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Media Analysis of City-Wide Local News Portrayals of Youth Criminality: Worcester, Massachusetts

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**MEDIA ANALYSIS OF CITY-WIDE LOCAL NEWS PORTRAYALS OF YOUTH
CRIMINALITY: WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS**

ANDREA BOFFICE

MAY 2018

A Master's Paper

**Submitted to the faculty of Clark University, Worcester,
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And accepted on the recommendation of

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ABSTRACT

MEDIA ANALYSIS OF CITY-WIDE LOCAL NEWS PORTRAYALS OF YOUTH CRIMINALITY: WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

ANDREA BOFFICE

This study consists of a comprehensive media analysis of local news in Worcester, Massachusetts that explores portrayals of youth criminality of an entire city's local media landscape. It examines how local media portrayal of youth is primarily dominated by coverage of youth crime and youth victimization. As our nation is questioning our trust and reliability in ever-changing news, this study asks whether our local news, with the new platforms that are emerging, have been compromised in providing a fair portrayal of youth. Particularly, whether it fairly portrays Black and Latinx youth in representations of criminality proportional to crime occurring. During the period of analysis, the term "swerving" was established and used by the media to describe youth and bike-related crimes. This example shows how local media can fuel moral panics and perpetuate stereotypes of the "likely criminal".

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Conceptual Framework	1
Methodology	12
Data Analysis	16
Analysis	26
Discussion: “Swerving”	30
Conclusion	36
Bibliography	39
Glossary	41
Appendix	42

Introduction

The recent national election has brought to conversation our relationship and trust with the ever-changing media. In the United States, our trust in media is declining, but we still trust local news more than national news (Pew, 2016). Local news matters, it informs people about the issues deemed too small for national news. While local news is vital to a community, crime news in local media consistently stigmatizes youth of color by perpetuating stereotypes of criminality, creating moral panics, and leading to real world implications for youth-adult relationships. This study will explain the results of a media analysis concerning the city of Worcester's local media outlets to understand a city-wide portrayal of youth criminality.

In local news media, crimes committed by youth and Black and Latinx are over reported, while their victimhood and White criminality are underreported (Dorfman et al. 2001). These portrayals perpetuate harmful stereotypes; all while failing to allow the groups they portray to use their own voice to speak their own narrative. These stereotypes lead to real-world policy implications, and effects on youth-adult relationships. This media analysis assesses Worcester's local news for mentions of youth, and codes their portrayal. It also examines one particular issue of "swerving", and how a term was picked up by local media in Worcester, became a charged buzzword, and used to create moral panic concerning youth on bikes.

Conceptual Framework

To make any significance of the findings in the media analysis, it is important to establish a framework for how we interact with crime news. To do this, we need to understand the role that media and local news plays in our lives, our susceptibility to media images, and our country's history of categorizing who or what makes a "criminal" or a "danger". Our media is changing, and we need to ask if this change has impacted the quality of local news' portrayal of youth.

Media Consumption in the U.S

Knowing how our country’s media is changing will help us understand if media’s influence on its consumers is changing as well. Overall, interest in traditional news outlets are declining, especially in younger audiences where there is greater reliance on social media to get information. U.S interest in news is at all time low, with news outlets struggling to stay open and relevant. Yet 7 out of 10 U.S adults follow national or local news either somewhat or very closely, and 65% follow news regularly (Pew, 2016). In 2016 The Pew Research did a comprehensive study of the United States media consumption habits. It illustrates that our assumptions about changing media consumption are mostly correct. Generally, readership preference is changing to screens of some sort. 57% of adults said that they “often” get their news from television, 38% get it from online, 25% radio, and 20% print newspapers (Pew, 2016). For perspective, in 2013 27% of adults “often” got their news from newspapers, meaning a decrease in 7% in three years.

This decrease in print readership makes sense when looking at the age breakdown of media platform choice:

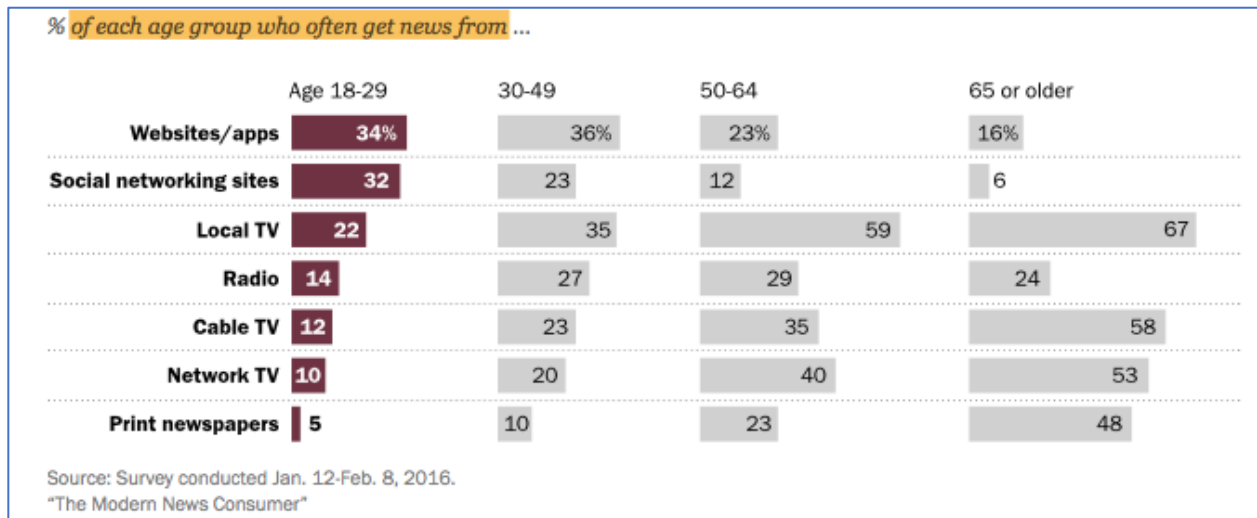
	18-29	30-49	50-64	65+
TV	27%	45%	72%	85%
Online	50	49	29	20
Radio	14	27	29	24
Print newspapers	5	10	23	48

(Pew, 2016)

There is a clear indication that older Americans are the ones primarily consuming print media. There is a reverse trend in regards to online media; although not as drastic. People who consume news can mainly be classified as those who either prefer to read or watch their news. Those who prefer to watch the news are sticking to television, but it is those who prefer to read the news that are switching from print to online sources (Pew, 2016).

There are different kinds of “online” news. Some news outlets essentially post their print content on the internet without changing much. However, many online platforms are changing their content when they move online, and more users are going

to social networking sites for their news. In total, 81% of Americans get *some* of their news from websites, social networking sites, or apps (Pew, 2016).



Websites, apps, and social networking sites are preferred by younger viewers, while television, radio, and print are preferred by older generations. Overall, the largest single source preferred is local TV. It is believed that one of the results in changing media platforms is a loss of local news as online content pivots to the national to get more “clicks”. Yet this shows that particularly in television, people are still consuming local news (Pew, 2016).

It is also understood that young people are more interested in social media than older people. Yet, when it comes to news on social media, young people *are no more likely* than older people to “interact” with news on social media- meaning share, comment, or repost news stories on social media (Pew, 2016).

Trust and Accuracy of Media

Media has always been an influential part of our lives, and people have varying levels of skepticism in media content. Our trust in media and news has never been absolute, and recent changes in our national and political landscape have put our ability to trust news under further scrutiny.

As of 2016, the amount of Americans that trust the information they get from news was 22% for local news, 18% for national news organizations, 14% for the news

they receive from friends and family, and 4% for news acquired on social media (Pew, 2016). Most people report having at least *some trust* in all news sources (Pew, 2016). Political changes have brought to light the partisan difference in trusting news; but trust in media has been partisan for a long time. Three-fourths of Americans believe that media performs play an important watchdog function and keeps political leaders in line, yet the same amount say that news media is biased (Pew, 2016). Moderates are less likely to say this than those whose political spectrum are far left or right, but conservatives are overall more likely to believe the media is biased than liberals (Pew, 2016). Trust in news is also higher amongst older Americans (Pew, 2016)

With news moving increasingly online, it makes it easier for like-minded individuals to form “echo-chambers” without hearing opposing viewpoints. Social media has enabled a person’s media diet to be increasingly shaped by their social circle of family and friends without a third party fact-checking or providing editorial judgment (Allcott, 2017). The amount of a person’s Facebook “friends” that has an opposite ideology to them is 20% for liberals and 18% for conservatives (Allcott, 2017). Since 77% of consumers get at least “some” of their news from family and friends, it is important to note that 35% of consumers admit that the news they get from their friends and family is one-sided, yet 30% of them are OK with the one-sidedness (Pew, 2016).

It is impossible to know whether the increase of fake news stories in the past political election is a cause or result of our lowering trust in news. During the election, the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories, and it was calculated that there were 760 million instances of a user clicking and reading a fake news story (Allcott, 2017). This averages to three stories per American adult, with many believing the content they consume (Allcott, 2017). When it comes to general online news, men and White non-Hispanics are the most likely to seek news online (Pew, 2016). Those who prefer online news also tend to have a more negative view of news media overall (Pew, 2016).

The presence of fake news influences our trust in media in general. Like national news, local news is competing with fake news stories and accusations of bias. News outlets are changing their online content with the aim of generating more views- and we should question whether this practice is changing the quality of information in our local

news. Fake news stories have the aim of either earning revenue by being inflammatory and widely shared- or to promote an ideology, often by “exposing” the “hidden truth” that the “mainstream media” won’t share with the public (Allcott, 2017). The result is that people’s knowledge is less accurate. What is relevant to this study is that the increased presence of fake news is causing consumers to become more skeptical of legitimate news, and reduces the demand for high-quality reporting and journalistic standards for legitimate news outlets (Allcot, 2017). Plus, the changing resources of media outlets means that journalists have to produce news cheaper and more popular. With all these forces acting on media creators, an analysis is needed to understand if there is a decreased desire for quality and unbiased reporting at local news outlets.

Crime News

A key aspect of both local and national news is crime news. In 2001, 76% of the public say that they form their opinions about crime from what they see or read in the news (Dorfman et al. 2001). During that time, a media analysis found that crime, and violent crime were over-reported in context to the numbers of crime that was happening (Dorfman et al. 2001). In fact, when crime rates drop, rate of crime coverage increases (Dorfman et al. 2001). Even though all news over-reports violent crime, newspapers do it less than network television, and neither do as much as local TV news.

