

Newsworthiness of Prison Escapes: Content Analysis of Factors Influencing Print Media Coverage, 2006-2010

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Abstract

This article extends the study of newsworthiness to prison escapes by developing and testing a theoretical framework of the factors that affect coverage of prison escapes in print news media. This article employs content analysis on articles printed in the New York Times between 2006 and 2010 (n=68) to identify newsworthiness factors, and negative binomial regression to examine the ability of these factors to influence coverage. Factors identified from the content analysis include: location of escape (domestic v. international incident), number of escapees, the presence of violence, criminal histories of the escapees, and methods of escape. Findings demonstrate a trend to disproportionately report sensational stories of escapes, focusing on the escape plan, as well as the seriousness of the escape and the escapees. To obtain these stories, the Times turned to correctional incidents occurring outside of the U.S. since escapes occurring within the U.S. are rare and mundane by comparison.

Keywords: media coverage, prison escapes, distortion analysis, newsworthiness

1. Introduction

For decades, research has shown that violent crimes are disproportionately reported in media compared to their occurrence in actual crime statistics (e.g., Harris, 1932; Davis, 1952; Marsh, 1991; Beckett, 1997). This can be understood in terms of the “infotainment” role of media, in that news outlets serve the dual function of informing and entertaining viewers (Cavender & Fishman, 1998; see also Graber, 1994). In addition to being a hodgepodge of entertainment and information, news is often “filtered” according to reporters’ “sense” of “what makes a good story” (Reiner, 2002, 324). This sense of what is newsworthy is attributable to inherent news values held by members of the media. News values emphasizing drama, novelty, violence, and graphic imagery can explain why media focus on atypical and violent criminal acts (see Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2004).

Like violent crimes in general, media coverage of prison escapes can be understood in terms of news values and the role of infotainment. Research has shown that escapes typically involve non-dangerous offenders who escape from lower-level security facilities, often without making plans to do so (Culp, 2005). Furthermore, inmates tend to escape custody alone or in pairs, typically do not commit additional violent crimes, and are often recaptured (Culp, 2005; Culp and Bracco, 2005). Despite this, in movies and television programs, escapes are often portrayed as sensationalized stories, focusing on violence and ingenious planning, and involving serious criminals who commit additional crimes while on the lam. Stories such as “the Texas Seven” (see Dugan, 2001) seem to suggest that this inaccurate depiction of escapes may also be perpetuated by the news media.

This article examines the coverage of prison escapes¹ in nationally representative print news media. Thus, this study seeks to contribute to the existing body of literature in three ways. Most importantly, it will extend the study of newsworthiness by analyzing a correctional phenomenon that has been overlooked in recent research. Even though escapes occur infrequently, they are an essential component of the correctional system. Prison administrators consider risk of escape an important outcome criterion to predict during the inmate classification process (Austin, 1986, 2003; Lowenkamp, Holsinger, & Latessa, 2001; Hardyman, Austin, Alexander, Johnson, & Tulloch, 2002). Moreover, escapes can cause fear and pique curiosity in the public (Culp, 2005; Fisher, Allan, & Allan, 2004), especially affecting those who live in close proximity to a prison (Carlson, 1990).

¹ The term “prison escape” in this study is used to reflect escapes from correctional institutions broadly, including escapes from jails and prisons

As one researcher put it “if there were such a thing as first principles in the field of corrections, the idea that prisons ought to prevent inmates from escaping would certainly qualify for the list” (Culp, 2005, 270).

Second, using news values and infotainment as a framework for understanding, this study attempts to determine the features that affect news coverage of escapes, making comparisons to the factors that influence crime news coverage in general. Finally, by developing and testing a theoretical framework of escape news coverage, it will put forth implications for both media and escape research. As such, this article should be viewed as a pilot study.

1.1 Previous Research on Prison Escapes

Much of the previous research of prison escapes has focused on demographic correlates of escape behavior. For example, being a male (Chard-Wierschem, 1995) and being white (Murphy, 1984; Cowles, 1981; Sandhu, 1996) have been associated with escape likelihood, but more current research questions these findings (Culp, 2005). Findings also suggest that marital status may be related to escape behavior, though these findings are inconsistent about the direction of the relationship (Cowles, 1981; Shaffer, Bluoin, & Pettigrew, 1985). The strongest correlate of escape behavior has been age, in that younger inmates are more likely to escape than older inmates (Scott, Mount, & Duffy, 1977; Anson & Hartnett, 1983; Campbell, Porporino, & Wevrick, 1985; Chard-Wierschem, 1995; Culp, 2005).

Another theme identified in the literature relates to the types of offenders that escape from custody. Most research using official statistics has found that inmates with criminal histories of property offenses escape more often than other types of offenders (Murphy, 1984; Cowles, 1981; Verlag, 1978; Culp, 2005). Conversely, when news articles were analyzed, more than half of the reported escapees had committing offenses of murder, rape, and other violent crimes (Culp, 2005).

