Keeping It Covered:

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Foro: Convivencia y Seguridad Cuidadana en
el Istmo Centroamericano y la Isla Española
San Salvador, June 1998

Introduction

Late last April, on the Los Angeles freeway, a half-naked middle-aged man set his truck and clothes on fire, stopped traffic during the afternoon rush hour near the international airport, and waving a banner urging "safe love," killed himself with a rifle. The man was protesting the service given by health maintenance organizations (HMOs) in the United States. After the incident we learned that 10 years earlier, the man's appendix had burst after an HMO had sent him home. We also found out that he was HIV-positive. At the time he died none of these circumstances was known to the public. However, several local television stations broke into their regular programming--sometimes interrupting after-school cartoon shows for children--to broadcast his suicide live.

Thus tens of thousands of children, at home and presumably safe in a world of danger, innocents watching fantasy images from an electronic box that has become the United States' No. 1 baby-sitter, were treated to an image of an emotionally-disturbed man, in pain, killing himself with a gun. The public outrage was huge, and the offending networks quickly apologized. Because they did not anticipate the man committing suicide, they said, they did not cut away in time from his final tragic act. They also pledged to refrain from broadcasting the actual shooting again. The pledge, however, did not keep them from replaying in later broadcasts the tape of the victim with his clothes ablaze. (1)

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The incident in Los Angeles speaks in volumes about the importance of our deliberations here today. I have been asked to speak on violence and the media, the influence news and entertainment organizations have on violent behavior, and to share some ideas and strategies about violence reduction. I offer to you today an example from my own country, the United States, to tell you that you are not alone in your concerns, and that--as even top law enforcement officials from my country now admit with regards to another social scourge--narcotics--we in the north bear some responsibility for the violence that invades, through your television set, your own homes. (The movie industry

in the United States is one of our top exporters.) And, of course, we also have some insights and remedies to our common problems that may also be interest to us today.

Throughout the Hemisphere, news about crime and violence appear to dominate the pages of newspapers and magazines, and fears about public safety have grown apace. In Brazil such worries have sent wealthy motorists scrambling to purchase armored cars; in Venezuela every Monday Caracas newspapers carry headlines about the dozen or more killings committed each weekend; in Medellin, Colombia, psychology students working on internships gather on weekends at city cemeteries because that is where the community passes its leisure time, as the resting places are filled with mourners of the freshly murdered.

Even in countries where criminal violence has not reached alarming proportions, the perception of insecurity fanned by often sensationalized news coverage has brought with it questions about the efficacy of state efforts to provide for public safety. The fears have had corrosive social effects; residents of rich neighborhoods in Venezuela, for example, now pay huge sums to private security agencies for personal protection, while investments in public law enforcement--needed to protect society as a whole--are increasingly viewed as irrelevant. As international financial institutions focus on the rebuilding of “social capital”--the network of personal relationships and associations that make neighborhoods viable places to work and raise a family--as a means of fighting poverty, scores of urban centers are being “decapitalized” by the growth of street crime and gang violence. As noted in one recent World Bank study:

> “Escalating crime and violence--attributed to increasing unemployment, particularly among young men, and growing drug and alcohol abuse--

> threaten personal safety and increase isolation as people become reluctant to leave their homes at night. The rising number of burglaries has reduced the trust among neighbors and community members. This, along with rising rates of murder, crime on the street and on public transport, and vandalism of public property, has reduced community participation, further eroding stocks of social capital." (2)

As the prospects of armed insurgencies overthrowing governments become a fading memory in many countries, crime and criminal violence have become THE news story. The resorts of authoritarian government--curfews, martial law, illegal searches and seizures--no longer work to suppress both criminal elements and coverage of their deeds, as in times past. Demographics--greater urbanization and ever-greater numbers of young people--and the relative ease and low cost of crime coverage by the media also have played a part in creating a sense of insecurity that sometimes is only partially mirrored in the most reliable statistics.