The most common crimes are non-violent and property-related crimes; yet the crime of murder is reported most often in news even though it happens the least (Dorfman et al. 2001). Murder and homicide are the more interesting and news-worthy than car theft. The more complex or unusual murders are even more likely to be reported (Dorfman et al. 2001). Certain factors that are not “normal” in most murders increase the likelihood of a homicide being reported in the news, such as: multiple victims, multiple offenders, an unusual murder method, a child, elderly, or female victim, interracial murder, or a murder occurring in an affluent neighborhood (Dorfman et al. 2001). Interracial homicides, or homicides committed by strangers, are much *less* likely to occur than someone is to be killed by someone they knew and of their own race (Dorfman et al. 2001).

Homicide is one of the most serious crimes, and it may deserve more attention than petty crime. Yet if a large portion of a consumer's media diet consists of emphasized murders, it may create a perception of higher violent crime rates than the reality. Additionally, if it is the most unusual homicides that are reported, people may think that these *are* the most typical kinds of homicides. The national trends of crime news will be compared to the local news in Worcester to see if they are also making the "unusual" crime seem normal, and whether they follow these tropes of "worthy victim" and "likely criminal".

Understanding Stereotypes of Black and Latinx Youth; Themes of Criminality

This study researches the portrayal of youth criminality in Worcester with the framework that in the national news media, youth criminality and Black and Latinx criminality is disproportionately reported in comparison to White and adult crime. To understand this discrepancy, it is important to establish the context of racial disparities in our culture and justice systems; topics that have been covered extensively and in more depth than is possible here. Here, we will be focusing on assumptions and stereotypes regarding youth criminality, particularly Black and Latinx youth. It is a fact that minority youth are disproportionately arrested. When explaining discrepancies of racial portrayal in crime news in the "Crime News" section it is important to note that the news still reports Black perpetrators disproportionately to *arrests* made, which in themselves are disproportionate to crime occurring. Black youth make up of 15% of the nation's 10-17 population but constitute 23% of juvenile arrestees and 33% of youths in public detention facilities (Bishop, 1998). This discrepancy can either be due to higher incidence of offending among minority youth, a disproportionate arrests of minority youth, or both (Bishop, 1998). A study that followed almost 500 Black and White boys from childhood to adulthood found that Black youth were more exposed to risk-factors that are more likely to lead to general arrests and theft-related arrests (Fite, 2009). There is sometimes an assumption that poverty leads to crime, and the racial discrepancy in arrests is due to the fact that Black people are more likely to be in poverty. Yet the study found that; "Minimal support was found for the hypothesis that a differential sensitivity to risk factors accounts for disproportionate rate of minority male

arrests.” (Fite, 2009) This study showed that childhood risk factors, such as poverty, alone do not explain why Black youth were arrested more than White youth. In fact, Black boys who grow up in families of the top 1% of income earners have the same incarceration rate as White boys whose families make earnings of \$36,000 (Badger et al. 2018).

The study also found that early exposure to risk-factors did not explain a discrepancy in drug-related arrests (Fite, 2009). There is evidence to prove a discrepancy in the way crimes are processed when all factors are equal aside from race. In 1985 it was found that race did not directly impact case disposition; but that Blacks were more likely to be detained than Whites, which does lead to more severe dispositions (Bishop, 1998). The Black adult population make up 13% of drug users and 12% of total population, yet consist of 38% of those arrested for drug offenses and 59% of those convicted of drug offenses (Weich, 2002). The term “driving while Black” was coined to explain how discrepancies all throughout a person’s interaction with the criminal justice system to general belief of a person’s predisposition to criminal activity:

Because police will look for drug crime among black drivers, they will find it disproportionately among black drivers. More blacks will be arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and jailed, thereby reinforcing the idea that blacks constitute the majority of drug offenders. This will provide a continuing motive and justification for stopping more black drivers as a rational way of using resources to catch the most criminals. 17

Despite the fact that most crime and violent crime are committed by adults, youth crime holds a special attention in news media. Black and Latinx youth are particularly overrepresented as perpetrators, and *significantly* underreported as victims compared to crime statistics (Dorfman et al. 2001). This is only beginning to scratch the surface of the differences between how White, Black, and Latinx people interact differently with our criminal justice system. But it is important to ask if the general population consuming local news understands even this basic framework. When community members read local crime news; is this broader context understood by the consumer, or explained in the articles themselves? Or, do these articles mirror or amplify racial disparities of criminality? Knowing that people’s perception of crime in their community is largely shaped by news, we must ask whether Worcester’s local crime news reinforces these stereotypes or if they provide these contexts.

Real World Implications of Media on the Personal

Media portrayal affects the personal opinions of those who consume them. In figuring out the impact of local crime news we have to consider the media literacy of the viewers. I will use Aufderheide's definition of media literacy, "The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian, 2015). The message interpretation process (MIP) model that states that

"...individuals process media messages and internalizes or rejects them based on comparisons of the media message to an individual's sense of generalized others as well as to the individual's personal experience." (Scharrer, 2015).

Once media images are internalized, they can be difficult to disrupt. Many studies of media literacy intervention have to do with the topics of ethnic and racial stereotypes in media. Many studies have found (mostly when studying children) that those who are exposed to a diverse media that counter racist stereotypical images are more likely to think favorably of that racial group (Scharrer, 2015,). However, there was an adverse effect when the counter-stereotypical image was presented as atypical (for example, showing surprise that a Black person was CEO of a company) (Scharrer, 2015). In the context of analyzing Worcester articles; if the accomplishment of a youth is presented as an unlikely anomaly it will actually be counterproductive to disrupting stereotypical images of youth.

There are some positive finds in media literacy studies that show how viewers may be gaining a more critical lens when viewing media. Studies involving youth have some promising evidence that they are starting to critically examine gender stereotypes; however, they are less likely to discuss racial stereotypes (Scharrer, 2015). This may speak to our country's shift of what topics are more accepted to talk about in the mainstream, and which are still taboo.

Societal Moral Panic

There is one case study of media sensationalizing youth violence that is extremely relevant to Worcester. It describes an example of moral panic caused after local media gave high visibility to a crime involving a group of youths attacking a woman

in Central Park in 1989. In the media aftermath, the term “wilding” was coined. (Welch, 2002). Moral panic can be defined as:

“a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people.” (Cohen, 1972)

There are multiple examples of media, politicians, and criminal justice figures fueling anxiety over public safety- particularly in cases of youth violence (Welch, 2002). In 1964 England, youth “Mods and Rockers” were considered new threats to public safety; politicians and media exaggerated the dangers of youth as justification enhanced police powers and expansion of criminal justice apparatus (Welch, 2002). This pattern has continued to this day. After the 1989 Central Park attack, the tragic event became coined by local media as “wilding” to describe sexual violence committed by a group of teenagers. As explained in the “Crime News” section, some of the variables that make a crime more “newsworthy” are present here: multiple offenders, a white victim, a female victim, occurring in an affluent neighborhood, youth crime, and interracial crime (Dorfman et al. 2001). The story, and the term “wilding” exploded in New York local media. These moral panics seem trendy; that these “phenomenon’s” burst into mainstream discussions and then dissipate. Yet these moral panics continue to reinforce stereotypes of Black and Latinx criminality (Welch, 2002). Politicians and the media pander to people’s fear of Black and Latinx criminality often to create support for “law and order” campaigns resulting in renewed hostility towards those identified as the ones causing the decline in social order (Welch, 2002).

The concepts of “likely criminal” and “worthy victim” need to be established. The media reaction to the Central Park story is emblematic of overall trends in media. A analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* found that in the city, 80% of the homicide victims were Black or Hispanic yet Blacks were half as likely to be to be depicted as homicide victims than Whites, and Hispanics were two-thirds as likely (Dorfman et al. 2001). Or, when a White person is murdered in L.A, it is two-thirds as likely to be reported on than if the victim is Black. Countless media studies confirm the trend of the “worthy victim” to be reported; “the white, youngest and oldest, women, high socioeconomic status, who were killed by strangers”. Another trend has emerged to compliment the “worthy victim”,

I call the “likely criminal”. Coverage of perpetrators is similarly disproportionate, through not as drastic as the disparity in coverage of victims. White perpetrators are underrepresented in news media, which in itself prevents a racially skewed image of the “likely criminal”. This image is also determined by *how* articles portray Black and Latinx criminals in comparison to White ones. Black suspects are less likely to be identified by name as White suspects on the news, to be quoted in their stories, and are more likely to be shown physically restrained than Whites (Dorfman et al. 2001). In general, Black suspects are consistency depicted as poor, dangerous, and *indistinct* from other non-criminal blacks (Dorfman et al. 2001).

Three days after the attack, the New York Times coverage replaced legal terminology of the attack with the term “wilding” as “the product of a past time” (Welch, 2002). Law enforcement department officials were also quoted using the term- and admitted they had never heard the term before this case (Welch, 2002). Establishing “wilding” as a new and not fully understood phenomenon contributed to anxiety surrounding the attack (Welch, 2002) Coverage of the new “wilding” trend was embedded with racial implications. The appearance and race of the victim and perpetrators were described in most media accounts of the attack (Welch, 2002). Some media outlets suspected that the term came from a rap song of the time, although it was never confirmed (Welch, 2002). This small detail in itself is telling. Studies have found that both Black and Whites, when exposed to rap music, associate it with violent stereotypes of male Black behavior (Johnson and Trawalter, 2000). Therefore, connecting the racialized term “wilding” with an unconfirmed rap song further reveals the racial assumptions of those using the term.

Not to say that that this wasn’t a horrific crime that deserved attention; but news’ coverage of the more “unusual” crimes may distort the viewer’s understanding of what is a “usual” crime and stoke fears not based in reality. Sexual assault is a very real threat. Yet, the media’s emphasis on covering crimes that happen between strangers has contributed to women particularly having a deep sense of fear in public places (in particular- parks and garages) and strange men when statistically; the greatest threat to women is at home from men they know (Valentine, 1992). This would be the “usual” factors of a crime of this type. The Central Park attack was horrifying, but some of the

factors of that crime were “unusual” (Dorfman et al. 2001). Yet it had a drastic amount of coverage. If news crime reporting reflected reality, coverage of sexual violence would lean heavily towards understanding the often unreported sexual assault in the home and workplace. During the period of analysis for Worcester’s media, I found 11 articles reporting sex crimes between a male perpetrator and female victim who were strangers, and one where the perpetrator and victim knew each other. And because sexism and racism intersect, it is also important to know that interracial crime is rare; and that coverage of Black female victims of sexual violence in are severely underreported (Welch, 2002). After the Central Park attack, Reverend Al Sharpton is quoted “Black women are attacked by ‘wilders’ and mugged every day, and it’s not even newsworthy. The fact that she is white is the only reason the city is concerned.” (Clifford et al. 1989). Nationally, multiple media studies find that news consistently and severely underreports minority victims of all types of crime (Dorfman et al. 2001). In fact, on the very same day as the attack in Central Park, another woman in New York City, a Black woman, was raped by three men and thrown from a roof (Associated Press, 1989). Yet this story barely made a ripple in news media. It reinforces that Whites, and White women in particular are the only “worthy victims” of outrage and sympathy. This case study shows how stereotypes of the “worthy victim” and “likely criminal” can be amplified by a single case of societal outrage.