Researchers have also examined the security level of the correctional facility from which escapes occur. Approximately 88.5% of all escapes are from minimum-security facilities (Culp, 2005). Cowles (1981) also found that escapees were more likely to have been in lower custody status. Even offenders with more serious records who escape from custody seem to do so from lower security facilities. In fact, one study found that 19 of the 35 escapees convicted of murder had escaped from minimal or nominal security institutions (Sandhu, 1996).

Some research suggests that recent or pending events are important factors in the prison escape process. Sandhu (1996) found that 20% of the escapes in his study were triggered by some kind of event. These included an impending transfer, news of a family illness, relationship problems, or sexual problems with other inmates. Likewise, many studies have found that internal pressures can lead to escape (Duncan and Ellis, 1973; Centre for Research, Evaluation, and Social Assessment, 1996). Other research has examined the possible role of intent, duress, and necessity in prison escapes, such as being beaten by correctional staff or being forced to escape (e.g., Lesser, 1972; Fletcher, 1978; Jeffries, 1979).

Some research has specifically examined the amount of planning that takes place during the escape process and the methods used to facilitate each incident. Culp found that in 88 escapes reported in the press, 32 involved the cutting or scaling of a fence, 6 involved hiding in vehicles, 3 involved the forging of documents, and 1 involved tunneling (2005, 286). However, since the large majority of escapes are considered walkaways or AWOLS, it is probable that these involve little or no planning. Accordingly, recent research suggests that escapes in general appear to be impulsive and tend to involve very simplistic plans, if any at all (see Culp & Bracco, 2005; Culp 2005; Centre for Research, Evaluation, and Social Assessment, 1996).

Another important theme involves additional crimes committed during the escape process or while the escapees are out of custody. Federal courts have deliberated about whether an escape is considered a violent offense due to the potential risk inmates pose to guards and to the public (see U.S. v. Chambers 2007; U.S. v. Templeton, 2008; U.S. v. Bryant, 2002; U.S. v. Golden, 2006). One researcher found that approximately 6.3% of escapees commit additional crimes while they are out of custody, and that only 8.3% of all escapes involve violence against prison personnel (Culp, 2005).

On average, 1.3 inmates are involved in each escape incident (Culp & Bracco, 2005), and 92% of incidents involve one or two inmates (Culp, 2005). Moreover, Culp (2005) found by averaging three sources of data that approximately 74.5% of escapees are recaptured, with a larger percentage for those incidents that took place in higher levels of security (approximately 92%).

Overall then, the research seems to suggest that escapes typically involve non-dangerous offenders, lower levels of security, and little planning. Also, inmates tend to escape custody alone or in pairs, typically do not commit additional violent crimes, and are often recaptured.

Media, however, seem to portray escapes as sensational stories. While it is no surprise that fictional media have depicted escapes as painstakingly complex plots that involve careful planning and the cunning of an ingenious inmate², several recent documentary-style television programs tell the stories of real-life escapes through dramatic footage, interviews, and representations of the events³. Even news media tend to focus on the anomalous, captivating stories of escapes, as evidenced by infamous news stories such as “The Texas Seven” (see Duggan, 2001). Thus, some prison escapes seem to be unique in that they can make for fascinating tales with inherent drama. There is something about certain prison escape stories that makes them characteristically newsworthy.

1.2 Crime in Media

Research consistently shows that the public relies on media for information about major social events, such as crime and terrorism, and for understanding which social issues are most important (Altheide, 1987; Ivengar & Kinder, 2010). The influence of media does vary by type (Pollack & Kurbin, 2007). Television news, for example, may appeal more to emotion (Doyle, 2003) and differ in its organization and production (Jeffries, 1986) than print news. Regardless of the medium, depictions of crime influence the way crime is understood (Rawlings, 1998).

Crime is an essential part of the news. Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987; 1989; 1991) analyzed the process of news-making in Toronto and found that deviance is “the defining characteristic of what journalists regard as newsworthy” (Ericson et al., 1987, 4). Crime, then, becomes the “essence of news” (Reiner, 2002, 305) with news stories increasingly focusing on crime (Pollack & Kurbin, 2007). Sacco (1995) estimated that between 4 and 25% of news is dedicated to crime coverage. In particular, news seems to focus on violent crimes. An analysis of the news coverage of crime in the United and other countries between 1960 and 1989 found an overrepresentation of violent crimes compared to official crime statistics (Marsh, 1991). Findings like this have been consistent over the past century (e.g., Harris, 1932; Davis, 1952; Beckett, 1997).

1.3 Infotainment and News Values

This focus of media on criminal justice topics favors the stories about the police and the courtroom, with little attention paid to corrections (Doyle & Ericson, 1996.) Media focus on criminal justice issues tend to be frontloaded, with increasingly fewer stories being reported as offenders are processed through the system (Chermak, 1998a). Stories of prison escapes, however, are unique in that they occur after inmates have been processed through the system (or at least part of the system), yet they also involve a new crime and involve law enforcement.

