

## Part Two

Four leading press commentators assessed last year's coverage of topics that included criminal justice issues in the presidential campaign and continuing crime rises in some cities in a conference call moderated by **Ted Gest**, president of Criminal Justice Journalists and Washington Bureau Chief of The Crime Report.

The participants were **James Alan Fox**, The Lipman Family Professor of Criminology at Northeastern University; **William Freivogel**, a professor of journalism at Southern Illinois University and publisher of the Gateway Journalism Review, and **Marea Mannion**, a veteran broadcaster and senior journalism lecturer at the Penn State College of Communications. There are additional comments from **Brandt Williams**, a board member of Criminal Justice Journalists and a reporter for Minnesota Public Radio, who was unable to take part in the call.

*Below is an edited transcript of their Feb 1, 2017 conversation.*

### 2016 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

**Ted Gest:** Crime and justice were bigger issues in last year's presidential campaign than they had been in recent contests. What did you make of the media coverage?

**William Freivogel:** Looking at network television coverage, analyst Andrew Tyndall [counted](#) only 32 minutes of issue coverage, and criminal justice was not a major topic. That compared with 220 minutes of issue coverage in the 2008 Obama-McCain race, a huge decrease. (The [top crime story](#) was the Orlando nightclub massacre, which got 163 minutes).

**James Alan Fox:** It's quite noteworthy that the official websites of the two campaigns gave quite different coverage in terms of volume to criminal justice issues. Clinton's criminal justice section was lengthy, covering a wide variety of criminal justice topics. Trump's was quite brief, talking mostly about immigration and guns. So whatever the media could do on crime issues was constrained.

Trump made a great deal of the issue immigration and crime, focusing a lot on anecdote. Based on criminology research, the connection between immigration and crime certainly was overstated by the Trump campaign. That element of his campaign got a lot of attention.

**Marea Mannion:** I agree. Trump got so much coverage of everything he put out. He spoke many times of out-of-control crime rates, reaching record levels. The statistics say something else. The question is how much coverage was there of what actually was out there versus what he put out. What he was saying was contrary to the facts.

**James Alan Fox:** In term of guns, there was a lot of coverage of Trump's appearance before the National Rifle Association, playing up his commitment to the Second Amendment, and in the process the

coverage completely distorted the position of Hillary Clinton. I don't think the media covered the fact that what he was saying of Clinton's position was inaccurate – the idea that she would eliminate the Second Amendment.

**William Freivogel:** Not just in this campaign, but in general, the media do a poor job of explaining that the Second Amendment is not an absolute guarantee that you can have a gun at any place at any time. Clinton's position didn't mean she wanted to take people's guns away. We often forget that Obama and his administration took a position in favor of the Supreme Court's Heller decision recognizing an individual right to have a gun.

Beyond that, even though Trump didn't have on his website the kind of detail that Clinton did on criminal justice, he was able to get across the notion that he was pro-police, pro-gun, anti-crime, anti-what was going on in the Chicago streets.

I'm not sure what Clinton got across, despite all of the things on her website. You heard about her agreement with blacks about police shootings, but Trump's was a more powerful message.

**James Alan Fox:** The media spent far too much time on the "super-predator" term that Clinton used in the 1990s, painting her as someone who was behind that term, which I don't think she was. At the same time, the media failed to point out that Bob Dole used the same term when he was the Republican nominee in 1996. Politician after politician latched on to that term. Some media described it as a racist term, which it wasn't necessarily. It described crime rates about juveniles, white and black, that were rising at the time.

The media assisted in unfairly painting Clinton as a racist, as if she were the only person at the time using the term.

**Marea Mannion:** Are you talking mostly about the broadcast media?

**James Alan Fox:** Yes. The media also unfairly tied Clinton to mass incarceration. Her whole thing was "it takes a village," not "it takes a prison." Some media suggested that she was single-handedly behind a rise in mass incarceration, which was hardly the case. Back in the 1990s, she was strongly committed to crime prevention programs.

## TRUMP AND CRIME NUMBERS

**Ted Gest:** Back to Donald Trump, did he make major misstatements during the campaign about crime and justice, and did the media try to correct him?

**James Alan Fox:** Yes and yes. He continually was suggesting that there were record crime levels in the cities. Sure, there were some cities like Chicago where crime totals were rising, but crime had been decreasing so much-- homicides had declined 50 percent over two decades—the totals were getting so low that the only way they could move was upwards.

In some places, it could have been an aberration or a blip. Trump was called on that. The media did say that his focusing on that was inaccurate.

**William Freivogel:** I have a bit of a different point of view on this. There were some reputable criminologists, such as Richard Rosenfeld of the University of Missouri at St. Louis, who did a report on it for the Justice Department, who said that crime was going up in a number of cities.

Rosenfeld said that a so-called Ferguson effect may have been happening in some cities. So there was some truth to the data.