Much media coverage, political attention, and outrage was given to the youth who were accused of this attack, and given the catchy name of the “central park five”. Yet when these youth were exonerated, after serving jail time, there was hardly any media coverage from the news outlets that were quick to vilify them (Beardsly & Teresa, 2017). While the city worked to provide settlements to the men (which in itself is woefully inadequate to make up for the harm done) local media made no efforts to apologize or rectify for perpetuating anger towards the men. Moreover, the term “wilding” was meant to describe group youth violence, yet the man who confessed to the crime was an adult, and acted alone (Beardsly & Teresa, 2017). Meaning that the event that the moral panic of “wilding” was based on, was false. Yet there was no acknowledgement from media outlets that they perpetuated racist stereotypes and caused a moral panic based on a false version of an event. This shows how media can

show an extreme lack of caution when vilifying a group for the sake of a news story. We will see in the Worcester example of “swerving” that similar racial stereotypes are being perpetuated under the term of a supposed “trend” of youth crime without properly examining accuracy or impact. Crime news moves so fast that the attention and research that is deserved can be set aside for the sake of creating an impact in readers. When corrections or wrongdoing is discovered, there is no real desire to hold news organizations accountable; and media attention quickly moves on to the next story.

Policy Implications

One result of moral panic is proposed policy or community changes. In reaction to the attack in Central Park, neighborhoods organized public forums to discuss the issues of “wildling sprees” with political leaders (Welch, 2002). A borough president and mayoral candidate proposed a “antiwilding law” to increase penalties for anyone who commits crime as part of a group plus an increased number of police officers (Welch, 2002). This is by no means the only time politicians manipulate fear of crime for political gain (Welch, 2002). Most clearly and recently the country saw current president Donald Trump use this tactic to win the presidency (Huber, 2016). In response to the Central Park attack, Donald Trump took out full-page advertisements in four New York City newspapers demanding the death penalty for those involved in the attack. Incumbent Mayor Ed Koch also called for the death penalty in cases of “wilding” and future mayor Rudolph Giuliani similarly campaigned on calls for increased harsh measures to deal with the “marauding gangs on ‘wilding sprees’” (Welch, 2002) In one example, Denver media reported many sensationalized stories of Denver’s “Summer of Violence” by giving high visibility coverage to several youth killings in 1993. This is despite the fact that in 1991, 1992, and 1994 there were *higher* rates of youth homicides than in 1993 (Dorfman et al. 2001). Media perceptions of crime do not actually reflect spikes in criminal activity.

Methodology

This paper discusses how local media represents youth and youth criminality through a case study reviewing city-wide perceptions of youth in local media.

This research conducts a media analysis with geographic parameters, and is a case study of Worcester's local media and its portrayal of youth. It aims to understand not just one publication, but the entire local media landscape of one geographic area. The main data set for this research comes from the media analysis of Worcester local media outlets. There is also information obtained during two youth focus group/community celebration series called Youth Speak Outs.

Media Analysis

This study focuses on the main news outlets in Worcester, Massachusetts. These news outlets include the *Telegram and Gazette*, *Worcester Magazine*, *Go-Local Worcester*, *Mass Live*, and *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight*. *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight* is the only television station, *Telegram and Gazette* and *Worcester Magazine* have print sources, and all the others have online content varying from online newspapers to blog-style pieces. This study did not include print sources, partially for capacity and time, and so it would be easier to compare the different sources. It was conducted in 2017, and contains four months of media analysis; June, July, October, and November. July is the only month where the media analysis did not occur for the entire month- rather, three weeks in July.

The media analysis began originally for a different project about youth mental health. A research team of four graduate students at Clark University developed the methods and template for the media analysis. This team conducted the media analysis for April 2017. This first month of analysis did include the indicators of youth criminality, the results of which inspired this project. After this, the project was taken over by a single researcher, myself, who conducted the remainder of the media analysis.

In conducting the media analysis, I would check each news source once a week, and tally how many articles were published each day. I would then tally how many articles were either about, or mentioned youth. "Youth" is defined as someone aged 13-23. The age range was chosen as suggested by the city Division of Youth, which uses the same age definition. If no age is listed in the article the researcher used certain

context clues. This can include photos of age appropriate youth or words such as “youth” “juvenile” “teens” “high school students” etc. All of the information is kept in a spreadsheet. The date and the names of the news outlets are kept on a spreadsheet on the Y axis. The X axis contains the count of total articles and youth related articles. On another tab, the X axis contains codes for describing youth.

If on a day, an article is published pertaining to youth, I would read and code the entire article. There is a list of pre-established “codes” to note if they appear in an article. Some of these are specific words such as “millennial” or “gang” as well as topics to also code such as “extra-curricular activities” or “drug-use”. Whenever an article notes one of these things, it will be marked under the code. I was particularly interested at looking to the theme of criminality, and racial representations of youth. Pictures and comments were also coded. Whenever a youth’s race, ethnicity, or nationality is shown or told, it is coded in the context of the article subject. Codes were also chosen to get at the following questions: “In what subjects are Black and Latinx youth most often represented?” “What are the races of people shown in photos?” “Are they portrayed positively or negatively?” “As agents or victims?” “How often are they directly quoted?” “What are the racial compositions of stock photo models?”

In addition to these codes, I would read the article and mark whether the overall portrayal of youth was positive, negative, or neutral. “Positive” portrayals of youth were articles that described the accomplishments, efforts, or opinions of youth. This included sports accomplishments, graduations, volunteer work, interview with youth interested in photography, etc. “Negative” articles were those that described youth either as doing something bad (crime, skipping school ect) or if the article described youth in a negative way (addicted to technology, lazy, etc). “Victimization” were articles that described youth as passive victims of violence, poverty, health risks, poor schools, etc. “Neutral” consisted of articles that did not fit any of the above categories or if article failed to give any opinion or portrayal of youth. After the first month of analysis, April (which is not featured in this study) it became apparent that there was a large portrayal of youth as victims- which did not fit into either a positive or negative portrayal of youth. Therefore, for the rest of the study, “victimization” was added as one of the categories.

There were times where a single article would be re-posted more than once. This would be included and coded as if it were a separate article, as reposting the article exposes the reader to a greater amount of youth-portrayal.

Halfway through the media analysis, I decided to code readership comments. This would be a direct way to gauge public reactions to the article content and see if it affected most outspoken reader's portrayal of youth. Readership comments are coded for October and November.

Youth Speak Outs

In June and July of 2017, the City of Worcester Division of Youth hosted a series of events called Youth Speak Out. Worcester youth, primarily in high school, were invited and recruited through flyers, person-person recruitment, and by inviting youth groups. Two sessions were conducted, and in total approximately 120 youth participated. These were in part a community event with food and open mic performances, and part focus groups led by community leaders to ask the youth about their opinions on a range of topics having to do with their experiences in Worcester. Some of these questions had to do with media portrayal in Worcester, and its impact on their lives. These series were open meetings and publically taped, and the facilitators took notes of the responses.

Limitations

The entirety of the media analysis was done by only one person, myself. I tried to be consistent, but deciding whether an article fits certain codes can sometimes be subjective, and therefore the reader must be aware of the possibility of researcher bias.

Additionally, after the first two months of media analysis, I decided that I wanted to code readership comments. This means that there is analysis of the articles for four months, but analysis of the readership comments for only two of the months.

Race is subjective and personal, and so I have some limitations in my accuracy of determining someone's race from a photo. In some cases, pictures accompany names that help clue someone's race, or based on the article content. In these instances, articles may have given clues to ethnicity, which I could have mistakenly

inferred as someone’s race. The picture analysis was only done by myself, a White woman. In some cases I am only gauging from the photo and it is possible I have made mistakes in categorizing someone’s race. It is more than likely that if this photo analysis had been done by a diverse team, there would have been some different interpretations of people’s race.

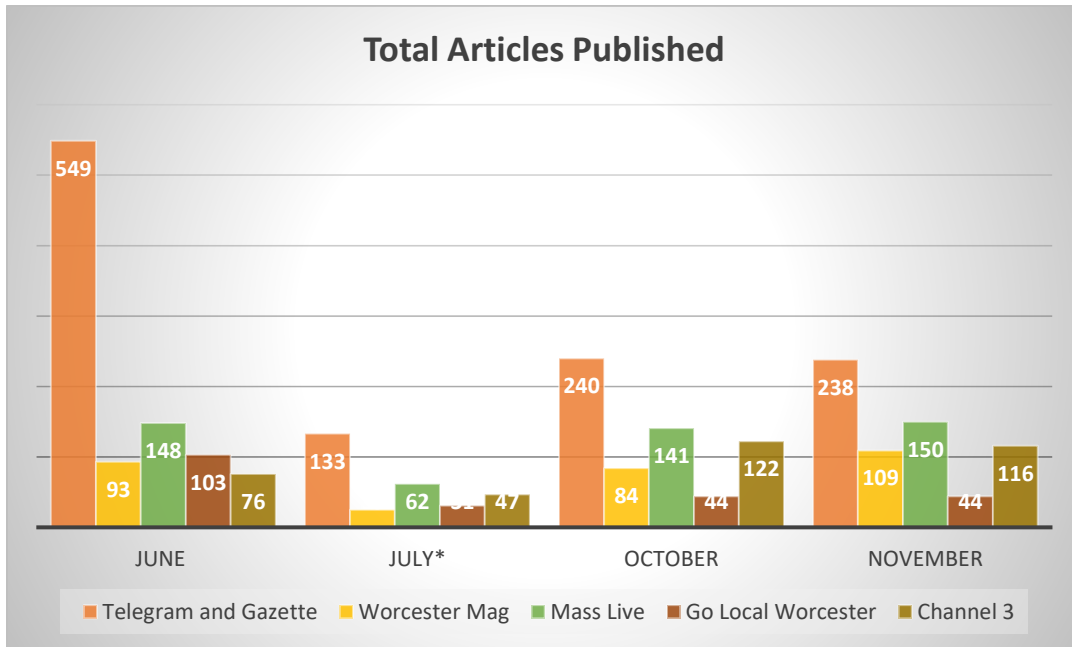
Data Analysis:

