have been shifted away from crime coverage to political coverage. However, as 2008 was also a presidential election, the inclusion of this year would seem to allow for a fair comparison. Presumably the same resources, or even more, would be devoted to the election campaign of the nation's first black president. Election coverage may also account for local stories increasing in length in 2008.

Also, as discussed, the murder rate in 2006 was the highest of all years studied. This may have been artificially raised by the influx of evacuees from New Orleans following the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in late August/early September of 2005. Much initial reporting blamed the mass emigration to Houston as being the cause, or at least a likely contributor, to the rising murder rate (for example, see Gelinias, 2006 and Weber, 2006) although this premise has since been disputed (Pinkerton, 2010; Varano, Schafer, Cancino, Decker, & Greene, 2010). This study merely mentions the relocation of Katrina evacuees to Houston as an abnormal event coinciding with the high 2006 Houston murder rate.

Determining randomness of a crime can be difficult. Circumstances require examining a crime in its totality as the presence of a motive does not automatically eliminate the crime's randomness. For example, a six-year-old girl killed by a drunk driver (Girl, 6, 2009) does not reduce fear as the motive appears random. It is the presence of other factors (date, time, location) all combined which can reduce a reader's fear of such an incident occurring to them or their loved ones.

Finally, when discussing fear reduction, one reason fear may not have been higher among readers was a lack of a moral panic. Even though crime coverage and the crime rate increased, the lack of a signature event (Columb & Damphousse, 2004) may have been the reason. Without this event and a constant media exposure to it, no such panic ensued. The closest which might have occurred during this year was the rise in the murder rate in 2006 that was anecdotally often attributed to Hurricane Katrina evacuees. This "sudden explosive growth, and the menace it poses" (Jenkins, p. 35) might have led to such a moral panic. However, the decrease in murders in the following years likely abated any such fears.

Suggestions for Further Research

There remain a number of opportunities for further research. Among them are studies of newspapers to determine how relevant the print edition is to the public. While print remains the greatest source of a newspaper's revenue, perhaps more people are consuming the online version. If so, it needs to be determined which is the more appropriate source for measuring the basis of public opinion. Similarities between the online and print versions can also be examined in the years to come. Likewise, when examining how opinion leaders form their views of what is important to the public

(which is not necessarily the same thing as what the public deems most important), studies can examine the extent to which opinion leaders are relying upon newspapers (print or online) as their primary source. If newspapers remain significant, then the studies may examine whether opinion leaders are relying upon the print edition, which has the advantage of being a frozen moment in time, or the online edition which is constantly updating and may have different content. Also, given the prevalence of mobile devices such as smart phones and computer tablets, perhaps an online edition carries greater weight because of its accessibility and immediacy. If opinion leaders are not relying upon newspapers (online or print), what has replaced them and how those replacements are being consumed may also be examined.

The traditional distinctions between news mediums have also blurred. Newspapers are becoming more like television through the incorporation of video, and television stations are becoming more like newspapers through the use of printed stories. Future studies could examine to what extent, if any, other sources of local information, such as television websites, have replaced the local newspaper as the primary source of local information for the public and opinion leaders.

The delivery of news itself has changed, with print, television, and radio all becoming more interactive due to the internet. This opens whole new ways of examining news consumption and its effects. Among them, surveys of opinion leaders and the public could be conducted to determine fear of crime and how, or if, newspapers like the *Houston Chronicle* are creating moral panics.

It would also be interesting to continue the research begun in this study to include the years 2010 and 2011. The precipitous drop in the *Houston Chronicle's* newshole in

2009 may be a one-year aberration or it may be the sign of something deeper. It could have been an exceptionally bad year or the beginning of a freefall that has caused other newspapers, including ones owned by the Hearst Corporation, to close down. Examining more recent subscription numbers and story counts and length would aid in establishing whether the downward spiral has continued or even accelerated.

Also, socio-economics may play a greater role in news consumption and the forming of public opinion than in years past. With only one newspaper in Houston and almost everyone having equal to access to television and radio news, is the technology used to consume news more important than ever? It remains to be seen whether a presumed greater access to smart phones and computer tablets, such as the iPad, allow wealthier (and likely better educated) Houstonians to access information and engage in fear reduction in a manner unlike their poorer fellow citizens.

Finally, the role social media plays in creating and heightening a moral panic may also be studied. With access to friends and acquaintances always at someone's fingertips, rumor, fear, and panic can be spread wider and more quickly than ever before.

While newspapers such as the *Houston Chronicle* are not necessarily dead, many are on life support. It remains to be seen what, if anything, will supplement or replace their traditional role in supplying a community with accurate local information.

APPENDIX A
SAMPLE CODING SHEET

Houston Chronicle

Date

Section

Page

Total # of Stories

(do not count if continued from previous page)

Total # of Non-Local Stories

Total # of Local Stories

Total Paragraphs

Total Non-Local Paragraphs

Total Local Paragraphs

Total # of Local Crime Stories

Total # of Local Crime Story Paragraphs

Individual Crime Story Coding

Date

Section

Page

Crime Story Yes No

Title of Story (if crime related):

Number of Paragraphs (if crime related)

(text)

Picture

(if crime related): Yes No

Type of Crime Violent Non-Violent Other

Violent Murder Rape Robbery Agg. Assault

Non-Violent Burglary Theft Auto Theft

Other

(i.e. traffic accidents, evading arrest,
narcotics, etc.)

Houston Chronicle

page 2

Date

Section

Page

Individual Story Coding

Date

Section

Page

Crime Story Yes

No

Title of Story (if crime related):

**Victim
Information**

Gender: male female not provided

Race: provided not provided

Age: provided not provided

Relationship

to suspect

(i.e., friend, relative

co-worker)

provided

not provided

Suspect Information

Gender: male female not provided

Race: provided not provided

Age: provided not provided

Relationship

to victim

(i.e., friend, relative

co-worker)

provided

not provided

Houston Chronicle

Date

Section

Page

Individual Story Coding

Date

Section

Page

Crime Story Yes No

Title of Story (if crime related):

Crime Details

Location provided not provided

Date of Occurrence provided not provided

Time of Occurrence provided not provided

Circumstances Surrounding Crime (what victim was doing when occurred e.g. jogging, drug dealing) provided not provided

motive provided not provided

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