In the United States, as in many other countries in the Hemisphere, crime related stories make up the largest single news reporting category of newspapers. Does the crime phenomenon deserve the coverage it receives? What is its quality? Are hidden hands manipulating public insecurity for private purpose, be it profits and circulation, or political advantage? Is it the press' duty merely to report the news as it happens, or should it try to put it into context for readers, or even serve the public information strategies of law enforcement? To what extent does it "advertise disorder?" Does crime news generate fear and, in doing so, actually better prepare citizens to confront it? Does such news fit into the category covered by the public's right to know, ensuring access to

information essential if “government by the governed” is to survive? Or is it merely a reflection of our own morbid, and sometimes hypocritical, curiosity? Can crime coverage actually help a society understand the underlying causes of violent and anti-social behavior, and thus serve to motivate citizens into action?

Answers to these questions are important because crime news is a curious mirror of public mood, which it also helps to generate. Perceptions of threat to personal safety can influence our outlook on the rest of the world, our willingness to be open to others, and our ability to interact in ways that strengthen neighborhoods and communities.

Violence as News

The interpretation of crime phenomenon by the press has become a two-edged sword for policymakers and the public. The return to democratic rule throughout the region has meant journalists can report on an endless number of topics extensively; dictatorships frequently were able to suppress the unwelcome news of social turmoil, such as crime, through censorship. However, the "cronica roja"--gripping blood-soaked true crime tales--carried by many newspapers and magazines can and sometimes do transform individual crimes into misleading characterizations about the threats faced, and about the efficacy of the forces of order in meeting those threats. A collection of anecdotes is not data; to portray them as such can cause the public to lose confidence in the state to maintain the rule of law and, in the worst cases, foment a type of hysteria, one of whose by-products is often a lynch-mob mentality.

Divergent opinions about media coverage of crime have sometimes suggested those who hold them live in different worlds. At the end of 1997, for example, in Argentina, citizens clamored for greater public protection in the face of what was

reported to be an upsurge of violent crime. The government and the Federal Police charged that the media was creating a public "psychosis" about crime, and that in the federal capital delinquency in fact had decreased. The controversy came just weeks after a government minister had claimed a "media coup" (*golpe mediaco*) was in the offing in the days before crucial provincial elections. It was later shown however, that violent crime *had* increased, and newspapers that reported the upsurge were merely reflecting unpleasant realities.(3)

In the United States there is a renewed interest in the subject of crime reporting. There, as elsewhere, perception of media coverage of crime is frequently at odds with fact. For example, many people accept as an article of faith that an upsurge in crime reporting increases people's fear of crime in their own neighborhood. One study, however, suggests that reading crime news has *no* effect on people's fear of crime in their immediate vicinity, although it can increase or diminish it about other communities or regions.(4) It is an interesting point, I think, for two reasons. First, it suggests that the impact crime news is believed to have on people's behavior may be overestimated, as it is to be presumed that most people spend a majority of time in the area where they live. It also indicates that, when faced with the choice of trusting newspapers, and trusting their senses and those of the people around them, most people choose the latter. So the much vaunted agenda setting powers of the media, at least when talking about crime and public insecurity, remains something of an open question.

Nor does the idea that crime reporting reflects hidden political agendas hold up very well. In most newspapers most crime stories rarely reflect a reporter's or an editor's theories about criminality or the nature of crime. Unlike social scientists, who search

data for consistent patterns, the news media tends to focus on exceptional events. The reporter's quest for "objectivity" often makes regular (as opposed to celebrity) crime reporting fundamentally non-analytical, with stories thin on information and empty of nuance. The crimes that get reported most often, such as murders, are actually fairly rare by comparison. The rarer it is, the more newsworthy. Furthermore, crime news tends to "sell", and to receive coverage, even when crime rates are fairly low. There is often no relation between the amount of crime in an area and the amount of crime news. The notion that newspaper editors make conscious decisions to shape public opinion about crime attributes to them too much credit for reflection and maneuver--the business is characterized by overworked professionals whose narrow focus on the day's (or week's) news lends them to criticism of "tunnel vision." Fragmented spot reporting--unconnected with past events--tends to be the rule; serious analysis is the exception.