**James Alan Fox:** The numbers were accurate, but I'm talking about benchmarking. A one-year change or a two-year change is not a trend. Long-term, we're so much better off than we used to be. Even in Chicago, the numbers are much lower than they were two decades ago. We're not at record levels.

**Ted Gest:** To pick up on Bill Freivogel's point, what's wrong with the media reporting that crime numbers went up in a given year?

**James Alan Fox:** There's nothing wrong with it, as long as they do say when the totals are lower than they were in years past. They should give the long-term perspective.

**Ted Gest:** What if a police department gives only one year's data?

**James Alan Fox:** The media should ask, "What about five years ago? Ten years ago?" It's a longstanding practice to focus at the beginning of a year on a year-to-year change. That can be ambiguous. The last year could have been particularly bad, or particularly good.

If crime rates drop, the next year you've got to hold your breath, because next year they may be talking about an increase. We don't focus much on day-to-day changes in the stock market, and we shouldn't do that on crime, either.

In Boston, there was an increase in homicides reported for 2016, but it turns out that 2015 was one of the best recent years ever. And remember that when we're talking about violent crime generally, the biggest category is aggravated assaults, many of which don't involve injury. So when a violent crime rate is reported, the media should break that down into its component parts.

**William Freivogel:** I agree that reporters should be asking about the possible reasons for a change in the crime rate. For instance, a homicide increase could be a result of the "Ferguson effect" of police being less aggressive, or heroin problems, but it may be difficult to connect the possible explanations to a one-year change.

**James Alan Fox:** You should ask people beyond the police, including academics and community groups, because when crime goes down, the police typically take credit, but when crime goes up, they blame other sources. The police have a vested interest in interpreting crime changes.

**Marea Mannion:** Do the media also have a vested interest in covering crime, to earn revenue? Are they not reporting that crime is much lower than it used to be because of the pressure on them to draw

readership and viewership? I don't think many in the media, particularly cable TV, are providing enough context on crime.

**William Freivogel:** I don't see that changing much. Local TV news coverage gives a distorted picture when it comes to crime.

**Brandt Williams:** Context is so important in reporting crime figures. We need to include comparisons to previous years when reporting levels of reported violent crime. Homicides tend to lead newscasts, but from what I understand, are not necessarily the best measure of public safety. I know it's not always possible, but I think we better inform readers, viewers and listeners when we can also include where homicides *are* happening and what populations are most impacted by them. People tend to assault and kill the people closest to them and the people who look like them. I've instituted my own prohibition of the term 'black on black crime.'

**James Alan Fox:** Another thing local TV news does is treat victims like they are experts: they know everything, because they were a victim of crime. They were a victim once, and they now know what should be done about crime. But it's only one person's point of view.

## **POLICE SHOOTINGS**

**Ted Gest:** Let's move on to shootings of civilians by police officers. This was a big media topic starting with the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. That continued through 2015 and into last year. There were also killings of police by civilians. How are the media doing on this subject?

**James Alan Fox:** There is a tendency by the media to think in epidemic terms. The *Washington Post* says there were about 1,000 killings of civilians by police in each of the last two years, but we don't know how many there were in 2010 or 2005, for example. The reports make it sound like it's out of control.

As far as shootings of police are concerned, the FBI's count of felonious killings of officers is down. We have seen some heinous tragedies like the one in Dallas that received a tremendous amount of attention, but in terms of the risk now to police, it's no greater than it has been in the past, and in fact it may be lower.

The numbers go up and down, but the national total generally is in two digits each year, so the Dallas shootings might be 10 percent of the total. It's another case in which you have to look at long-term trends.

**William Freivogel:** The way in which the media cover shooting by police is entirely different from what it was three years ago. Social media now dominates the story that gets told. What is reported on social media, such as the original reports about the 2014 Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, has become the *unofficial* way in which protesters and other people in the street find out what is happening, rather than the traditional media.

And video becomes the story that is told nationally. When you compare this with the way stories were told five or 10 years ago, it's totally different.

**Ted Gest:** Even though we don't have comparative numbers from many years ago, is 1,000 killings of civilians by police around the U.S. a serious problem to which the media are paying sufficient attention?

**William Freivogel:** Both the *Washington Post* and *The Guardian* have done good reporting on this, and I think it is a serious problem that is getting the attention from both social and traditional media that it should get.

We must be careful about whether some of the video of an incident is accurate or not. For example, the "hands up, don't shoot" narrative of the Michael Brown incident was not borne out by the police investigation.

**James Alan Fox:** We also should keep in mind that even if a majority of the 1,000 people shot by police in a year are black males, there were also 7,000 or 8,000 black men shot by other black men. Police shootings are an important issue because the police have a significant amount of power, but the biggest risk for young black men in this country is from their peers.

### **BROADER POLICING ISSUES**

**Ted Gest:** Are the media doing a good job of following up on broader issues raised by police shootings, such as the need for better training of officers?

**Marea Mannion:** Perhaps in the major markets, but in smaller markets, there is reactive coverage of the incident itself, and that's about it. There could be more follow-up coverage of issues like police recruiting, which many agencies are having trouble with. There tends to be coverage only of the shooting incident, but little context or coverage after the fact.