Media Analysis: Publication of Youth-Related Content

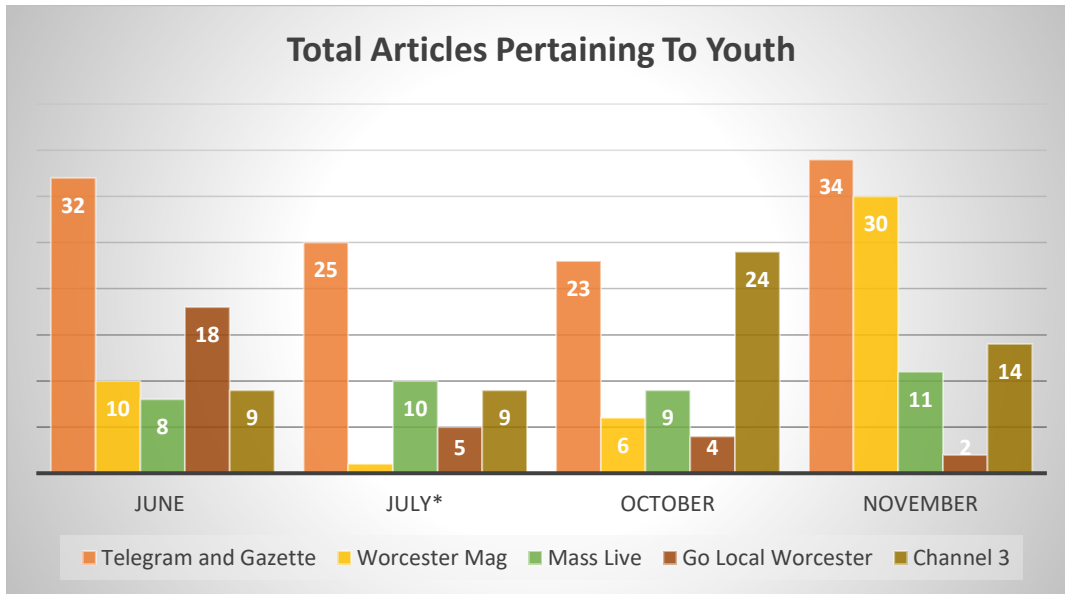
This section will show the results of the media analysis for Worcester local news.

Total published articles in “news” sections for the different sources:

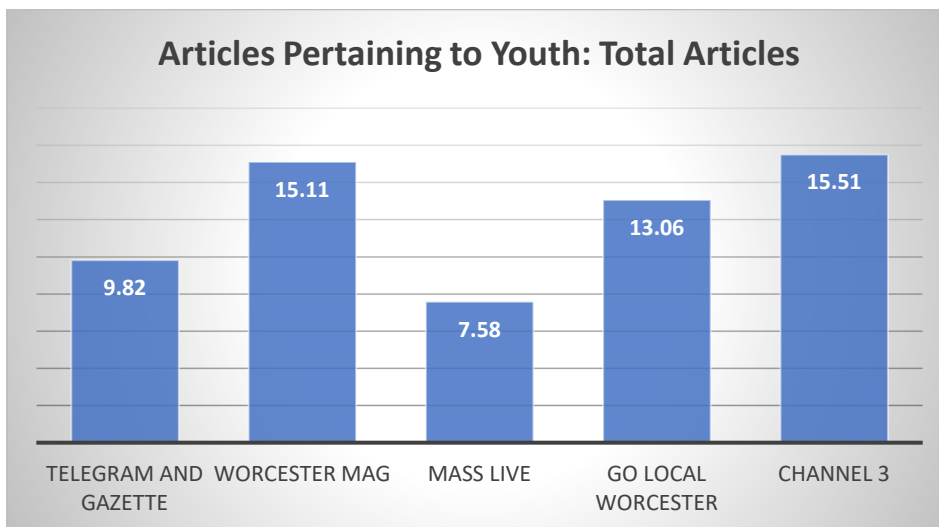
*The July analysis does not consist of the whole month, but three weeks in July.



The total articles published during the period of study that pertain to youth:



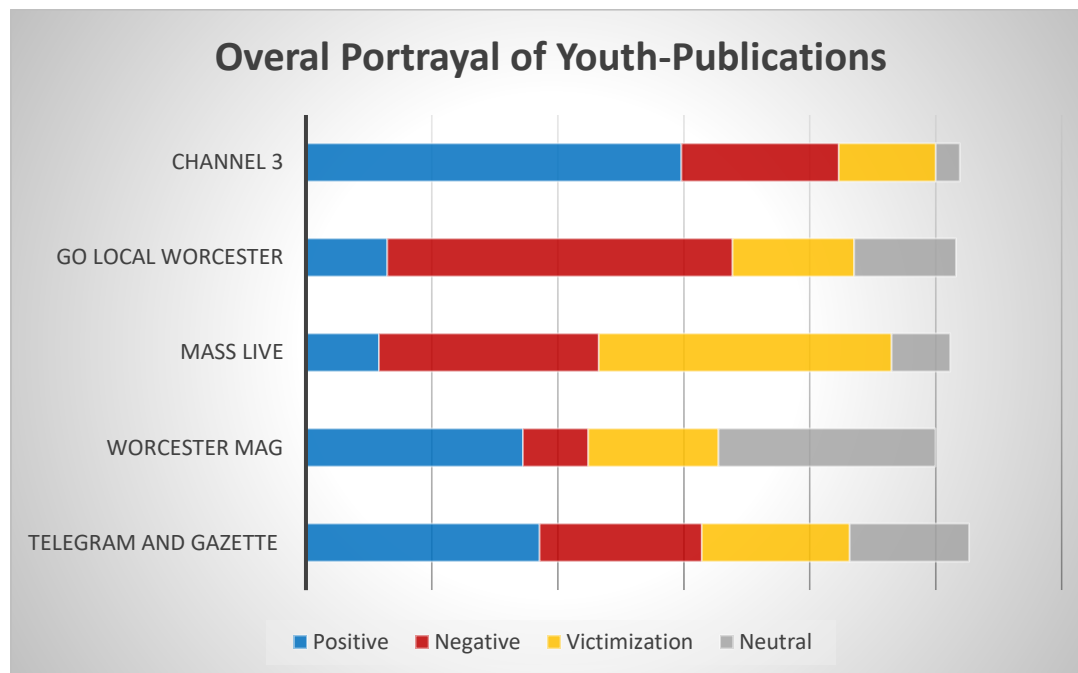
Ratio between total articles published, and articles that pertain to youth:



Here we can see that *Worcester Magazine* and *Channel 3 Worcester News tonight* have the highest ratio of articles about youth to total articles, while *Mass Live* has the lowest average ratio at 7.58.

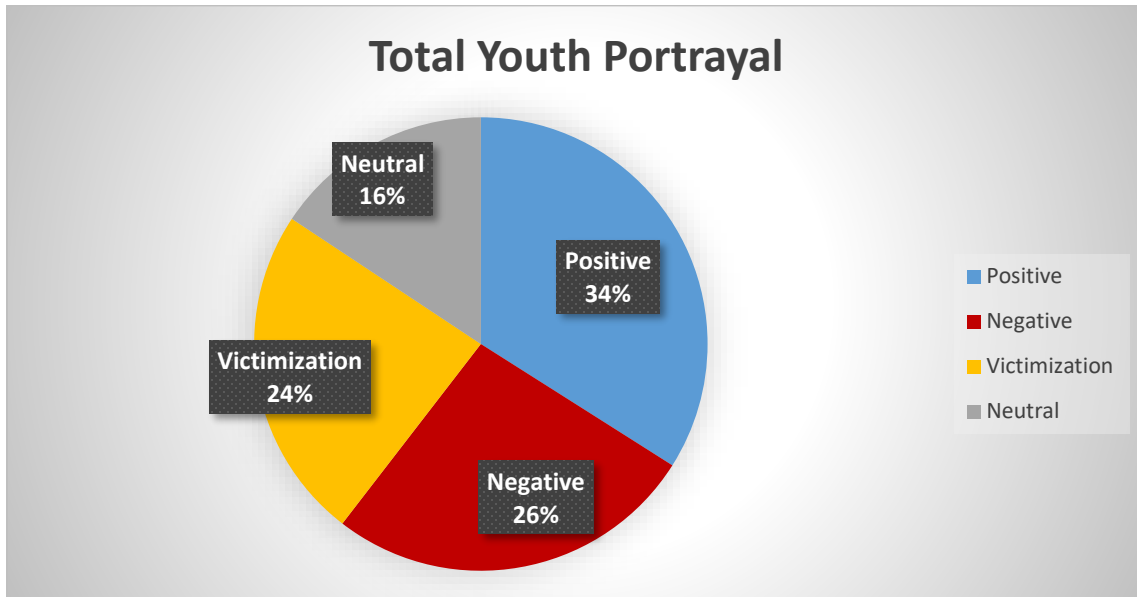
The next portion will show the summary of articles in terms of their portrayal of youth across different news sources. An article that pertained to youth was given a rating for its overall portrayal of youth. It could be “positive”, “negative” “victimization” or “neutral”. The sum of the overall article ratings often do not add up to the sum of articles, because some of the articles had more than one overall rating (some articles had both a negative *and* victimization portrayal of youth- for example).

Portrayal of youth for each source in the entire period of media analysis:



Here we can compare overall portrayal of youth across the different media sources in Worcester. These percentages come from dividing the number of *positive* articles written by the *Telegram and Gazette* towards total youth related articles in the *Telegram and Gazette* and so on. The numbers come from comparing each news source to their own total articles for more accurate comparison between sources (*Telegram and Gazette* writes the most “positive” youth articles, but they also write the most articles in general). Here we see that *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight* publishes the highest percentage of *positive* stories about youth (with *Worcester Magazine* in a close second), *Go Local Worcester* publishes the highest percentage of *negative* stories, and *Mass Live* publishes the highest stories of youth *victimization*.

Total youth portrayal of all sources:



We have the overall summary of total articles across the period of study and their portrayal of youth. The highest categorization was a “positive” portrayal, but the number of articles with a positive, negative, and victimization portrayal are similar. Of the articles in Worcester local media pertaining to youth during the period of study, 34% had a positive portrayal of youth, 26% negative, 24% victimization, and 16% neutral.

Media Analysis: Codes

I read and coded each article pertaining to youth, and tallied when the codes were present in the article. Here is the sum of the codes in Worcester’s local media in order of greatest to fewest during the four months of analysis without a differentiation between media sources.

