Despite a sizeable body of literature on how neighborhood characteristics affect crime rates (e.g., Krivo, et al. 2015; Zimmerman and Messner 2010), there are only a handful of studies that have assessed the role of neighborhood context in newspapers’ reporting of crime. This research, while scarce, has generally been consistent with the law of opposites perspective – where wealthier neighborhoods and those with fewer racial minorities experience greater coverage of violent crime in newspapers, in spite of their lower rates of police-reported violence (e.g., Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004; Cronin et al. 2013, Paulsen 2003; Peterson 2014, Sorenson, Manz, and Berk 1998). Though certainly informative, such analyses have been limited to studying the predictors of one type of crime (homicide) in singular city newspapers and often treat neighborhood contexts as supplementary control variables (Cronin 2017; see Baranauskas 2018 for an exception). More systematic nationwide analyses that center on how neighborhood-level variables may influence newspaper reports of violent crime are important for at least two reasons. First, neighborhoods are often the geographic scale that the media uses to construct the public’s knowledge about crime (Baranauskas 2018). Distorted media representations of violent crime in certain types of neighborhoods could therefore have other social implications, ranging from altering local residents’ fear of crime to providing justification for the expansion of punitive police interventions (Scarborough et al. 2010; Terrill and Reisig 2003). And portrayals of home invasion crime, in particular, may elicit strong responses because they endanger our American ideals of family, privacy, and security leading some to the perception that ‘no place is safely sacred’ (Katz 1987; p.52). Second, it is fully possible that after controlling for aggregate neighborhood level crime rates and demographics, individual or situational factors may no longer yield the same significance (Cronin 2017).

This study attempts to fill these gaps by presenting one of the most comprehensive analyses available of how neighborhood conditions influence newspaper coverage of violent crime. Recognizing that there is scholarly disagreement about how “neighborhoods” should be defined and that many factors matter, I use geographic zip codes as a proxy for neighborhoods because they are a strong predictor of how residents demarcate their communities (Billingham and Kimmelberg 2018). Specifically, my analysis tests whether various zip code level characteristics (e.g., a crime index, Census median income, Census racial percentages) predict patterns of coverage in over 700 reported incidents of home invasion crime spread across fifteen U.S. city newspapers (Byron, Molidor, and Cantu 2018). I find that neighborhoods with a higher percentage of white residents or a lower percentage of Mexican residents have more words written about their initial home invasion stories, net of other theoretically important individual and situational variables. This pattern aligns with the law of opposites perspective as whiter neighborhoods receive more word space presumably because these crimes are rare and especially sensational in these more privileged contexts. It is also concordant with the “normal crime” hypothesis that violent crime in Latino neighborhoods will be less newsworthly because it is viewed as routine and reflective of more general perceptions of Latino (and especially Mexican) residents’ criminal dispositions (Brown, Jones, Becker 2018; Cronin 2017). Though the race of individual level perpetrators is not statistically significant in these models, arguably because of the Associated Press’ stricter rules of reporting race and text-based underreporting associated with journalistic evasion of claims of racism (Boulahanis and Heltsley 2004, Diadum 2014), race and ethnicity do factor into coverage patterns in more subtle and spatial ways. By giving more or less word space to home invasion stories on the basis of neighborhood level race and ethnicity, newspapers may help construct racialized perspectives about violent crime in a way that evades any public scrutiny for doing so. Such findings reveal nuanced implications for market-based paradigms of news coverage and highlight the continuing significance of race to the news media.
References