As was the case of the Argentine media at the end of last year, sometimes the U.S. media is also accused of "crime wave" reporting, or offering too much information in too short a time. It is important to clarify what exactly is being objected to, as most "news pegs" the media follows--reported crimes and arrests--are only a minority of the crimes believed to be committed. Therefore, what some perceive as "excessive" reporting may in fact hint at numbers of crimes committed that are closer to reality. Objections that such reporting is "sensationalistic"--that it is detailed and uses a certain emphasis, tone and language to arouse interest--need to be balanced against the fact that, despite the form used, useful information may be transmitted, and for some is more informative than that conveyed in more turgid prose.

The issue of reporting on minority groups and crime brings into focus the subject of racial and other stereotypes and how news organizations are not immune from reflecting society's biases and prejudices--reducing the chance to understand the phenomenon of violence. One argument used so as not to pay equal attention to violence and other crime in minority neighborhoods is that it is so prevalent there that it long ceased to be news. This view can be, and often is, dead wrong, as we will find out later from an example taken from Austin station KVUE-TV. In addition, faulty facts inevitably lead to faulty conclusions. For example, earlier this year a shooting in Arkansas allegedly committed by two primary school students left a teacher and several young classmates dead. As reported by the NewsWatch Project, a media watchdog organization, a number of television and radio guests commented that the violence "you expect to see ... in New York, Detroit, or Los Angeles, not a rural town like this." The image, NewsWatch noted:

> "grows out of the daily dose of robberies, rapes and killings in news broadcasts produced in big cities. Such comments have a sub-text, based in stereotypes about people of color in urban areas prone to violence. Yet all four of the multiple shootings at schools in the past year were in predominately white, rural areas. New York's violent crime rate is way down. Urban school violence is declining." (5)

The group noted that a report in The New York Times , citing information from the National School Safety Center, which tracks school violence, said that 1997 killings at schools were half of what they were in 1993. Stereotypes resulted in media caricatures, not news reporting. The identities of the four locations where school

violence occurred went against the grain of stereotype, and the *real* story was the fact that, despite the high profile coverage of the tragedies, similar crimes had actually *decreased* in number nationwide.

Careful examination of some other recent trends in crime reporting will repay important dividends.

"What" crime news should be reported continues to generate debate, particularly in the last few years, when public worries about crime continued to rise even as crime statistics dropped sharply. Could local issues, including violence and crime, be presented soberly and factually, and still compete with sensational images of violence and grief? Is there too much crime coverage that actually lacks significance, but whose voyeuristic value makes it a ratings or circulation winner? To what extent does sensationalized reporting fuel fear, and thus make people feel powerless, as the bonds of social capital are eroded apace? Does responsible reporting end up being a tool of self-censorship, or unquestioning boosterism for law enforcement?

Local television newscasts have found themselves on the cutting edge of these questions. The editors of a news program of an ABC affiliate in Austin, Texas, KVUE-TV, decided to try to do something about them. It determined that, before airing a crime story, one or more of five criteria had to be met:

1. Does action need to be taken?
2. Is there an immediate threat to safety?
3. Is there a threat to children?
4. Does the crime have significant community impact?

5. Does the story lend itself to a crime prevention effort?

No longer would the station run stories, as it had done a few months earlier, such as that of a pickup truck crashing into a day care center, killing a child, when the incident occurred in far-away California, and the only reason for running the piece was that it contained a high-impact visual of a child's lifeless body on a playground.

The effort to change the content and character of television crime reporting involved shattering some highly-developed work habits, confronting old prejudices and taking risks, particularly in terms of its impact on ratings or "market share." Implicit in the new reporting regime was the fact that the station would not compete with other stations on all stories in the same way--a jarring realization for competitive professionals used to looking for lowest common denominators, even when of questionable information value, to "win" in the audience share sweepstakes. The ratings issue was crucial, as no station management could long afford to take "hits" on a metered market, while claiming allegiance to some higher public good.

