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Media Bias Toward the Colorado Springs Police Department: An Analysis of the Existence of  
Bias Through Three Eras of Police Chiefs

By  
Jennifer Walden

A Research Proposal Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Criminology

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February 2012

Media Bias Toward the Colorado Springs Police Department: An Analysis of the Existence of  
Bias Through Three Eras of Police Chiefs


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### **Abstract**

Research has been conducted for decades examining bias in the media, specifically toward targeted groups and organizations such as politicians and public agencies. The intention of this study is to examine written media news stories surrounding the time period of three local police chiefs from 2001 through 2011 to determine the existence of bias toward the Colorado Springs Police Department. The research conducted during this study adds to existing research and literature which assesses the unpredictable relationship between the police department and the media. It expands on the need for a police department to utilize its public information officer and public relations team to effectively communicate with the media while understanding that perception of bias could be occurring through what is known as the hostile media effect. Employing content analysis of words and context within a given article, little evidence of bias exists. While bias-indicating words appear most frequently in articles alluding to internal matters within the police department, which often involve investigations into one of their own, there is not enough conclusive evidence to show that prevalence of a biased word indicates slant toward the department. Therefore, the study expands on alternative methods for research and considerations as to why bias is perceived.

*Keywords:* Bias, Colorado Springs Police Department (CSPD), Criminology, Hostile Media Effect.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Section

|    |  |    |
|----|--|----|
| 1. | Introduction.....  | 1  |
|    | Purpose .....  | 2  |
|    | Rationale.....   | 5  |
|    | Research Questions/Hypothesis.....                       | 10 |
|    | Limitations/Delimitations.....                           | 13 |
|    | Definition of Terms.....                                 | 14 |
| 2. | Review of Literature.....                                | 16 |
|    | Newsworthiness in America.....                           | 17 |
|    | Media Influence on Bias.....                             | 25 |
|    | How Police View the Media.....                           | 35 |
| 3. | Methods.....   | 42 |
|    | Content Analysis.....                                    | 42 |
|    | Research Design.....                                     | 43 |
|    | Procedure.....   | 45 |
| 4. | Results.....   | 50 |
| 5. | Discussion.....  | 57 |
|    | Research Questions and Hypothesis.....                   | 58 |
|    | Previous Findings and Explanation of Perceived Bias..... | 62 |
|    | Limitations.....   | 65 |
|    | Conclusion.....  | 65 |
| 6. | References.....  | 67 |

## INTRODUCTION

On Friday, September 23 at 7:00pm the Colorado Springs Police Department (CSPD) sends out a media advisory explaining that a joint administrative investigation will be launched to review concerns “stemming from a liquor code investigation at a local Hooters restaurant” (Noblitt, 2011, para. 1). At 7:10pm a local television station reports the story. The words used are verbatim to the press release providing a number of the same quotes used by leaders on the CSPD. Both the press release and local television station are quick to mention Chief Rick Myers’ support for the decision:

We believe our officers followed existing policies and procedures regarding this investigation. We have also listened to the voices of our community and want to make sure that our policies and procedures are in alignment with the highest level of the police profession. (Bennett, 2011, para. 3).

What, if anything, can be concluded from this television report? It may be that this particular television station has a good relationship with the CSPD. It may be that the station is adhering to a strict code of ethics in which they are compelled to report just the facts. It may simply be that there is no bias to the story. The events surrounding this press release, knowing it would be going out to the public, would put any organization on alert. As undercover officers, they are expected to blend into whatever environment they are in so as not to raise suspicion. Unfortunately, the event mentioned above occurred in a Hooters restaurant where the officers were supposedly drinking alcohol. Just mentioning the name ‘Hooters’ brings a number of stereotypes to mind. It would not be unexpected for the public to raise concern as to why there would be undercover officers in this type of establishment attempting to blend in. What is not understood, however it was reported by the news, is that there was a specific purpose for these officers to be in this location. Those facts are usually ignored. What people hear and see is that police officers were drinking at Hooters; end of

story. The question in their mind arises as to how a police department can rationalize such an activity?