Although crime and violence has always played a significant role in the media, the way these concepts are used by media has changed. Media has changed since the late 1980s due to a shift toward reality programming, which has led to a “blurring” of the lines between fact and fiction, as well as between news and entertainment (Cavender & Fishman, 1998). “Infotainment” is the idea that what media now produce serves the function of informing viewers, while simultaneously providing entertainment (Cavender & Fishman, 1998; see also Graber, 1994). Stories of prison escapes seem to be used as infotainment as they can be important news, especially to residents living near the facility from which the escape occurred, and can make for fascinating tales with built-in drama.

Any story that appears in the news must be selected from a pool of potential stories through a process of assigning, reporting, and editing (Ericson et al., 1987). To facilitate this process, reporters develop a “sense of newsworthiness” through which “[n]ews content is generated and filtered”, what makes a good story that their audience wants to know about” (Reiner, 2002, 324). This sense of newsworthiness is influenced by news values that members of the media – often subconsciously – hold (see Chibnall, 1977). Newsworthiness and news values, then, help news makers understand what stories their audiences are interested in.

² For example, movies such as *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Con Air* and the television series *Prison Break* and *Breakout Kings* depict prison escapes as carefully planned incidents which are masterminded by one or two intelligent inmates

³ For example, *Breakout* premiered in 2010 on the National Geographic Channel, *I escaped: Real Prison Breaks* premiered in 2010 on Investigation Discovery. The stories told in these shows, though real, consist of dramatic depictions of the events, including musical scores, re-created footage, eyewitness accounts, interviews, and expert commentaries. These are akin to the type of hybrid reality shows outlined by Cavender and Fishman (1998), who discuss how media have changed since the late 1980s due to a shift toward reality programming. Modern crime “reality” shows are edited to maximize action and entertainment, thus serving the role of “infotainment.”

In testing how newsworthiness influences news coverage, the number of victims and offenders (Chermak & Chapman, 2007) and the overall seriousness of a story (Chermak, 1998b) have been shown to be important predictors of the amount of space and attention a particular incident will receive. Homicides that involve multiple suspects, for example, receive more print media coverage than homicides that involve a single suspect (Paulsen, 2003). Research that examines the extent to which particular incidents are covered is often referred to as “media distortion analysis.” This type of research has typically focused on major events, such as terrorism (e.g., Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006) and homicide (e.g., Gruenewald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009, 2011). News values such as dramatization, novelty, risk, proximity, violence, spectacle, and graphic imagery (Chibnall, 1977; Jewkes, 2004) and the conception of infotainment suggest that this area of research can be extended to understand why and to what extent escapes are covered by media.

2. Present Study

Escapes that meet newsworthiness criteria because they “infotain” viewers and conform to certain news values likely receive more media attention than the majority of typical escapes. Thus, the present study uses content analysis and inferential statistics to examine how news values and infotainment can be utilized as a framework for understanding which characteristics influence the news coverage of escapes. The following research questions and hypotheses are addressed:

- 1) *Will the characteristics of escapes reported in print news reflect what is seen in previous research?* Since prior research has shown that other critical incidents, such as homicide and terrorism, are misrepresented in the media, it is hypothesized that the characteristics of the escape incident in this study will be dissimilar to what is reported in prior research.
- 2) *What factors influence the print news coverage of prison escapes?* Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that the coverage of escapes will be influenced by factors such as the number of escapees, the violence and seriousness of the escape, the committing offense of the escapee, and the method of escape.
- 3) *Can these factors explain the variation in the extent of coverage?* The study employs negative binomial regression to determine if the factors identified in the content analysis can predict the extent of news coverage.

2.1 Data

Data for this study come from *New York Times* stories over a five year period from 2006 to 2010. The *New York Times* is an authority of national media coverage and national agendas (Winter & Eyal, 1981; Chermak & Weiss, 1998; Danielian & Reese, 1989; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Articles that met the following criteria were included in the analysis: 1) the escape had to have occurred during the years of study; 2) the escape had to be from *correctional* custody (i.e., prison or jail); and 3) the escape had to be an intentional act by the escapee. Based on these criteria, an incident was not included if it involved absconding from bail or eluding arrest, or if it involved an accidental release.

Following these guidelines and using a keyword search in *LexisNexis*, 1,064 articles were identified by the search terms “prison” and “escape”. Since the unit of analysis of this study is the incident, 68 unique incidents of escape were identified. In some cases, one article identified multiple incidents, and in other cases, a single incident was covered by multiple articles. Characteristics for each incident were then coded into SPSS.

2.2 Plan of Analysis

The following study is divided into two parts. First, this study uses content analysis to examine the characteristics of escapes reported in the *Times*. Official reports of prison escapes, when available, are stripped of identifiers before they are published. Because of this, the fact that escapes are a relatively rare event inside the U.S., and the finding that a large portion of the incidents covered in the *Times* occurred outside of the U.S.⁴, it is impossible to match the incidents identified in the newspaper stories to official statistics.