Codes:	
At Risk: Health/Safety	76
"Students"	57

Weapons	45
Victims of Violence	43
Violence	36
Events for kids	34
Youth in Extra Curricular	32
Accomplishments	31
Sports	27
At Risk: Socio-Economic	25
"Teen"	23
"Kids"	23
"Boy/Girl"	20
Drug use	16
Academic Achievement	16
"Youth"	16
Volunteering	15
"Neglected"	14
Absenteeism	12
Drug Dealing	11
"Juvenile"	7
Gang	3
Disabilities	3
Refugee Youth	2
"Millennial"	2
LGBTQ youth	2

Here we can see the most common code is “Health and safety risk”, and the fourth most common is “victims of violence”. This compliments the earlier finding that 24% of total articles about youth characterize them as victims in some sort. The second most common code is classifying youth as “students”. In reading the articles, it is easy to notice a theme that youth are most likely to be talked about in terms of their connection

to school, and segment this part of their identity. More holistic words to describe youth, such as “teens”, “kids”, “boys/girls” and “youth” are used less often.

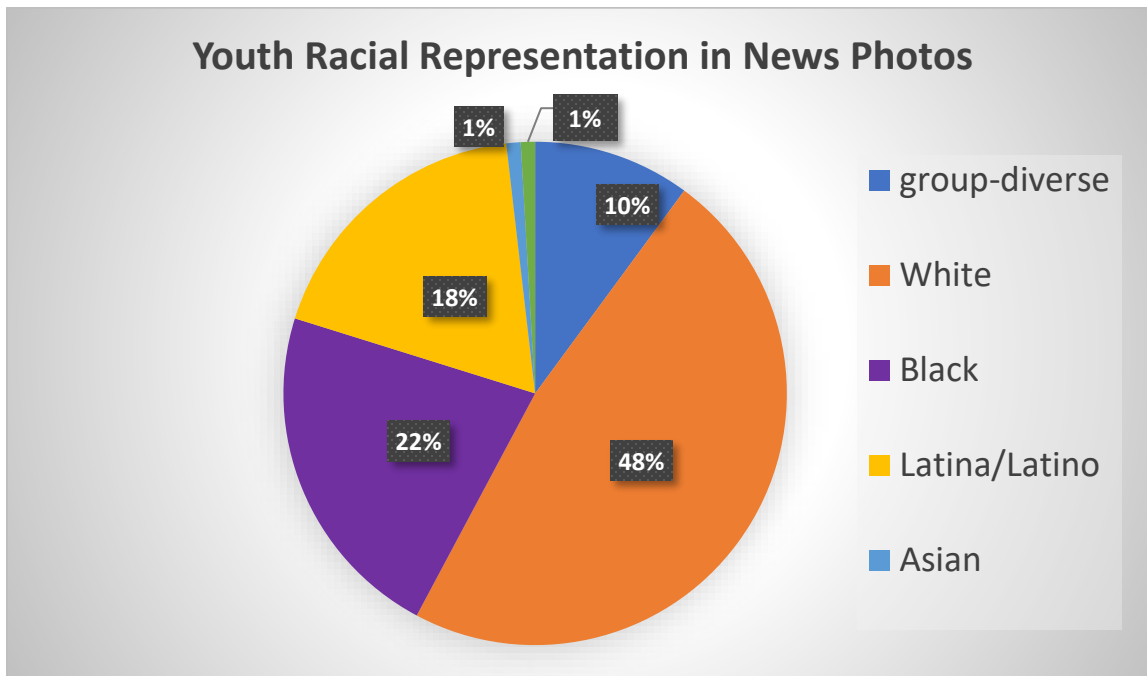
Since this study is particularly focused on representations of youth criminality, I would like to draw attention to the third most common code, “weapons” and fifth most common code, “violence”. Additionally, if we cluster “drug dealing” and “drug use” we could find that overall there were 27 mentions of drugs in articles about youth.

Media Analysis: Coding Pictures

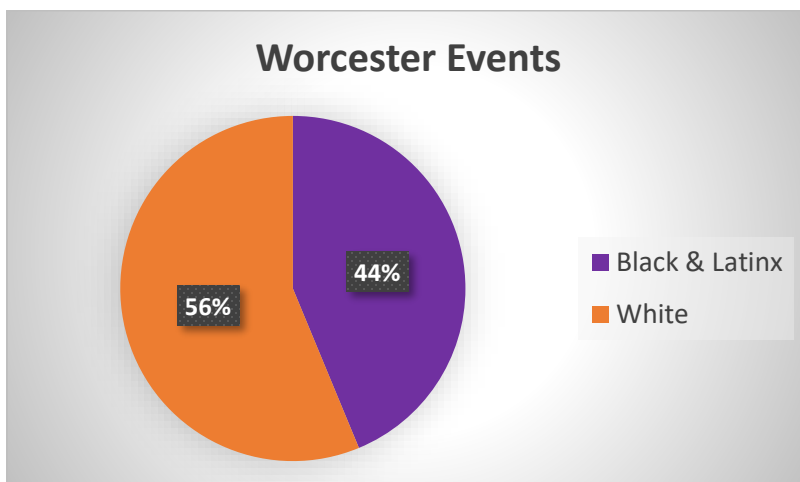
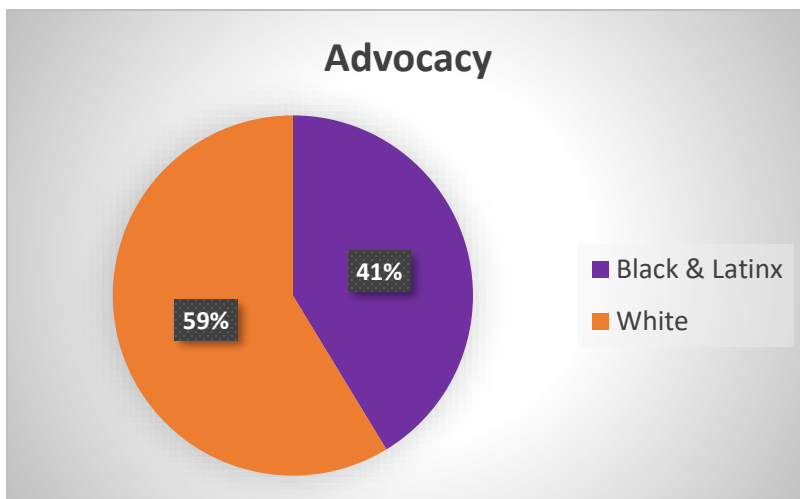
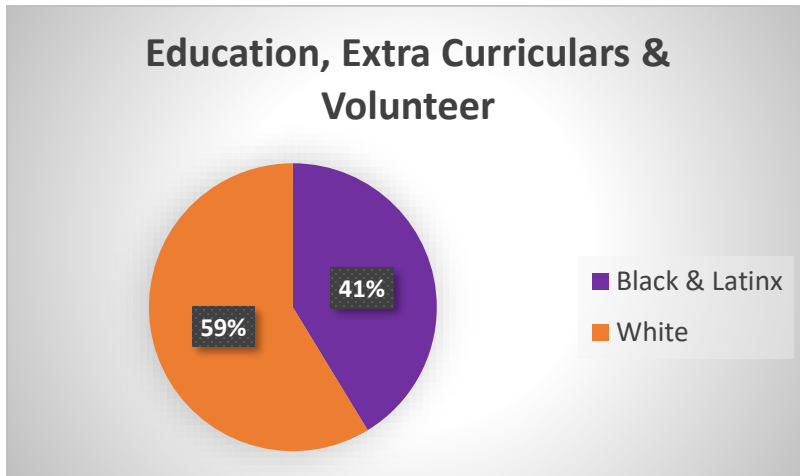
I was interested in tracking racial representations in the photos in the youth-related Worcester media content. Many of the articles did not contain photos, or contained photos that were of objects or buildings rather than people. Many of the photos are stock photos (particularly in *Go Local Worcester*), meaning that in these cases the news outlets have complete control over who to portray. In Table 12, I have outlined the photo representation for different topics.

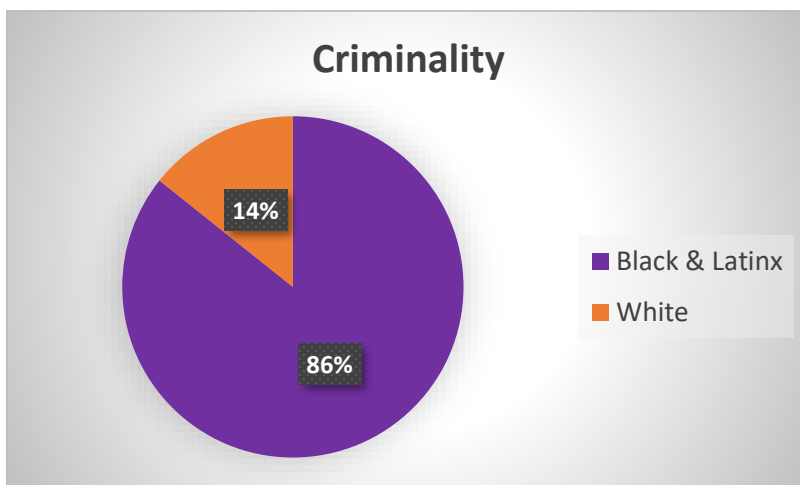
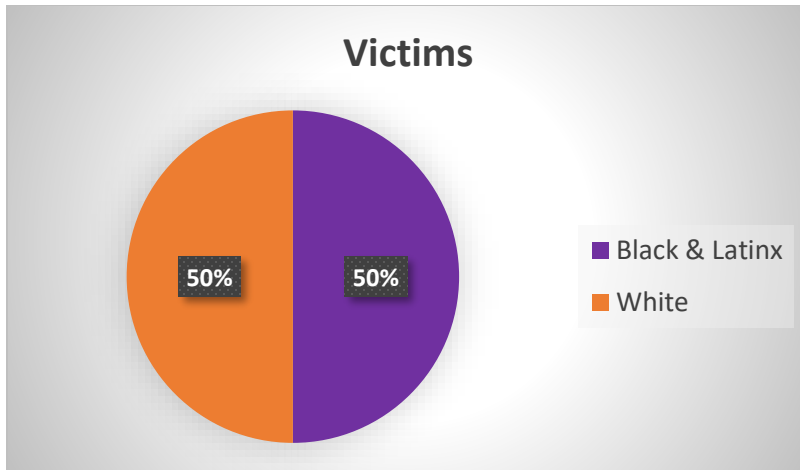
Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight was not included in this variable, as coding all of the images in a video would have been beyond the scope of available time for the analysis.

Racial representation in photos across all news outlets:



Racial representation in photos by topic:





Media Analysis: Quoting Youth

Out of the 2555 articles in this study, only 22 directly quote youth. This is 0.008% of all youth-related content. 10 of those 22 articles directly quoting youth come from *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight*. Many of the articles did have direct quotes for their articles, but nearly all the quotes came from adults. Interestingly, these adults that were quoted were rarely parents. Rather, the majority of comments on youth content were some kind of professional such as a board of education member, superintendent, a social worker, etc.