There are many other issues that could be reported. However, local media with tight budgets and reduced staff don't always have the resources to stay on the topic even if they want to. They are often in the position of waiting for the next dramatic incident.

**William Freivogel:** There has been follow-up coverage in some places, such as in the St. Louis area by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and St. Louis Public Radio on issues including unconstitutional municipal court practices and police training. NPR has also covered several important topics related to court collection of fines in minor cases.

There is also the issue of police licensing. Some of the biggest states, like Massachusetts and California, do not have licensing of police officers. That's a topic that hasn't got a lot of attention.

**Brandt Williams:** Gender tends to be missing from coverage of police brutality or use of force stories. Unfortunately, the body of research isn't terribly broad, but it appears that women officers are much less likely than male officers to wind up sued in excessive force suits. Will increasing the amount of women on police forces also reduce excessive force lawsuit payouts and increase police/community relations?

## MASS SHOOTINGS AND TERRORISM

**Ted Gest:** How did the media do last year in covering mass shootings, whether the terrorist incident in the Orlando nightclub or other cases?

**James Alan Fox:** What I notice is the presumption in any mass shooting that it is terrorism. Media reports say “terrorism has not been ruled out.” The vast majority of mass shootings have nothing to do with terrorism. Many are prompted by personal issues, revenge, hate crimes, and slights. When reports say “terrorism has not been ruled out,” that is scaring the public.

There’s nothing wrong with saying, “We don’t know the motive.”

Also, the term “active shooter,” the new phrase for a bogeyman with a gun, gets far too much attention. For example, a UCLA faculty member was shot, and that was on CNN within minutes, but it turned out to be a teacher who was shot by a student, who then killed himself. It was a very local, small story that became a national story because the term “active shooter” was assigned to it. The nation is not at risk when one professor is killed by a student. The nation doesn’t need to know about every shooting that occurs in every jurisdiction.

In the UCLA case, nearby schools were locked down even though the shooter was dead. We see this time and time again – a hysterical response to a shooting –widespread panics and widespread lockdowns.

**Marea Mannion:** With incidents like these, some cable networks tend to do wall-to- wall coverage – it goes on and on and on. When it’s over, it just goes away.

**Ted Gest:** Anything to say about coverage of the Orlando nightclub shooting?

**James Alan Fox:** There was a lot of misinformation at the beginning. This may not have been true in the Orlando case, but initial reports of these incidents typically include speculation that there was more than one shooter. There often are more shooters suspected than there turn out to be involved.

There also is a tendency of media to focus on record-setting, saying for example that this is the largest shooting of all time. Does that imply that if there were fewer than 45 people killed, it is not important? Focusing on records also may challenge others to try setting a new record.

Finally, there are many erroneous reports that mass shootings are on the rise, which is not correct. It’s an unfortunate narrative that keeps being played out.

**William Freivogel:** Note that coverage of the Orlando shooting got 163 total minutes on the network nightly news programs, twice as much as any other crime story. (Number two was the shootings of the officers in Dallas.) The amount of coverage may have been justified.

**Ted Gest:** To touch on a few other topics very briefly, how was the coverage of marijuana legalization, including the big victory in California?

**James Alan Fox:** I thought it got good coverage, and both sides were represented.

**William Freivogel:** And the California marijuana vote was overwhelmed by the news coverage of the presidential election.

## THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC

**Ted Gest:** How about coverage of the opioid epidemic?

**Marea Mannion:** Here in Pennsylvania it has gotten lots of coverage on a regular basis in both the print and broadcast media. That includes things like the police and other first responders being trained in the use of Narcan. In some markets there has been almost daily coverage of something related to the epidemic and especially the miracle overdose cures when schools or first-responders administer Narcan. Some police agencies have sought out positive media reports on their departments and their Narcan training, by holding public ceremonies that award officers for saving lives with the Naloxone antidote.

Although these miracle overdose reversals could be increasing public awareness of the epidemic, it seems like there could be more context by reporting of the bigger opioid addiction problem. In some cases there is little or no local media follow-up which addresses the reality of this addiction. Some uninformed readers or viewers are probably not aware that this same person just given the miracle reversal drug may run out that same day and buy more heroin.

**James Alan Fox:** Some media have published maps showing the differing rates of deaths in different places, but that can be misleading because the numbers in jurisdictions can be so small.

**Marea Mannion:** It may be a big shock to some citizens when there is an opioid-related death in a rural area. One death in these smaller, low crime communities has been getting a lot of local media coverage. Reports could be misleading or could magnify or exaggerate the hysteria if the problem is not reported with accurate numbers and in proper context.

**Ted Gest:** Anything to say about media coverage of incarceration?

**James Alan Fox:** I am impressed by the amount of coverage on solitary confinement.

**Brandt Williams:** I'd like to see more coverage of why, in a 30-year period of declining violent crime, incarcerations are increasing in many states.

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