⁴The author decided to include escapes that occurred outside the U.S. for three reasons. One, restricting the cases to U.S. prison escapes would significantly reduce the sample size, making analyses all but impossible. Two, the coverage of escapes from outside the U.S. may still influence readers’ perception of escapes in general. Lastly, whether or not an incident occurs within or outside the U.S. has been shown to influence media coverage (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006)

Therefore, this study will not be a true news distortion analysis. Instead, it identifies factors that influence news coverage by conducting a content analysis of news stories to build a theoretical framework of prison escape newsworthiness.

Once these factors are identified, the second part of the analysis uses negative binomial regression to estimate how they are able to explain the extent of media coverage of escapes. Due to the small sample size (N=68) and the exploratory nature of this study, these analyses should be viewed as a pilot study for future empirical research.

3. Content Analysis

3.1 New York Times Coverage of Escapes

Table 1 provides a summary of the incidents and articles by year and by region⁵. Interestingly, only 25 of the 68 identified incidents occurred in the U.S. Many of the escapes that were reported by the *New York Times* took place in Middle Eastern countries and, to a lesser extent, Western European Countries and Mexico. Although the *New York Times* is an international newspaper, this number is surprising: Other research has shown that the *Times* is more likely to report domestic incidents than international incidents since these are more “culturally relevant to the reader” (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006, 445). Still, consistent with the notion of cultural relevance, the incidents that received the most coverage occurred in New York. For example, one inmate broke out of an upstate New York jail in 2006 and subsequently committed several serious crimes while on the lam. Another escape involved an inmate who disguised himself as a lawyer to free himself from a detention facility in a Manhattan Court Building.

On average, each incident was covered by approximately two articles. However, there is much variation in the amount of news attention being given to specific incidents. The amount of coverage per incident ranges from 1 to 25 overall. This differs when year and region are taken into account. And while the number of incidents that took place in the U.S. is fewer than the number of international incidents, the U.S. escapes, on average, were covered by more articles than escapes in other regions. Interestingly, escapes that occurred in 2006 received more news coverage than escapes that occurred in other years.⁶

Table 1. Summary of New York Times Incident and Article Statistics by Year and Region

		Incident		Articles			
		N	Percent	N ¹	Mean	Min	Max
Year	2006	18	26	61	3.39	1	25
	2007	17	25	30	1.76	1	13
	2008	7	10	13	1.86	1	5
	2009	12	18	19	1.58	1	3
	2010	14	21	26	1.86	1	5
Region	U.S.	25	37	73	2.92	1	25
	Mexico	9	13	10	1.11	1	2
	W. Europe	7	10	11	1.57	1	2
	Middle East	17	25	33	2.29	1	13
	Other	10	15	16	1.60	1	5
Total		68			2.19	1	25

¹Number of articles per incident in that year or region

3.2 Elements of Newsworthiness and Infotainment

⁵ Escapes from the U.S. occurred in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. Western European countries include England, France, and Greece. Middle Eastern countries include Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Yemen. Other countries include Canada, Bosnia, Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, Haiti, India, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, and Singapore

⁶ The disparity between the U.S. and other regions, as well as the disparity between 2006 and other years, is due to the incident in which an inmate escaped from a jail in upstate New York. This incident was covered by 25 articles in the *New York Times*

Table 2 provides summary statistics of various newsworthiness factors for these New York Times stories. Chermak and Chapman said that “as the number of victims or offenders increase[s], so [does] the likelihood of selection and the degree of prominence” (2007, 354).

An overrepresentation of inmates or victims per escape would be consistent with this finding. Table 2 shows values for the total and average number of inmates involved in a particular escape incident. A total of 2,420 inmates took part in the 67 incidents of escape⁷. However, with a range of 899 and over 50% of the incidents involving only one or two inmates, it is obvious that this average is skewed by a few large escape incidents. Evident too is the fact that there were more victims in these escapes than there is in a typical American escape, as there is an overrepresentation of homicides and additional crimes committed while the escapee is out of custody when compared to official statistics.

The perceived seriousness of a particular offense also significantly contributes to the amount of space and attention a particular crime story receives in the news (Chermak, 1998b). This may also account for the overrepresentation of certain factors. While violence occurs in less than 9% of all escapes (Culp, 2005), almost 21% of the escapes in this sample involved additional crimes while the escapee was on the lam, 20% resulted in at least one homicide, and 40% involved violence committed by inmates during the escape or by outsiders to facilitate the escape (e.g., assaulting a correctional officer).

The news value dramatization suggests that the news benefits from creating drama and reporting on sensationalized stories (Chibnall, 1977). One element of prison escapes that has the potential to be sensational is the method employed by the inmates to escape. The methods of escape in these incidents reported by the *New York Times* tend to have sophisticated or sensational plans associated with them. For example, there were reports about inmates being picked up by a helicopter that landed inside the prison (e.g., Clark, 2009), tunneling hundreds of feet under prison walls (e.g., Hauser, 2006), shinnying down long walls with ropes made of bed sheets (e.g., Correll, 2008), using a can opener to cut a hole in the ceiling (e.g., Staba & Lee, 2006), pretending to be lawyers to escape custody (e.g., Baker, 2009), or getting inside help from guards (e.g., Worth, 2008). The most common sensational method reported in these articles was inmates overpowering the guards to facilitate their escape, occurring in 27% of the incidents.