Media Analysis: Coding Comments

Over the period of study, there were a total of 310 comments, which were recorded and coded. These comments were made below the youth-related articles in Worcester’s local News publications. Generally, *Go Local Worcester* and *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight* hardly had few comments. Most of these comments come from *Telegram and Gazette*, *Mass Live*, and *Worcester Magazine*. This is likely due to the fact that *Go Local Worcester* and *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight*’s comments are connected to one’s Facebook account. Overall, the most common types of stories to have large amounts of comments were ones having to do with crime (either a criminal or victim of crime), and to give opinions on the education system. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that many comments come from a few people who comment often and don’t necessarily reflect the entire reader population.

The 310 comments in this pool are overwhelmingly negative, and often offensive. People do not need to hide their identity to say something kind, yet the anonymity of online comments are a place for people to say controversial and provocative comments without personal repercussions or being judged. Therefore, studying these comments aren’t meant to be reflective of the entire population of people who read these stories. It does, however, show that a certain amount of readers are having very strong reactions to these stories about youth and forming strong opinions about the youth in these articles. From what we know about readership habits, we can assume that the readers of these stories, and commenters, are likely older adults. Particularly, men and White non-Hispanics are more likely to seek news online than women and non-White people (Pew, 2016, 18).

Coded Comments

Tough on Crime	74
Complaints: Youth	44
Victim Blame	27
Berating Other Commenters	19
Parent Blame	19
Condolences	18

"Bad" Part of Worcester:	13
"Welfare State"	13
Complaints About Journalism Quality	10
Correction	9
Other	9
Complaints: Educational Systems	8
Compliment	6
Complaints: Government	6
Opinion on Guilt/Innocence	6
Anti-Gun Control	5
Calling Out: Racism	5
Complaints: Immigrants	5
Pro-Police	5
"Darwinism"	4
Anti-Democrat/Liberals	4
"PC" Culture Anger	4
Chastising others	4
Explicit Racism	3
Against a Law	3
Anti-Police/Military	3
Need for Resources	3
Youth: "Coddled"	3
Conspiracy	2
Pro-Gun Control	2
Blaming Parents	1

Analysis

Political Divide:

Part of the reason for doing an analysis that includes multiple media outlets within one city was to understand if the wide variations of political ideology translate to a diversity of youth portrayal within the different news sources. There is often an assumption that more “liberal” cities or news outlets have a more sympathetic or kinder view of both youth and people of color, and that more “conservative” news outlets or cities have a more negative view of youth and people of color.

It would be assumed that the different media outlets in Worcester would have a range of political leanings, but with a majority being more liberal. *The Telegram and Gazette*, *Worcester Magazine*, and *Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight* were had a more positive portrayal of youth. *Worcester Magazine* and *Telegram and Gazette*, observationally, are generally less overtly conservative. *Worcester Magazine* in particular, was overtly liberal, with authors often giving their personal opinion on the stories they were reporting on. However, the assumption that more “liberal” news outlets had more positive articles about youth was not proven to be strong enough of a trend. Overall, the Worcester news outlets in this study have similar positive and negative portrayals of youth.

Layout and Youth Portrayal

The news outlets that have more positive portrayals of youth are the ones that are more “traditional” and “legitimate” news outlets. *Turtle Boy Sports*, which will be discussed later, is extremely, and explicitly, conservative with support from a conservative former city counselor- and also has extremely negative stories about Worcester’s youth. It is important to make the distinctions that some news outlets have a *greater* amount of positive portrayal of youth in comparison, and not necessarily that they have are overall very positive towards youth. We cannot let comparisons of better/worse make us think that the “better” is good enough.

Channel 3 Worcester News Tonight plays on local TV, and both *Worcester Magazine* and *Telegram and Gazette* publish in print in addition to online. *Go Local*

Worcester and *Mass Live* are exclusively online, with a more blog-style layout than the other online news publications. Even *Worcester Magazine* and *Telegram and Gazette's* online layout is situated similar to a newspaper, whereas the other online sources are more listicle. We can see in the Worcester media context, the news outlets with more "traditional" layouts tend to have a higher positive portrayal and a lower negative portrayal of youth than the "blog-style" counterparts (see table 6).

Comments:

The articles about crime are the ones that tended to have the longer comment threads. The most common type of comment were responding to a type of crime or perceived misbehavior that was reported on, either by calling for harsher punishment of the criminal, calling for corporate punishment, calling the criminals stupid, complain that our current justice system is too "soft" on crime, encouraging vigilante justice/violence (particularly on the articles about kids "swerving"), encouraging youth crime to be treated as adults, speculating that certain individuals were in gangs or on drugs without an article mentioning so, and just general anger at a criminal. These are "Tough on crime" codes. This is also connected to what I have called "'Bad' Part of Worcester'. Many comments had a theme that there was a "bad" part of Worcester that was causing all the crime, lack of economic opportunities, and in general were "ruining" the city. These comments often alluded to or explicitly named who or what is this "bad" part of Worcester: foreigners, certain geographical areas, Black and/or Latinx, and the poor. There was a lot of explicit anger towards poor of Worcester and in a lot of the comments under "Parent Blame" and "Welfare State" there is a theme of the poor being responsible for their condition, lazy, entitled, a drain to the taxpayers, stupid, "ruining" Worcester, and being "bailed" out by the government and taxpayers. They often blamed the government for "enabling" these people to not take "personal responsibility" (to get a job or to parent well). These types of comments typically came under articles about youth crime, or articles about new programs for youth (an article about a summer lunch program, for example). After an article about crime, there were many people to call for more incarceration, arrests, and punishments- but only a few calling for greater resources or intervention (see "Need for Resources" such as education, job training,

etc.). Some called specifically for corporal punishments or physical violence not by the state but by individuals under the supposed lens of “vigilante justice”.

While there were many comments stating explicit class discrimination, the comments expressing racism were less explicit, but no less present. Observationally, there were more “Tough on Crime” comments under articles with clear indication that the criminal (either in writing or in photos) was Black or Latinx than if the criminal was White (with the exception of two articles featuring White men accused of sex crimes against minors). For example, there was one article where a Black male youth was shot during a hit-and run; in another article, a White man was injured when his nephew shot him. The first featured comments on how the youth was probably connected to gangs, the second article had comments calling the pair “stupid” but did not allude to criminality. The category of “Explicit Racism” may seem to be a small number, but those were only in examples where the racism was explicit within the comment itself, and not alluded to. That category could also include the “Complaints: Immigrants” category as most were not shy at stating which types of immigrants they were against, and accusing a criminal of being an “illegal” immigrant without any mention of citizenship in the article.

This example may seem like cherry picking, but there were many examples where young victims of color were not as sympathized and were even accused of criminal activity themselves, as compared to their White counterparts. There were two examples of separate murders of a White female youth and a White female woman. Both of these murders happened more than five years ago. One was relevant as the accused murderer (a young man of color) was up for trial, and in the second the killer is unknown, but the families were interviewed. Both cases had multiple articles across the different news sites. These articles contained the majority of “Condolences” comments, with the rest were under articles about social programs, and about a youth who drowned. On the other hand, there were also multiple stories reporting two young Black male rappers from Worcester who were shot in Atlanta, with the murderer being unknown. In this case, whether the article was sympathetic or not- the comments did not have nearly the same amount of sympathy as did the two murders of white women. Additionally, many comments speculated that the men were somehow connected to

crime themselves. This follows the patterns of the “worthy victim” in national news as explained in the literature review.

There was a significant amount of “Victim Blame” mostly related to youth that died or were injured in accidents. There were some crimes involving female victims of sexual abuse, and nearly all had some level of comments blaming the female victim. Particularly, if it was a case of domestic assault (if she knew the perpetrator). Many accused women (and underage girls) of lying about an assault, lying about an assault to cover up supposed cheating, “luring” men, for being “stupid”, or for not “leaving”/ calling the cops sooner. The exceptions came at a case of a man who was a stranger to his victims, and a man who attempted to kidnap nine year old girls. These cases speak to our understanding of who is a “worthy” victim of sexual assault.

Youth Speak Out

There is a theme of hostility and fear towards Worcester’s youth in these comments, as well as undeniable racism towards youth of color in terms of what the comment say and on which articles have more comments. These comments confirm a strong racism and ageism amongst a segment of the adults in Worcester: some who have power over these youth whether it be institutional or in person-person interactions.

Within the categories of “Complaints: Youth”, “Complaints: Educational System”, “Youth: Coddled”, “PC Culture”, “Welfare State” and “Tough on Crime” there is a theme that Worcester’s youth are more reckless, crime prone, lazy, and disrespectful than other youth or in the past. It is an old cliché: “When I was young, I had jobs/never talked back/were respectful/walked to school in snow”. Yet, there were many comments that followed this formula, with the commenter hinting that the current youth are somehow worse than youth in the past and that the failure is their fault-not due to society failing youth. It also gives away at a commenter’s age- young people themselves rarely talk about “the youth”.

This particular theme of the comments gets at the question: If adults read these news stories, does it have any impact on youth? In theory, if adults read these articles, and form negative perceptions of youth (evident by the news outlet’s portrayal of youth

and the comments posted), this will affect adult-youth interactions. The best people to ask if youth media portrayal is having an effect is the youth themselves.

The youth in the focus group consisted of those of high school age from different schools in the city. Most were affiliated with a youth group, and so represent a population that is probably more likely to be used to having thoughtful group discussions. They were given prompts to talk about multiple topics, one of those being media portrayal of youth. Table 12 in the appendix has some key quotes from the youth.

In the youth's responses, we can see that their idea of how media portrays them is for the most part accurate. Even though research has established that this group is not likely to consume news themselves; they still are aware of how it portrays them. The idea that youth are lawless, comparing them to wild animals, and crime-prone are themes backed up by the media analysis and national media analysis studying youth and youth of color. The last recorded youth comment is particularly telling

"Youth can't be trusted. I feel like adults see things about us, like we're irresponsible and we can't be trusted. And I go to apply for a job and they assume I can't be trusted because it's what they keep seeing and then they don't want to hire us [youth] because of what they keep saying about us."

This youth perceived the adults around them forming preconceived ideas about youth from their media consumption, affecting youth-adult interactions.

Discussion: "Swerving"

In the case study of "wilding" in New York, the authors explain the criteria for a "moral panic". It consists of concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). During a moral panic, the accused are labeled as not only as a danger to innocent victims, but also a threat to the social order (Welch, 2002).

I focus on this case study because a similar phenomenon occurred during the period of Worcester's local media analysis. During that time, local news outlets introduced the supposed new phenomenon of "swerving". "Swerving" refers to youth

dangerously riding their bikes in the street in groups, doing tricks, and intentionally riding into traffic and then “swerving” away at the last minute.