In light of all the potential scandal surrounding this one event, the station did report just the facts. This is not as easy as it seems especially when there is perceived bias from one group against another regardless of whether it exists. For the purposes of this study, the groups that are being examined are the Colorado Springs media, and the CSPD. While not a direct participant for this research analysis, supposed bias will usually impact the public in some form. Thus, they will be mentioned throughout the study as having an impact on perception of bias. In addition, politicians may be additional participants as they place themselves in the midst of the story if they recognize a threat. People are highly dependent on the media for their news. During large-scale events such as September 11, individuals strive for information and sense-making. The media systems dependency theory states that the media can best satisfy the needs mentioned as they are able to provide the information quickly through what is perceived as “expert” sources (Lowrey, 2004). While the Hooters incident is by no means a large-scale event in comparison to September 11, it still leaves the public, media, and law enforcement agency searching for answers and explanation.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine if media bias toward the CSPD exists. Knowing that most people will receive their news from the television (TV) or newspaper at face-value without doing any additional research, the general opinion is that the media must slant stories to cater to these types of viewers. However, that would be taking a very ignorant approach to the notion of bias. When someone makes the claim that everything the media says is biased, the best response is to ask why that is their perception and what

evidence exists to substantiate such a claim. Thus, it is important to understand bias, real or not, as it undermines the credibility of an organization such as the CSPD.

It is nearly impossible to escape the media in the U.S. Even if one does not own a TV or receive the newspaper, news will still infiltrate through coworkers, friends, family, the TV at the local bar, or walking down the street listening to other people's conversations. For some, the political context with which it is presented can be more important than simply digesting the news. For example, MSNBC is viewed as a liberal network whereas Fox is considered to be conservative. Without the networks actually making the claim that they lean one way or the other, they seem to do a decent job at portraying their political views whether intentional or not. For example, Chris Matthews, the host of MSNBC's *Hardball*, stated recently "the Republican Party as an organization wants to cause 'cruel pain on people' and intends to 'get rid' of cops and firefighters" (Whitlock, 2011, para. 1). The unintended consequences of this type of reporting is that people who may not know much about the context within which Matthews is speaking are likely to be frustrated with the Republican Party and their ideas of making cuts to the number of police and firefighters, regardless of any truth to the statement. Thus, media watchdogs, such as the Media Research Center are formed to help educate the public as well as the media about bias that may be occurring (Media Research Center website, 2011). A simple Google search for 'media watchdog' will bring up a number of websites that monitor both print and visual stories in which one of their main purposes of existence is to verify that bias in the media does indeed occur. For example, Media Matters for America is a national non-profit information and research center dedicated to monitoring and correcting conservative misinformation in the media (Media Matters for America website, 2011). Additionally, Rocky Mountain Media



Watch works to expose bias in the media and help people understand what constitutes better journalism (Rocky Mountain Media Watch, 2011).

Information about these types of organizations is presented to substantiate the need for organizations, such as the CSPD, to ask if there is bias against their agency. As long as there are organizations that feel the need to check up on the media to make sure what is being reported is unbiased and ethical, it is only natural to assume that bias does exist. Therefore, how will agencies, organizations and the public know that a story is being presented without bias? One way to help answer this question would be for the story to not be reported at all until the entire investigation has been completed. For example, a TV station in Denver chose not to report on a supposed prostitution scandal involving the incoming mayor until all facts were present and investigations complete even when other stations were already reporting the allegations. The news director stated:

I said from the very beginning that this is a story we are going to pursue aggressively behind the scenes and conservatively on air. The bar for reporting for this story is evidence. What I didn't want to do was report on the process of our investigating. Once we had something concrete to report, some evidence to report, that we would do so. Because of the nature of the claim, and how sensational it is, the bar should be high. (Salzman, 2011, para. 2)

While it would be nice to know that everyone exemplified this kind of integrity and moral standard, there is far too much evidence to the contrary. Add in the fact that the economy is causing challenges for many U.S. citizens, journalists themselves are claiming the need for meeting the bottom line is superseding ethical standards. Because the media is privatized, their need for profit is just as substantial as any other company that is trimming costs wherever possible. Reporters claim that they are now required to do two or three stories a day as opposed to one that has been extensively researched. They now see the news filled

with easy-to-report crime stories causing some veteran journalists to rethink their career decisions (Stoll & McManus, 2005).