Almost all prior research has found that inmates serving time for property crimes are more likely to escape than those serving time for other crimes (Murphy, 1984; Cowles, 1981; Verlag, 1978; Culp, 2005). However, the committing offense of the escapees in these news stories varies from the reality of U.S. prisons. In 21% of the incidents at least one of the escapees was convicted or charged with murder. Since homicides have been a focus of newsworthiness studies, it makes sense that inmates convicted of murder might increase the likelihood of an incident being covered.

Stories about escapees that were “terrorists” were also prevalent, which is not surprising due to the abundance of international escape incidents reported by the *Times*. Even before September 11, it has been said that terrorist groups “have the power, through the news media, to rivet public attention on their actions” (Paletz, Fozzard, & Ayanian, 1985, 162). The act of terrorism can itself be seen as newsworthy (see Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006) or as fitting the role of infotainment (Nacos, 2002; Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). Iyengar and Kinder (1991) found that there was more media coverage of terrorism than other important social issues, such as poverty and crime. It is no surprise then that escapees with criminal histories of terrorism would draw attention from the press.

There is also a focus by media on themes related to the war on drugs, often mirroring what the government believes about the dangers associated with drug use (Taylor, 2008). Media tend to endorse a sensational view of the war on drugs by focusing on the extreme and distortions of reality (Reinarman & Duskin, 1999). It is no surprise then that members of Mexican drug cartels and other drug traffickers were highlighted in more than 13% of the escape incidents identified. Other serious offenders (e.g., rapist, kidnappers, and robbers) were also represented in these articles, implying that the newsworthiness of escapes is linked to the committing offense of the inmates who escape. In 36% of incidents, news articles reported that escapees were serving time for minor offenses, or failed to report anything about the committing offense of the escapee(s).

⁷ This statistic is excluding an incident in which 5000 inmates escaped from Haiti’s main jail after the 2010 earthquake

Table 2. Summary of Newsworthiness Factors

	Total	Mean	Percentiles			Range
			25 th	50 th	75 th	
Number of inmates¹	2420	33	1	2	18	899
					Overall Frequency²	Percentage of Total Incidents²
Seriousness of Incident						
Any violence					27	40
Homicide					13	19
Crimes while out of custody					14	21
Violence during the escape					27	40
Serious Committing Offense						
Murder					14	21
Terrorism					15	22
Drug Cartel/Drug Trafficking					9	13
Rape/Sexual Assault					4	6
Kidnapping					7	10
Robbery/Bank Robbery					11	16
Other/unspecified ³					24	36
Sensational Methods of Escape						
Helicopter					6	9
Tunnel					3	4
Ladder or rope					5	7
Destroying fence, window, or door					15	22
Fraud/Deception					6	9
Official corruption					11	16
Overpower guard/takes weapon					18	27
Other/unspecified ⁴					15	22

¹Excluding an outlier incident in which 5000 inmates escaped from Haiti's main jail after the 2010 earthquake

²Frequencies and percentages are not based on mutually exclusive events. For example, if an escapee may have been convicted of both rape and murder or have employed more than one method to escape. Thus, percentages are based on a total of 67 incidents, but do not add to 100 percent.

³ These include two escapees serving time for parole violations, one for making fake passports, one for "political corruption", and 20 whose committing offense was not reported.

⁴ These include one incident where a guard accident detonated a grenade and made a hole in the perimeter, three incidents where inmates snuck out of the facility, and 11 where the method of escape was not reported.

4. The Extent of News Coverage

The above content analysis found several factors that appear to influence whether or not an escape will be reported by the news. Specifically, escapes in the news have more escapees per incident, more sophisticated plans, more serious offenders, and more violence than what is seen in prior research of official statistics. Although the sample size for this study is small, empirical analysis of the data is useful to explore the appropriateness of a newsworthiness framework in analyzing the degree to which escapes are covered by the news media.

4.1 Dependent Variables

The following analyses use three outcome variables to measure of the extent of coverage an escape receives. The first measure is the *total number of articles* published printed between 2006 and 2010 for each incident of escape. The next measure is the number of *specific-incident articles*. These types of articles focus on “describing the who, what, when, and why of the incident” (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006, 441). In other words, these are articles that were published to specifically cover the escape incident. Specific incident articles are distinct from the final measure included in the analysis: *general-incident articles*. General-incident articles do not specifically focus on the incident, but rather discuss it in a meaningful way. An example of a general incident article would be an article discussing systemic issues of official corruption in a country, highlighting particular prison escapes to support this claim. General-incident articles provide researchers with another way of understanding what about an incident is newsworthy (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006).