KVUE reporters found that when covering crime and violence, their new inability to rely on unimportant but visually graphic footage actually allowed them to improve their reporting. For example, a drive-by shooting in a minority neighborhood might have been consigned in a hastily reported stereotype about urban (read: "minority") crime. Instead, because they needed to find a community impact angle to the story, the reporters discovered that the murder in a predominately black neighborhood happened during a family gathering, and involved a racial hate crime. The killing was not a random act, but had profound implications for the entire community.

KVUE's efforts, it turned out, were rewarded by the best viewer ratings ever, a needed tonic for those who wish to do good while doing well. (6)

The rights of victims of crime have also become a focus of some news reporting and, more importantly, incorporated into the information gathering process, as the media is encouraged to get the story without re-victimizing the victim in the process. In 1990, Michigan State University's (MSU) School of Journalism began a path-breaking Victims and the Media Program, designed to reach working professionals as well as students. The program is headed by a veteran reporter and an adjunct professor in journalism, psychiatry and criminal justice, with a specialization in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

According to Bonnie Bucqueroux, assistant director of the program, students attending the journalism school receive instruction on victim issues at the novice and advanced reporting levels. Students are taught to "understand why victims behave as they do, interviewing tips; issues of privacy and grief intrusion; discussion of the role of gender, race, and class." The challenge, she said, is to put these issues "within the broader context of how and why we cover violence as we do and the ways in which that is changing. Also of concern are the implications for victims in New Media, including the proliferation of e-zines and webzines on the 'Net."

The MSU journalism school also administers the Dart Award for excellence in reporting on victims of violence. A $10,000 prize is given to the newspaper that does the best job within a given year of covering victims of violence. Winners of the Dart prize include the Daily Oklahoman, for its coverage of the bombing of the Alfred Murrah federal building, and, last year, the Press-Telegram of Long Beach, California, for a

package of stories called “Path of a Bullet.” The Victims and the Media program is also looking at developing an international component.

“Our position,” said Bucqueroux,

> “is that victim voices deserve to be heard. All too often, the emphasis in crime reporting is on the predator. In other cases, well-meaning journalists rely on experts to explain the victim's stories, rather than to let the victims speak for themselves.” (7)

(More information on the program can be obtained by contacting the School’s electronic mail address: bucquero@pilot.msu.edu).

It is useful to note, for example, how some crime reporters have come to see their jobs, and how what they do actually transforms them over time into secondary victims. When reporter Mark Pinsky began his reporting career in the racially troubled southeastern United States in the 1970s, writing about murder and the criminal justice system, “any transient twinges I felt about profiting from other’s pain were offset by the sense that in the process I was rescuing a few people who had been dropped onto the fast track to the electric chair and occasionally exposing injustice in pockets of the rural South largely bypassed by the civil rights movement.” Over time, he noted:

> “the defendants in the cases I wrote about shifted from the poor, black and often innocent to the middle class, white, and often guilty. By that point, I felt no socially redeeming value in the work I was doing: all I was exposing was the depth of depravity people were capable of.” (8)

For Pinsky, “bearing witness as society’s surrogate” no longer was enough to compensate for the psychological battering he felt while covering his beat. No longer did the allure of

"career building, a guarantee to frequent by-lines and good display" for articles in a publication make up for the spiritual wear and tear. Covering murders on a regular basis, he warned, could lead to two major pitfalls. On one hand,

> "If you protect yourself too much by screening out the unpleasantness, you cheat the reader by failing to convey the horror, which is, after all, your job. On the other hand, if you allow yourself to absorb the reality of what you see and hear, you run the risk of destroying yourself emotionally. When you can no longer walk that fine line, you should be able to leave the beat."