Those readily reported crime stories force the police department even further into the spotlight. If TV stations and newspaper agencies are seeking out crime stories because they know that the public is always ready and willing to hear about these events, that is precisely what they will do. Deviance has always been important to the media. It has been proven that deviance incorporates a number of other values that the news often reports such as novelty, conflict and controversy (Lee, 2008) making law enforcement agencies a prime target for coverage. This is especially true if the public perceives misconduct within the agency. “The future sees law enforcement becoming more and more transparent” (Lovell, 2003, p. 157). It is becoming more difficult for the police to escape the constant watch and scrutiny of the media and the public. Inevitably, agencies will be forced to look at potential bias toward their operations and must decide when to fight and when to concede knowing this may ultimately be part of the job.

#### Rationale

There may be complicated reasoning behind the study based on a number of factors. In the most basic sense, the relationship between the police department and the media has profound effect on both sides as well as the public it serves. Understanding what may have occurred over the last ten years to create such a perception of bias will help to determine what steps should be taken moving into the future. The media is not going away, nor is the police department. A review of the last ten years and its three police chiefs will be further explained below. To protect the integrity of the police chiefs mentioned in this study, the police chief during the 2001-2002 time frame will be referenced as chief 1. The police chief

during the 2003-2006 time frame will be referenced as chief 2. The police chief during the final era of 2007-2011 will be referenced as chief 3.

In 2001, chief 1 was the head of the CSPD. He entered the agency in 1990 as a 29-year veteran of the Los Angeles Police Department. His vision for the CSPD was to have them work more closely with the community. He also wanted to empower the officers to problem solve and make decisions (Sheingold, 1999). He spent a great amount of time establishing trust with both the officers and the community. He stated, "I constantly reminded the staff that you can never forget what it's like to be a cop. You can never forget what it's like to be working in a radio car and responding to the complex kinds of calls and situations that officers get sent to" (Sheingold, 1999, para. 69). In 2002, he accepted the position of City Manager. According to an article published in the *Gazette* (2002), 11 years into his tenure he was still revered as the guy who was approachable, forgiving, and willing to listen to other people's suggestions. Additionally, the NAACP president at the time held this police chief in high regards by explaining that the way police treat minorities is not perfect, but he listened like no one had ever listened in the past. It was believed that his greatest accomplishments came in the way he dealt with people, both in and outside of his organization. It was no surprise that he would be missed when his role transitioned from police chief, but as the city manager he would at least have authority to pick his incoming replacement.

Succeeding chief 1, chief 2 became the city's first Hispanic chief. He was sworn in mid-2002 and served as the police chief of the CSPD until mid-2006 when a possible vote of no-confidence forced him to resign his position. Even though the department was feeling some of the pressures of financial stress and budget cutbacks, this chief's time in office will

forever be clouded by the improper disposal of evidence that took place between 2005 and 2006. The goal had been to eliminate fifty percent of the evidence on-site in 2005 to make room for new evidence. According to a report released by the police department in 2006, thousands of pieces of evidence were disposed of, including evidence for 67 cases that were not authorized. The head of the evidence section took a majority of the blame. Chief 1, then city manager, explained “this was a failure of leadership, training, discipline and trust” (Huspeni, 2006, para. 2). The same article captured chief 2 explaining that “we accept accountability for our actions, and we will strive to regain our credibility” (para. 33). Chief 2 also pointed out that the evidence technicians did not follow proper procedure as they were never properly trained. Unfortunately, as the Chief of Police, everything eventually comes back to you regardless of whose fault it may or may not have been. Even though he committed he would not step down, in July 2006 he announced his decision to do so after a looming vote of no-confidence and this particular scandal hanging over the department. In his public address to the community he made sure to state that the decision was one he made in an effort to help the organization rebuild with new leadership (Willett & Huspeni, 2006).