4.2 Independent Variables

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that certain factors, such as the number of victims and offenders, and the amount of violence associated with a story, impact the amount of coverage a particular incident will receive. Thus, two independent variables included in this analysis are *the number of escapees per incident*, which was logged to reduce the large variation, and the *presence of any violence* during the entire escape process (i.e., when the inmate(s) broke out of custody, while the inmate(s) where in the community, or during recapture). In addition, the above content analysis indicates that there is a substantial difference between official statistics and media reports in terms of the committing offenses of escapees and the presence of sensational escape methods. Thus, two additional dummy variables were created to measure the *presence of at least one sensational escape method* (e.g., helicopter, tunnel, ladder/rope, destruction, fraud, corruption, or overpowering guards) and the *presence of at least one offender with a serious criminal history* (e.g., murder, terrorism, drug trafficking, sexual assault, kidnapping, or robbery). Finally, since many of the escapes identified in the above analysis occurred outside the United States, the following analysis also includes a dummy variable (1=domestic, 0=international) to measure the extent of news coverage in domestic versus international escape incidents⁸. Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics for the variables in the analyses.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Variables in Negative Binomial Analyses

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Total number of articles	2.21	3.56	1	25
Number of specific articles	1.51	2.53	0	17
Number of general articles	0.70	1.52	0	9
Logged number of escapees	1.55	1.76	0	6.8
Presence of any violence	0.40	0.49	0	1
Sensational method	0.78	0.42	0	1
Serious offender	0.64	0.48	0	1
Domestic incidents	0.37	0.49	0	1

N = 67

4.3 Analytic Technique

The dependent variables in this study – the number of articles spanning a five year period – follow a count distribution. Model used to analyze count data include Poisson and negative binomial regression. Poisson regression is only appropriate if the assumption that the conditional means equals the conditional variances is met. Alternatively, negative binomial models are less restricted than Poisson models and are appropriate when data are over dispersed (see Hilbe, 2007 for an overview of negative binomial regression). To determine which model was more appropriate, I conducted a likelihood ratio test, which is a test of the over dispersion parameter. In these data, the over dispersion parameter (alpha) was significantly different from zero, indicating that a negative binomial model was the correct model. Table 4 provides the results from the three negative binomial regression analyses.

⁸ Alternatively, it may be useful to examine international and domestic incidents independently. However, this was not feasible given the small number of identified cases. Further, the focus of this analysis was to determine which factors influence the extent of news coverage and, consequently, impact readers’ conception of escapes from custody. Thus, I opted to include this variable as a control, but did not analyze these two types of incidents separately.

4.4 Results

The results for these exploratory analyses are mixed. Many of the variables are not significant, and some were significant in the direction opposite to expectations. For example, escape incidents that involved violence actually received *less* total, specific, and general coverage than incident that did not involve violence. While this finding is surprising, it is important to point out that the outcome in the regression analysis is the *extent* of coverage, not whether or not an incident is covered. In other words, while violence almost certainly increases the likelihood of an incident being reported in print news, it appears that violence does not increase the *extent* of coverage. Similarly, prior research has shown that the number of suspects involved in an incident can affect the extent of its coverage in the news. In the current study, results from the content analysis indicated that reported escapes have much higher number of escapees than what has been demonstrated in official statistics. However, the number of escapees per incident does not appear to be a good predictor of the extent of coverage.

The most robust predictor seems to be the presence of a sensational escape method. Escapes that involved at least one sensational method are expected to have 3.529 the incident rate of total articles, 3.055 the incident rate of specific articles, and 4.857 the incident rate of general articles than escapes that did not involve a sensational escape method. Also, escapes that occurred in the U.S. are expected to be covered in a higher number of specific articles than escapes that occur internationally, but this variable is not significant in the analysis of general articles. This suggests that escapes in the U.S. are used by the *New York Times* in stories specifically discussing prison escapes, while both escapes in the U.S. and abroad are used to contribute to general stories in which prison escapes are not the focal point. Interestingly, escapes involving inmates with serious criminal histories are expected to be covered in fewer general articles than escapes with inmates that did not have a serious record. This relationship, however, is not significant in the other two analyses.

Table 4. Analyses of the Extent of Escape Coverage

	Analysis 1 Total Articles		Analysis 2 Specific Articles		Analysis 3 General Articles	
	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>exp(B)</i>	<i>B</i> (<i>SE</i>)	<i>exp(B)</i>
# Escapees	-.000 (.081)	.999	-.038 (.096)	1.039	-.082 (.107)	.922
Any Violence	-.863 (.252)	.422**	-.807** (.287)	.446	-1.094** (.357)	.335
No Violence ¹	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sensational Method	1.261** (.348)	3.529	1.117** (.401)	3.055	1.580** (.507)	4.857
No Method ¹	-	-	-	-	-	-
Serious Offender	-.244 (.247)	.784	.016 (.285)	1.016	-.866** (.317)	.421
Other Offender ¹	-	-	-	-	-	-
Domestic	.380 (.271)	1.462	.823** (.314)	2.278	-.412 (.374)	.662
International ¹	-	-	-	-	-	-
Log-Likelihood	-119.611		-101.438		-76.072	
Likelihood Ratio χ^2	21.915**		20.777**		1.403	
AIC	253.222		216.875		166.114	
BIC	268.655		232.308		181.577	

¹Reference category

**p < .01, two-tailed

5. Discussion

Newsworthiness has been attributed to the “novelty” or “dramatization” of a particular story or incident (Chibnall, 1977). These news values suggest that media members benefit from reporting sensational news stories.