The MSU journalism school's Victims and the Media Program is now focusing on how coverage of traumatic events such as crime reporting can actually affect reporter's physical and mental health.

Violence as Entertainment

In the United States, entertainment television is also the focus of concern, as studies continue to provide evidence that the medium can have a profound effect in promoting or discouraging aggressive and even criminal behavior.

Ninety-nine percent of homes in the U.S. have a television set, and 69 percent have cable television. Studies indicate that higher rates of television viewing are correlated to increased use of tobacco and alcohol, and the initiation at a younger age of sexual activity. Children in the U.S. ages 2-17 spend 2.1 hours per day watching television, more than any activity other than sleeping (and 54 percent have a television set in their bedrooms), and those of school age watch an average of 28 hours per week, twice as much time as they spend in school in a normal year. This viewing includes,

annually, 20,000 commercials. Before the age of 18, the average child will see more than 200,00 violent acts on television, including 16,000 murders. Eight-year old boys who watch the most violent programs while growing up are also, studies show, the most likely to engage in aggressive and delinquent behavior by age 18 and serious criminal behavior by age 30. Three-quarters of parents say they have turned off a television program or left a movie theater because what was being shown was too violent. Eighty two percent of the U.S. public says it feels that the amount of violence shown on the movies is a serious social problem.(9)

The amount of people in the United States who feel that television violence is “very harmful” jumped from 26 percent in 1983 to 47 percent in 1993. Most people surveyed say they believe that portrayals of violence on television, and in books, films and newspaper stories, makes people more likely to commit violence. An overwhelming majority have said that they believe violence depicted in the media contributes to crime. Some three quarters of those surveyed have also stated that they believe that violence depicted in the media “numbs people so that they’re insensitive to it;” that it tells people that “violence is fun and acceptable,” and that it inspires young people to commit it. Or, as an Arlington, Virginia police officer told me recently, “make no mistake, television violence legitimizes it for the kids, who grow up thinking that it is an acceptable way of dealing with their differences.”(10)

A study conducted two years ago suggested that television violence had increased by more than 70 percent, and gunplay more than tripled since 1992. The violence, the Center for Media and Public Affairs reported, was found predominantly in cable movies and in cartoons, rather than on broadcast networks or prime time series. One average

there were almost 10 violent incidents per channel per hour, even after commercials and all non-fiction programming were excluded. (11)

Advocates against television and movie violence have looked to the mass communications experience in setting the public agenda on social norms and on individual behavior with regard to other social ills, such as smoking and drunk driving. The mass media, it has been noted, not only tells us what to think about, but how to think about it. Throughout the 20th Century, the mass media had provided the fora for public crusades which lead to reforms ranging from municipal, state and federal governments, to anti-trust laws, electoral reform and food and drug regulation. Getting the media's attention, however, is sometimes problematic, as AIDS activists found in the early 1980s, when public perceptions that the disease was limited to the gay community resulted in its being relegated to the margins of public debate. The anti-smoking crusade's recent string of successes, unthinkable two decades ago, rested strongly on well-crafted messages transmitted through the media. As Michael Pertschuk, co-director of the Advocacy Institute has noted:

> "There's been a shift from media focus on the ignorant or weak-willed smoker to a focus on the transnational tobacco companies as the functional and moral equivalent of the Medellin drug cartel.
>
> "With all due respect to journalists, editors and publishers, this outpouring of well-framed media coverage has not exactly come about through spontaneous generation. The most important form of mobilization has been scientists, health professionals, activists, and nonsmokers, as skilled media activists." (12)

If past successful campaigns are any guide, part of a winning media strategy against violence involves the carefully targeted selection of what part of the problem is being talked about--street violence, domestic violence, gun violence, youth violence, etc. Advocacy campaigns that do not carefully pre-select subjects that public opinion can rally around have far less chance of raising public awareness generally or rallying support for campaign-promoted solutions. By way of example, in some contexts, might it not be easier to attack violent portrayals in the media by focusing community understanding of the poor substitute television offers for the socialization and raising of children (promoting family life), rather than in favor of their restriction (censorship)?