Worcester is a city meant for the automobile; street parking is plenty and the emphasis on public transportation is minimal. Worcester does have a public bus system, the WRTA. It reaches most areas of the city, but service is irregular with some routes only running on the hour. Further cuts to the public bus operations are to be enacted again this year. In addition, Worcester is a very snowy city, frequently shutting down the bus system. Though many do use public transportation- the ability to use it for regular commuting is limited. Many adults and youth ride their bikes in Worcester. Some do for fun, and youth can often be seen balancing on one wheel. I will call this group of people “biking for recreation”. For others, it is a form of transportation. I have seen people riding their bikes in their work uniforms or with grocery bags hanging off the handles. I will call these “biking for transportation”. Of course, these groups can intersect. It is rare to see who I will call “bike enthusiasts” that many cities have. These “bike enthusiasts” are those who bike for pleasure (different than biking for recreation, mostly youth, in groups, and often doing tricks). “Bike enthusiasts” are most often White, male, urban professionals who may have custom bikes or other biking equipment (helmets, biking shorts, etc) and often bike for distance rather than tricks. “Bike enthusiasts” are not very common in Worcester. Most roads do not have bike lanes. Although the city is making an effort to add bike lanes and bike racks in the downtown, the city is not overall bike friendly. Bikers and cars often compete for space in the road, and although biking in the sidewalks are prohibited, many do anyways.

From observation, it seems that there are more people of color can be seen riding bikes than Whites. Worcester, in general has a higher non-white population than Massachusetts overall (57.4% in Worcester are white as compared to the 81.8% of the state) (“Quickfacts”, 2016) This context matters because when local news outlets are talking about “swerving” it is similar to “wilding” in that media had implicit or explicit suggestions of *who* these “swervers” are: namely, youth of color.

“Swerving” was defined as an activity where youth intentionally drive head on into traffic and dodge the cars or make the cars dodge them. Sometimes this term is used for some of the “biking for fun” behavior I have described above. “Swerving” implies

recklessness, danger, creating city-wide disorder, and being a “menace” to the city. The supposed phenomenon of “swerving” furthers the criminalization of Black and Latinx youth, particularly males and additionally makes these “swervers” indistinguishable from other bike users in the city- thus criminalizing all bike users. Just like in the “wilding” example, “swerving” has led to those in power using the new term to propose new rules and punishments to either control youth’s movement or have harsher penalties for youth misbehavior.

According to Worcester Police Chief Steven M. Sargent in a official statement, “swerving” is a new trend that has been spotted across the country. I looked for evidence of this. The majority of search results came from Worcester local news outlets. However, I did find one article from Philadelphia’s *The Inquirer* about teens doing bike tricks in traffic, using the term “rideout” (Byofsky, 2017) This article had admiration for the athletic feats of the bike tricks. The other article that was most relevant came from Staten Island’s *SILive.com*. They describe a youth that was arrested for intentionally riding his bike headfirst into a bus, forcing the bus to stop (“NYPD”, 2017). The same news outlet described the behavior as a city-wide phenomenon, but referred to it as “street riding” (“It’s Only Going to Get Bigger”, 2017). Only in a article from *Philly Magazine* did I find “swerving” used as a term to describe groups of youth intentionally riding into traffic for fun (Sasko, 2017).

The first mention of the “swerving” trend in local news media appeared on October 16th to announce that there was to be a new police taskforce to crackdown on the new trend. Within the next few days, the same story was reported by the other news outlets, using the same term. In the next few months, the phrase “swerving” would be used to describe youth (and sometimes adults) on bikes- whether those on bikes were engaged in criminal activity or not. These articles about “swerving” accrued the most comments encouraging violence, often described as “vigilante justice”, against the youth on bikes. Additionally, comments encouraging harsher criminal punishments, calling youth “wild” and “stupid”, and “Darwinism”-esque comments saying that if these youth are to be injured or die in biking accidents, it is a positive (comments like “thinning the herd”).

For the next few months, there would be articles reported about bike-related crimes or behavior described as “swerving”. In October 2017, a 15 year old was seriously injured after he collided with a car. It was reported by most of the news outlets, with the use of the word “swerving”. However, in this story, the accident occurred in a four-way stop where the car and youth were coming from different directions. While the youth should have stopped at the intersection and didn’t; it still appears to be a genuine accident and not a result of youth intentionally baiting cars by biking in the middle of traffic. Yet it was still given the label of “swerving”, a word that less implies youth stupidity but rather, intentional recklessness for fun. Similarly, “wilding” also implied that youth were engaged in criminal activity for fun. These types of incidents were given the same label as other bike-related youth behavior. For example, *Turtleboy Sports* posted a video of approximately 30 youth on bikes riding through an intersection, intentionally cutting off traffic. This probably most closely aligns to the “swerving” definition. Yet, the example of the youth-car accident, these 30 youth cutting off traffic, plus a video of a youth littering while on a bike, are sharing a moral equivalency in the media with the term. The term “swerving” is being extended to youth on bikes in general. *Telegram and Gazette* wrote an article about the “dangers of swerving”. This article was accompanied by a video: none of which showed the behavior as described in the article. It showed youth doing tricks in an empty parking lot, a youth riding a bike on a sidewalk, a youth biking across a crosswalk, and an adult riding a bike. None of the shown behavior was illegal, nor does it show the intentional driving into traffic as described. Yet the *Telegram and Gazette* associated this non-criminal behavior with a dangerous phenomenon.

The phenomenon of “swerving” occurred at the same time that the city started a bike-sharing program called Ofo in September 2017. On social media, some posted pictures of damaged bikes, with the payment system removed. One inspired a comment, “This is why Worcester can’t have nice things.” In articles about swerving, and videos showing youth on bikes, many would leave angry comments at seeing youth on the bright yellow Ofo bikes. The Ofo program is to go on as scheduled, with certain amount of expected bike thefts built into the program. However, the distinct impression from media and commenters is that when it comes to Worcester youth, the bike sharing program is not meant for them. It seems that people imagine that the users of the Ofo

program would be “bike enthusiasts” and are discouraged by the fact they are used by “biking for recreation” riders; even though they make up a larger portion of bike riders in Worcester.

During October 2017, police officer Sgt. Michael Cappabianca gave a talk at a Worcester middle school to talk about the dangers of “swerving”. During the talk, a student asked what was the penalty for “swerving. The police officer responded, “It’s not about arrests, you could die”. (Croteau, 2017). Additionally, during the City council meeting, Police Chief Sargent affirmed that the intent of the task force is not to make arrests, putting the emphasis on education. However, in the report jail time was listed as an option, and there have been some arrests. In addition, during the first week of the new task force, the police confiscated over a dozen bikes, according to Police Chief Sargent. (Bird, 2017) After two youth were found riding bikes in a private parking garage, and one of them had a knife in their possession, *Worcester Magazine* commented, “So now he’s in the system, and mostly because he was riding his bike in a rude way.” (Shaner, 2017) While this statement is opinionated, it does illuminate that the punitive action on youth “swerving” will contribute to people having criminal records before they become adults. Additionally, if local news are applying a moral equivalency of “swerving” to both illegal and legal youth biking behavior, it will lead to criminalization to youth bikers overall.

In addition to the news outlets I used in the media analysis, I also looked at the other Worcester local news blogs that commented on the issue of “swerving”. The *Worcester Sun* described “swerving” as such:

“The city has in recent months seen the rise of swerving, featuring packs of Epsilon-Minus Semi-Morons — also known as youths (some as young as eight) — who amuse themselves by traveling in packs on major thoroughfares, weaving among cars, snarling traffic and fraying nerves.” (“Worcester Sun”, 2017)

Here the *Worcester Sun* is using the case of “swerving” to criticize youth as a whole. *This Week In Worcester* also reported on the announcement of the new task force to combat “swerving” where they cite a “Trackbacks and Pingbacks” link to an article written by *Turtleboy Sports*. *Turtleboy Sports* is emblematic of how the internet has enabled new websites to emerge that blur the line between blog and news organization. It is often described as a “hate blog”, particularly against the poor; plus women and

youth of color (Murtishi, 2017). They are self-described as such: “We found out that what the people have been yearning for is a media outlet that isn’t afraid to cover hard-hitting stories that the mainstream media shies away from. By thoroughly investigating local, statewide, and even national stories, *Turtleboy Sports* has established its reputation as the only media outlet that consistently gives readers the story behind the story.” (“About”). While they do give their opinions on local politics, a large portion of their articles are devoted to berating people they accuse of misusing welfare, and those asking for money on Kickstarter. On the topic of “swerving” they published a post titled “I Can’t Wait Until One Of These Junior Hoodboogers Swerving Bikes At Cars Finally Gets Introduced To Darwinism” In it is a quote, “And you best believe that once one of them does get hit by a car their ‘parents’ will finally emerge from their third floor section 8 apartment in Vernon Hill and pretend to care about them. They’ll see a pay day, blame someone else for their own failures as parents, and raise holy hell.” (“I Can’t Wait”, 2017)

This article has 30 comments, an average for any of *Turtleboy Sports’* articles (more comments than in the average *Telegram and Gazette* article) all of which support the sentiment in the article. The site claims to have 65,000 views a day (“About”). If this is true, then their reader base is comparable to some of the more legitimate news outlets in the media analysis. In another article about “swerving”, they included a list of candidates that their readers should or should not vote for (“White Hipsters”). In the past, members of local government have been accused of being connected to the blog (Murtishi, 2017).

The example of *Turtleboy Sports* and “swerving” are an illustration of how we cannot dismiss or ignore “illegitimate” news outlets as not having an impact. We have to address that these types of sites are forming some people’s entire media diet, and what it means for city-wide youth-adult interactions if these are where some are getting their information and forming their opinions. The attention that local politics and news bring to the newly coined expression of “swerving” further criminalizes youth. These stories that were stoking fear of youth criminality were occurring during a lull of Worcester’s crime rates (Bird, 2017). This follows the trends of national media, which tends to report violent crime the most during periods of less crime (Dorfman et al. 2001). The

“swerving” media reporting and political response manifested similarly in New York City with the case of “wilding”. There, some local politicians wanted to extend the law to increase the punishment of those committing crimes in groups, to deal with the new “wilding” craze (Welch, 2002). Impeding traffic is already a crime; but the way that the media has conflated those who engage in that crime with youth in bikes in general has established that group in the trope of “likely criminal”.

Conclusion

In the literature review, under the section of “Understanding Stereotypes of Black and Latinx Youth” I asked whether Worcester’s local news avoids the use of stereotypical portrayals of youth and if they provide social or political context concerning youth in their stories. My research concludes that local news in Worcester on the whole fails to live up to these expectations. Overall, all the news outlets consistently criminalize youth and particularly Black and Latinx youth.