Almost all of the escapes reported in this study had some sort of dramatic storyline – be it a fantastic escape plan or extreme violence – that made them worthy enough to be reported by a national, agenda-setting newspaper like the *New York Times*. Several individual and incident-level factors were identified that may affect media coverage, such as the criminal histories of the escapees, and presence of violence during the escape. The method of escape, in particular, was found to have a consistent impact on how prominently an escape was covered. These factors provide manifest examples of what scholars have deemed “infotainment”. While they do serve the purpose of relaying news to the public about important correctional issues, they also add drama and intrigue, making these stories as entertaining as they are informative (Cavender & Fishman, 1998).

Challenging the idea that news values like “novelty” and “drama” are the root of media distortion, other scholars have suggested that, in fact, cultural typifications and stereotypes affect news coverage (Lundman, 2003; Gruenewald et al., 2011). For example, homicides that conform to race and gender stereotypes of both offenders and victims will typically receive more coverage than homicides that violate stereotypical profiles (Lundman, 2003). Thus, although news stories in which white females murder white males are “novel”, they actually receive less news coverage than homicides with black male offenders and white victims (Lundman, 2003). Katz (1987) describes this function of crime news as a “ritual moral exercise” which allows readers to reaffirm, redefine, and reify collective their values. Like homicides and crime news in general, stories of prison escapes may also adhere to cultural typifications. For instance, one reporter discussed the issue of helicopter escapes in Europe:

The novelty of an aerial escape should not have caught prison officials by surprise, law enforcement experts and criminologists said. In the past eight years, according to Interpol, there have been at least 14 successful helicopter jailbreaks worldwide and all but three have been in Europe ... After three prison breaks aided by helicopters in 2001, the French government allocated \$55 million to reinforce security at the country's 196 prisons. A large part of the money was used to install steel mesh nets -- known as chopper stoppers -- over exercise yards to prevent a helicopter from landing. In other prisons, clusters of antennas, seven to eight yards high, were placed on the roofs large. (Clark, 2009, para 2)

Another news value, “proximity”, includes both spatial and cultural elements (Jewkes, 2004). While a large portion of the escapes in this study occurred internationally, the escapes in this study that received the most attention from the media occurred in New York. These particular incidents also involved sensational methods of escape, additional crime, and violence. Thus, escapes that were most likely to receive extensive media coverage were “[n]ews stories which are perceived to reflect the recipient’s existing framework of values, beliefs, and interests and occur within geographical proximity” (Jewkes, 2004, 219). For example, the most frequently reported escape occurred in New York. In this escape, an inmate broke out of an upstate New York jail and committed multiple crimes, including murder, while out of custody. This inmate also used a can opener to cut a hole in ceiling of the jail to facilitate his escape.

While many other escapes occurred elsewhere in the U.S., they did not receive as much media attention as this particular escape. These findings suggest that the “typical” U.S. escape will not be covered unless it meets other criteria of newsworthiness, such as drama and violence, or unless the physical location of the incident is within close geographic proximity to the newspaper’s primary target audience. In other words, there is an interaction between geographic and cultural proximity in terms of newsworthiness and news selection.

When escapes that occur in the U.S. are not seen as newsworthy, newspapers that set the national agenda, such as the *New York Times*, seem to be turning to countries outside of the U.S. to provide readers with frameworks in which to view prison escapes. The focus on the Middle East is likely associated to the abundance of stories related to terrorism, especially since media tend to focus on international terrorism rather than domestic terrorism (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2006). The attention paid by the *New York Times* to Mexico seems to fit with the concern media has had with drug traffickers and the threat they pose to white, middle-class Americans (see Reinerman & Duskin, 1999).

Lastly, the concern for escape events in Western European countries seems to be associated with the spectacular level of drama and intrigue escapes from this region yield. These elements add to the “infotainment” purpose of these events (see Cavender & Fishman, 1998). Thus, the disparity between the reality of escapes from U.S. prisons and the typologies and characteristics of escapes being reported in print news can be attributed to the newsworthiness of atypical U.S. escapes and non-U.S. incidents, including high amounts of drama, planning, violence, cultural proximity, and entertainment.