At a conference co-sponsored by the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Harvard School of Public Health's Center for Health Communication several years ago, the success of the Designated Driver Campaign, promoting a practical solution to the practice of drunk driving., received high marks for professionalism and effectiveness:

> "The Harvard group marketed its particular 'product' in part by using standard advertising techniques, targeting specific audiences with well-timed and strategically placed public service announcements. However, they also sought to model normative behavior through entertainment programming by convincing producers and writers to embed appropriate references to the designated driver in dialogue. This strategy worked because the message was simple, believable, and acceptable. Might a similar strategy help change social norms about gun ownership, or model behavior that effectively avoids violent confrontation?" (13)

The success of the Center for Health Communication's designated driver campaign was due in part because of its practical focus--rather than target the universe of alcohol use and abuse in the United States, it zeroed in on one issue--drunk driving--around which a broad consensus was forged and, thus, the chance of being successful was increased. Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have identified a number strategies that might reduce gun violence without imposing a total ban on guns. A behavioral approach would develop methods to change the comportment of people who own guns. Other strategies might include making a safer environment, or focusing on the guns themselves--how they are used and stored, controlling access through licensing, background checks, initiating buy-back programs, restricting imports, etc. Key to the success of any campaign, however, will be changing perceptions of guns as symbols of protection and self-reliance, and, for groups such as inner-city youths, that the realities of their own lives reflect a better chance to breathe freer. (14)

Last July, pressure by public advocacy groups and their allies in Congress and elsewhere resulted in one important reform, as the television industry introduced a new set of content labels for programming that was merged with the age-based ratings already being used. The age-based system was scored for not giving parents enough information to make appropriate viewing choices. Age-based rating such as "TV-14" and "R," research indicated, had a "forbidden fruit" effect of motivating children to watch what had been determined to contain inappropriate material. Content based ratings, it was felt, did not have the same effect, and were more reliable as a source of information because they allowed choices to be made that reflected personal values. In addition, the content-

based rating were viewed as easier to implement and had a higher probability of consistent application. (15)

The TV Parental Guidelines used age categories modeled on the rating system established by the Motion Picture Association. These included two children's ratings (TV-Y: All Children; TV-Y7: Directed to Children ages 7 and above) and four general programming categories (TV-G: General Audience; TV-PG: Parental Guidance Suggested; TV-14: Parents Strongly Cautioned; TV-M: Mature Audiences Only). The presence of strongly objectionable material is indicated by content labels FV (for fantasy violence, in the TV-Y7 category); V (for violence); S (for sexual situations); L (for language), and D (for dialogue, in the TV-PG, TV-14 and TV-MA categories.) At the beginning of programs the guidelines are displayed in the upper left-hand corner of the television screen, and can be seen by using a display button throughout the entertainment. The self-imposed voluntary system allows broadcast and cable programmers to rate programs through their broadcast standards department, with complaints handled by an industry oversight committee. From this year, 1998, on, by law all televisions manufactured must contain a V-chip, an electronic device that allows viewers to block programming that contains objectionable material. (16)

Police-Media Relations

In a democratic society, we generally look to the men and women of law enforcement for security. In our efforts to keep open the frontiers of free expression, we find at the forefront the press. We also find, too often, that members of law enforcement and the media *do not* see themselves as comrades, but rather see each other as enemies.

The relationship between law enforcement and the press can be a difficult one. As someone who has covered shootouts, kidnappings and cases of alleged police brutality in the United States, I can say first hand that frequently, in my country, it is. "Today's upper middle-class, college-educated journalists have little in common with the police, and are frequently to the left of them politically," wrote one North American media critic several years ago.