The depiction of youth in Worcester’s local media is majority non-positive (66%). Of the positive stories, most relate to the youth’s connection to school. The news portrayal of youth in Worcester heavily depicts youth either as criminals or victims of crime even while Worcester’s crime is at an all-time low (Bird, 2017). Youth crime consists of a large portion of local media’s portrayal of youth, and Black and Latinx youth are more likely to be represented in these articles. Yet, from the analysis, we cannot make the simple assumption that this disparity of racial representation in youth criminality is simply a reflection of the crime occurring. Visually, a White youth criminal was less likely to have their photo shown across news outlets, and the story was less likely to be repeated within the same news outlet. There are two examples of White males committing crimes that exemplify this. In one, a man was convicted of sexually assaulting children, in another- a college student committed a home invasion. Both stories garnered many angry comments. Yet, between both of these cases, there was only one article from *Masslive* that showed a photo of one of the men’s faces. The other articles pertaining to these cases either didn’t show a photo, or published a photo of

landscapes, buildings, or law enforcement officials. We must acknowledge that these visual representations in local news are intentional rather than a result of being unable to find a photo. In many cases, photos of criminals or accused criminals are shown of them in court, mugshots, or even Facebook profile pictures. Through the choices of youth criminality portrayal, the media landscape of Worcester local news would give the impression to readers that there is a racial component of the “likely criminal”.

When it comes to both positive and negative stories of youth, there is a severe lack of youth voice. The lack of youth perspective in youth-related articles manifests both by failing to direct-or indirectly quote youth and by portraying youth not as holistic individuals with complex personalities and interests, but defining them as indistinguishable from a group. For example, the “poor”, bike gangs, and students, were common ways that youth were lumped into groups. This was exemplified in the case of “swerving”. It showed how media can create or encourage moral panics. Here we saw how local news contributes to clustering a wide range of behaviors and putting them under the umbrella of a criminal activity; criminalizing youth in general and one of the few outlets youth have for recreation, exercise, and transportation.

The readership comments and information from the Youth Speak Out indicate that stereotypes that I have identified in the article analysis are being internalized by readers. Granted, some readers do not determine their beliefs about youth from these articles, but rather re-affirm their already held beliefs when encountered with an article or comment that agrees with them. But when a “valid” (or even non-valid) news outlet perpetuates these stereotypes, it helps to legitimize these beliefs.

There are of course, exceptions to these trends. There are some articles from various sources that give a balanced and representative portrayal on an issue about youth. I encountered articles about youth with disabilities transitioning to adult benefits, interviewing a young man about his ambitions to start a greeting card company. Another interviews a youth who started their own organization for recycling school supplies, and another about one family’s boxing legacy. There was even an article about “swerving” that heard from youth and adults pro and con biking in the streets, and professionals to debate the issue. This type of journalism should of course be encouraged in addition to more direct youth quotes instead of consistently reverting to the adult professionals. In

addition, there needs to be youth-created content that is given a platform beyond school newspapers so they can have complete control over their narrative.

Even as we seek to improve journalistic quality of legitimate news outlets that are moving online, we also need to address the fringe groups and the real impact they have. We legitimize harmful youth stereotypes by perpetuating them in respectable, legitimate news outlets; but we also legitimize them when we give validity to blogs that do not have journalistic standards or fact checking. Legitimize, for example, by allowing creators to serve in government, or supporting business that advertise to them. When these sites are legitimized and considered “news”, we normalize reductions in ethical standards. While traditional newspapers as we know it are declining, people are still getting information about their community, it is just from different outlets than in the past. These outlets, whether new or “traditional”, perpetuate stereotypes about youth criminality, and harm interactions between youth and adults. The decline in desire for high-quality journalism contributes to this. When these local news outlets show youth criminality, it is rarely provided with context. News cycles have short attention spans, and there isn’t any motivation to rectify mistakes or wrongdoing in journalism portrayal. These trends manifest themselves in both “traditional” and “unconventional” news outlets. News articles about youth criminality are written to provoke interest and a reaction in readers, with little concern about perpetuating harmful stereotypes of the “likely criminal” in Black and Latinx youth of Worcester.

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Glossary

Fake News- I define “fake news” as intentionally false information, meant to be taken at face value and is not fact-checked or verified. This is different than satire, which is fake but not meant to be taken seriously.

Media Literacy- “The ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian, 2015)

Moral Panic- “A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people.” (Cohen, 1972)

Latinx- A gender neutral term in lieu of “Latino or Latina”.

Swerving- An activity where youth intentionally drive head on into traffic and dodge the cars or make the cars dodge them.

Youth- A person between the ages of 13-23 years old.

Watchdog- Media’s role in monitoring politics and government.

Appendix

Table 1: Total articles published

Total Articles	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	549	133	240	238
Worcester Mag	93	25	84	109
Mass Live	148	62	141	150
Go Local Worcester	103	31	44	44
Channel 3	76	47	122	116

Table 2: Total articles published that pertain to youth

Youth Articles	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	32	25	23	34
Worcester Mag	10	1	6	30
Mass Live	8	10	9	11
Go Local Worcester	18	5	4	2
Channel 3	9	9	24	14

Table 3: The ratio between total articles published, and articles that pertain to youth.

Ratio Total: Youth articles	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	5.8	18.7	9.5	14.2
Worcester Mag	10.7	4	7.1	27.5
Mass Live	5.4	16.1	6.3	7.3
Go Local Worcester	17.4	16.1	9	4.5
Channel 3	11.8	19.1	19.6	12

Table 4: The average of the ratios between total articles published and articles that pertain to youth.

	Ratio Total: Youth
Telegram and Gazette	9.82
Worcester Mag	15.11
Mass Live	7.58
Go Local Worcester	13.06
Channel 3	15.51

Table 5: Total articles that had Positive, Negative, Victimization, and Neutral Portrayals of youth.

Positive	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	19	13	8	9
Worcester Mag	3	1	2	4
Mass Live	1	2	1	1
Go Local Worcester	3	1	0	0
Channel 3	6	6	17	7

Negative	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	14	2	10	8
Worcester Mag	2	0	1	0
Mass Live	4	2	4	5
Go Local Worcester	9	1	5	2
Channel 3	1	0	8	3

Victimization	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	5	7	6	13
Worcester Mag	2	2	0	2
Mass Live	5	4	2	9
Go Local Worcester	3	1	1	1
Channel 3	2	3	1	4

Neutral	June	July*	October	November
Telegram and Gazette	9	4	5	7
Worcester Mag	6	0	2	3

Mass Live	0	2	1	1
Go Local Worcester	5	0	0	0
Channel 3	1	1	1	0

Table 6: Percentages of Positive, Negative, Victimization, and Neutral portrayals of youth compared to total articles about youth.

Percentage	Positive	Negative	Victimization	Neutral
Telegram and Gazette	35.25	24.46	22.3	17.98
Worcester Mag	33.33	10	20	36.66
Mass Live	11.62	32.55	46.51	9.3
Go Local Worcester	12.5	53.12	18.75	15.62
Channel 3	59.01	19.67	16.39	4.91

Table 7: Summary of Positive, Negative, Victimization, and Neutral articles about youth without distinction between news outlets.

Sum	
Positive	104
Negative	81
Victimization	73
Neutral	48

Table 8: Sum of the codes in Worcester's local media in order of greatest to fewest during the four months of analysis without a differentiation between media sources.

Codes:	
At Risk: Health/Safety	76
"Students"	57
Weapons	45
Victims of Violence	43
Violence	36
Events for kids	34
Youth in Extra Curricular	32

Accomplishments	31
Sports	27
At Risk: Socio-Economic	25
"Teen"	23
"Kids"	23
"Boy/Girl"	20
Drug use	16
Academic Achievement	16
"Youth"	16
Volunteering	15
"Neglected"	14
Absenteeism	12
Drug Dealing	11
"Juvenile"	7
Gang	3
Disabilities	3
Refugee Youth	2
"Millennial"	2
LGBTQ youth	2

Table 9: Racial representation of photos

Photos	group-diverse	White	Black	Latina/Latino	Asian	Native American
Telegram and Gazette	5	24	18	16	1	1
Worcester Mag	2	12	3	2	0	0
Mass Live	2	8	3	1	0	0
Go Local Worcester	2	8	0	1	0	0

Table 10: Racial representation of photos split into topics.

Education	
Black & Latinx	8
White	10
Victims	
Black & Latinx	10
White	10
Advocacy	
Black & Latinx	19
White	27
Worcester Events	
Black & Latinx	7
White	9
Criminality	
Black & Latinx	12
White	2

Table 11: Codes of Article comments in order of greatest to fewest.

Tough on Crime	74
Complaints: Youth	44
Victim Blame	27
Berating Other Commenters	19
Parent Blame	19
Condolences	18
"Bad" Part of Worcester:	13
"Welfare State"	13
Complaints About Journalism Quality	10
Correction	9
Other	9
Complaints: Educational Systems	8
Compliment	6
Complaints: Government	6
Opinion on Guilt/Innocence	6
Anti-Gun Control	5
Calling Out: Racism	5
Complaints: Immigrants	5
Pro-Police	5
"Darwinism"	4
Anti-Democrat/Liberals	4
"PC" Culture Anger	4
Chastising others	4
Explicit Racism	3
Against a Law	3
Anti-Police/Military	3
Need for Resources	3

Youth: “Coddled”	3
Conspiracy	2
Pro-Gun Control	2
Blaming Parents	1

Table 12: Youth Speak Out Quotes

How does media portray youth?

“Wild animals”

“followers”

“wild”

“crazy”

“Unprofessional”

“Youth don’t know what they are doing.”

“Dreams are unrealistic, unviable”

“Insubordinates that need to be controlled”

“White-washing history”

“They criminalize youth of color”

“Youth are just seen as a product of their environment”

Other comments:

“If you don’t fit the American cookie cutter, you are considered a “lost cause”, they don’t invest in you.

“When the TV shows a certain mold, they [youth] will fit expectations.”

“Only hear positive stories at school” [over the announcements]

“We need to see more professionals and more teachers of color in the media”

“Youth can’t be trusted” – I feel like adults see things about us, like we’re irresponsible and we can’t be trusted. And I go to apply for a job and they assume I can’t be trusted because it’s what they keep seeing and then they don’t want to hire us [youth] because of what they keep saying about us.

Adult comments about youth media portrayal:

“Do we hear anything? [about youth] If we do, its all negative.”

“They are only exposed to negative, how can they be somebody if they don’t see anyone in their community succeeding?”