A potential consequence of this misrepresentation is that the public may develop a particular framework and “form a familiar storyline in popular culture” by which to view escapes (Culp, 2005, 281). The method in which media report prison escapes has been shown to affect individuals’ fear of crime (Fisher, Allan, & Allan, 2004). Additionally, if the “familiar storyline” promotes the idea that escapes are violent, there could be significant ramifications in the creation of policy. Several recent court cases have determined that escapes are associated with potential violence and should be considered serious crimes (U.S. v. Chambers 2007; U.S. v. Templeton, 2008; U.S. v. Bryant, 2002; U.S. v. Golden, 2006). This has led to longer sentences for individuals convicted of escape. Therefore, while it may be unrealistic to assume that media stories should be completely representative of every type of event, reporters bear some responsibility to the public and to policy makers of appropriately representing prison escapes.

Another consequence of media distortion is that it focuses public attention on the “symptoms” of social causes and away from their “causes” (Chibnall, 1977, 206). This means that the reporting of critical correctional incidents - including prison riots, other forms of inmate violence, and escapes - might have the effect of distracting people from potentially serious issues that might be underlying the social causes of these problems. For example, scholars have acknowledged for decades that systemic deprivations and strenuous conditions related to imprisonment could manifest in inmate misconduct (see Skyes, 1958; McCorkle, Miethe, & Drass, 1995). Others have written about how faulty administrative control and the disorganization of management can lead to various forms of inmate misconduct (Useem & Kimball, 1989; DiIulio, 1987; Carrabine, 2005). Media researchers have also found that those in positions of power can use the media to either propagandize (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) or at least set the agenda for others (Kitzinger, 2004). Thus, the misrepresentation of escapes by major newspapers in the U.S. could shape individuals’ perceptions of the dangers associated with prisons and inmates, shifting focus away from other issues plaguing the correctional system.

Much past research has made this association between what makes a news story worthy and ideological views (e.g., Cohen & Young, 1981; Ericson et al., 1987, 1989; Fishman, 1980). The complexities involved with evaluating newsworthiness can be seen in the work of Ericson et al. (1987) who said that “[t]he journalist visualizes newsworthiness on the bases of his social organization (material resources, rules, and relationships in his own newsroom and in his sources’ organizations) and cultural organization (working and occupational ideologies in his own newsroom and in his sources’ organizations and the dominant ideology in society)” (139). This sentiment is an echo of Hall et al. (1978) who said that “each paper’s professional sense of the newsworthy, its organization and technical framework...and [its] sense of the audience or regular readers, is different” (60). Thus, it is important to realize that the creation of news and elements of newsworthiness are affected by the ideological and cultural makeup of media organizations, their sources, and their audiences. All of these impact the way crimes, including escapes, are represented in the news.

6. Conclusion

There are several limitations to this research. Since official data on escapes are stripped of important identifiers, it is difficult to match the escapes reported by the *Times* to the official statistics. This is complicated further by the fact that many of the escapes that took place in the U.S. during this time period may not have been made available to the press, either because inmates weren’t out of custody long enough to be reported to the press, or because correctional administrators purposefully decided to not report the incident⁹. As such, it was not possible to conduct a real media distortion analysis. Also, the incidents that are probably most underreported to the media are the “mundane” escapes, such as walkaways, which could bias the results in favor of coverage of sensational incidents.

⁹ Hall and his colleagues (1978) discuss the systematic structures in place that permit over accessing to the media by “elites.” For example, members of the media can only report on escapes they are aware of, and this information comes from government agencies such as state departments of correction or police departments

Another limitation is construct validity. The term “escape” has been measured differently across studies. Also, each state may have its own definition of escape, making it difficult to compare official statistics across the U.S. It is especially problematic, then, to compare the occurrence of escapes in the U.S. to the characteristics of escapes happening globally. The point of this study, however, was not to say that these distinct regions are directly comparable, but to explore the factors that influence if, and to what extent, escapes are covered in the news.

It is important to develop better national data on correctional events, such as prison escapes, so that comparisons could be made between which incidents are covered by media and which are not, using media distortion analysis. Alternatively, future research could use different media news sources. Media from states with greater frequencies of escapes might yield more information than *The New York Times*. Also, local news sources might cover “typical” escapes more frequently, especially if they directly impact the consumers of those media (e.g., they occur in the city or county in which the consumers live).

The purpose of this study was to examine the coverage of prison escape in major sources of U.S. news. By developing a theoretical framework of the factors that affect media coverage of escapes, the author hopes to: 1) promote a broader understanding of why certain elements of criminal incidents make them more “newsworthy”; and 2) contribute to the body of research on prison escape that has been all but ignored in the past 15 years by academia. The findings of this study demonstrate a general trend in U.S. newspapers to focus reporting on extreme examples of escapes from custody, including escapes with complex planning, escapes involving violence, and escapees with serious offense histories. Complex planning, in particular, seems to have a strong positive effect on the amount of coverage a story will receive. To obtain these types of stories, the media analyzed in this paper often turned to correctional incidents occurring outside of the U.S. since escapes occurring within the U.S. are relatively rare and mundane by comparison

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