> "Brutal police response to anti-war demonstrations and the civil rights movement shook idealized notions of law enforcement. ... Meanwhile, police seem increasingly isolated, abandoned by journalists and everyone else as they try to deal with horrifying levels of social decay, hatred and bloodshed. They seem to have turned inward, talking to and trusting no one but their lawyers and each other." (17)

(On the other hand, police do still enjoy a privileged place in the world of crime reporting. Legitimacy of a report can hinge on two little words, "police said." Or as news anchor John Chancellor noted 15 years ago, "There are jokes in this business that you can write almost anything and get it past the editors as long as it is tagged with those two words. As in: 'The sky is falling,' police said.") (18)

Examining some of the recent history from the rest of the region, we see similar although certainly not identical problems of police insularity and mistrust of the press. In the move from authoritarian to more democratic, pluralistic societies throughout the Hemisphere, journalists have, and still do, pay an often heavy price for practicing their profession. In recent decades hundreds of journalists have been murdered, tortured, "disappeared," exiled, censored or blacklisted. At the same time, many of the region's

police forces served as part of repressive military regimes whose sad record of abuse and corruption is well known.

But there is another side to this story, and part of it speaks less well of civil society, journalists included. The political polarization of societies in Latin America was frequently much in evidence in the newsrooms and news columns. The mission of informing the public often took a back seat to the political biases of the reporter, and coverage of security institutions--both positive and negative--was couched in terms of ideological speculation. Furthermore, and more generally, while there have been many newspapers and magazine that have specialized in “crime’ reporting, often of the *cronica roja* variety, there have been much fewer media that have taken an interest in, or had much understanding of, law enforcement issues and institutions--themselves key to strategies of violence reduction.

What this has meant is a public bereft of information on policies concerning the distribution of resources to law enforcement agencies at the federal, state (provincial) and local levels; the daily difficulty for police posed by low salaries and brutal working conditions, including inside the police headquarters; the ignorance of many sworn officers--the people society calls on to protect it--about their own labor and legal rights, among other issues. This public ignorance has a significant corollary: it is virtually impossible to provide civilian oversight for institutions whose internal workings remain a mystery. And thus we are faced with a chicken-and-egg sort of phenomenon, with police forces condemned to shoulder on with meager planning staffs lacking in reliable statistical information, and forced to base policy on only intuitive knowledge about the crime phenomena they face.

The return to democratic rule also has meant significant changes in the "rules of the game" for both lawmen and journalists. For the journalist, this has meant first and foremost an expanded number and variety of topics that can be freely addressed. For the policeman, it has meant new social forces to contend with, and new ways of relating to the community and to the courts. Moves away from inquisitorial to accusatorial systems of prosecution, the demilitarization of internal security, reforms of criminal codes and codes of criminal procedure and conduct, a revalorization of police work, particularly the role of forensics, community complaints about service--all of these changes impact immediately and strongly on the police officer's work.

Because of these changing frames of reference, efforts are needed to create a framework for members of both professions to do their work in a way that enhances long-term trends in public safety *and* the public's right to know. Part of that change starts with clear policies regarding the balance between legitimate law enforcement interests and the public's right to information. This is an issue that has gained significant attention recently in the United States, with the Supreme Court frequently called upon to be the arbiter of increasingly complex public issues. (19)

In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution enshrines the freedom of speech and of the press that our forefathers foresaw would contribute to an informed electorate and a more competent government. The First Amendment creates in the courts a strong interest in any activity that would tend to limit or restrain the work of a free press. This scrutiny in favor of free expression, however, does not provide unlimited guarantees. In recent years, the courts have sought to establish a balance

between legitimate law enforcement interests and the public's interest in information about the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies and personnel.

Limits placed on the media's First Amendment rights are not merely to protect the integrity of an investigation. They are also designed to ensure the right of the accused to receive a fair trial. Thus the conduct of a criminal investigation--the information gathered and strategies used--is almost always off limits to the press. Access to crime scenes and public disasters, where the presence of third parties might hamper or jeopardize the police's ability to carry out their mission, is also tightly controlled, with police legally empowered to cordon off areas until public access no longer poses risk to the interests of law enforcement.

Where the media does enjoy much greater First Amendment guarantees is in the area of pre-publication censorship. While its right to access is limited, once the media has the information in hand, it retains much broader rights in terms of expression. In 1980, the U.S. Congress enacted the Privacy Protection Act. The law prohibits, except in narrowly defined circumstances, the government from searching for or seizing any work product or documentary material that a person possesses with the intention of disseminating it to the public as a book, broadcast, newspaper article or similar public communication.

There is much that can be done to improve the communication between law enforcement and the press, and at the same time improve the quality of the information product delivered to readers and viewers around the region. What is clear is that police institutions, as the front line in the fight against violence and crime, need an informed

public to help them in their struggle. Improvements in communication might also help both press and police to reduce the physical risks of their respective professions.

On the part of the press, I think it is useful for professional media organizations, newspaper editors and publishers to engage in a dialogue with the leaders of law enforcement. These efforts can create greater trust in both professions, and to sharpen the focus on what types of reporting can generate better information and yield greater community support for a continued process of professionalization within law enforcement. Honest critiques by media professionals of police public information strategies can provide needed information for improvement within the force. Media representatives might also seek to provide instances for specialization of their reporters in law enforcement issues, such as participation in seminars at police academies and encouragement to cover broader social issues affecting police departments.

On the part of law enforcement, greater openness by the police institution can reap huge rewards in community support and, thus, the information and resources needed to protect and serve. One example of this is the public affairs office of Carabineros of Chile, truly one of the more impressive efforts by a police institution to make the community feel safer and well-served by a constant stream of information to the public about efforts by that force. During a visit to Carabinero academic institutions several years ago, I was struck by the importance attached to community relations by police instructors, and the rapidity with which the institution was able to provide Chileans with useful information about both the institution's work and crime prevention strategies generally.

Police efforts to introduce reporters to the hows and whys of the institution's functioning allow media professionals greater potential for developing stories that can give the public a greater appreciation for its successes and a greater understanding of its limitations. Special seminars for reporters, explaining issues such as the use of forensic sciences in solving crimes, or about the creation and work of an Office of Professional Responsibility, or how changes in the operation of the Public Ministry, or changes in the Criminal Code, or the Code of Criminal Procedure, impact on police work, can help news professionals learn the language of law enforcement, while receiving needed information about the context in which the police institution carries out its duties. There can be no better antidote for sensationalistic, *cronica roja*, or crime wave reportage.

Conclusion

Strategies for violence reduction through use of the media can afford key measures of public safety, while helping communities under siege rebuild their social capital. Efforts to improve coverage, like that made by Austin's KVUE-TV, can help to limit the kind of sensationalized reporting that fuels fear, and promotes a generalized feeling of community powerlessness and impotence. Greater attention to victims' rights can help to make sure that the already battered and frightened are not twice brutalized--the second time at the hands of the press. Even the long-term effects on reporters themselves of reporting on violence need to be addressed, for the physical and mental health of the media professional, and to assure that the community receives the best possible crime coverage.

The media--news programs and entertainment--can be a conduit or an enabler for violent conduct. Efforts of non-governmental groups seeking to limit or reduce the

amount of electronically transmitted promotion of aggressive and even criminal behavior should be encouraged. As was seen with the Designated Driver Campaign, carefully selected goals and support from the media can be key elements to any strategy that seeks to influence the public agenda, change social norms and modify individual behavior.

Finally, police-media relations need to be improved. An informed media can help the community decide what kind of police force it wants, and what kind of strategies work best to fight crime and violence. And the police need the media, in order to create an informed public because, as any cop on the beat can tell you, no amount of money can replace the community's role in the vital task of public safety.

Footnotes

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Center for Media and Public Affairs	http://www.cmpa.com
Center for Media Education	http://www.cme.org
Cops & Courts Reporters' List	http://www.reporters.net/ccr
NewsWatch Project	http://www.newswatch.sfsu.edu/