Even though the city’s beloved prior chief Kramer was still active in the community through his role as the City Manager, the reputation he had built for the CSPD took an unfortunate slip because of what was ultimately considered a lack of leadership. In only four years, less than half the time chief 1 was at the helm, his appointed chief was now out and damage control was being actively utilized to help the city regain its confidence in the police force. After reviewing four dozen applicants for the police department’s top role, community leaders brought their finalists to the City Manager who was to make the official appointment yet again. On December 1, 2006, chief 3, a transplant to Colorado from

Appleton, Wisconsin, was sworn in as chief. This chief entered the department at a particularly difficult time as problems had been mounting over the last few years leading up to the evidence scandal that forced his predecessor from his post. In addition, the country was headed into financial crisis that would put the department in a tough financial predicament. To further substantiate the challenging situation he was in less than a year after his hiring, the *Colorado Springs Independent* published an article in which it described how five years of animosity between the department and its citizens put them in their current predicament. Chief 3 was in an uphill battle.

2007 was a challenging year for the new chief from small-town America. In March, he was questioned for how the department handled a clash with war protestors at a St. Patrick's Day parade. In April, he launched the Community Impact Team (COMMIT) to help crack down on crimes related to guns, drugs and gangs after a number of violent crimes impacted the city in 2006. Even though the unit helped to reduce violent crime in the city, 28 homicides in 2007 tied the record for the most number of deaths in one year. Additionally, October brought about severe budget cuts in which he was forced to ground the helicopter unit and made plans to close a number of substations at night throughout the city. He then changed the plan to close the substations at night after a shooting in November. The reversal was made because a group of teens tried to get help at one of the stations and would not have been able to do so had they been closed. Unfortunately, the chief's first year ended with the killing of two sisters and suicide of the gunman in the New Life Church parking lot. 2008 and 2009 saw major budget cuts for the department. He was forced to reduce his COMMIT team from 32 to 13 officers, cut both the juvenile offender and air support units, and reassign investigators to work major violent crimes only.

2011 brought further strain to the department. In May, a CSPD officer was arrested on charges of sexual assault on a child from someone in a position of trust. In June, another officer was arrested for filing false accusations against an ex-boyfriend. That same month, two undercover officers at a Hooters restaurant charged the waitress with serving a visibly intoxicated person. By September, the case had been dismissed but an internal investigation was ordered to look into the incident due to the backlash in the community from having undercover officers consuming alcohol while on duty even though it was within departmental regulations. Multiple shootings and homicides overwhelmed the department along with lack of city funds and resources. On October 3, 2011, chief 3 announced his retirement from the department.

Serving one year longer than his predecessor, chief 3 struggled with the thought that he had come to a city to help oversee the downsizing of the police department after being forced to cut nearly five million dollars (Romero, 2011). With a new mayor, and boss, he explained to the media “he informed me he is ready to make a change in direction, and he is continuing to methodically create his own management team. Consequently, I have agreed to make room for this to happen by retiring from the CSPD” (Romero, 2011, para. 6). The future of the department is unclear, but what can be concluded is that “if you think the Colorado Springs police have been in the news a lot this year for the wrong reasons, you’re right” (Noreen, 2011, para. 1).

It is important to understand the progression of police chiefs over the last ten years to see how media and citizen perceptions may have shifted from the days of chief 1 through chief 3. A bias that may not have existed ten years ago may very well exist now. It could also be that with increasing population and subsequent budget cuts, crime has become more

prevalent, the ability to enforce more challenging, and the media's ability to capture it more sophisticated. Having presented the problem by explaining how the department has gotten to where it is today, the following section will further explore the purpose of and need for the project by explaining the questions that hope to be answered.

### Research Questions

Ask the average citizen if they feel the media is biased and they will say yes. Ask them why they think so and they will likely have a difficult time explaining. This is because bias is essentially subjective, meaning that it is more often determined on a case-by-case or individual basis. Just because one person views something as biased does not mean another person hearing the exact same story will also view it to be slanted in a similar way. A project that attempts to measure the amount of bias in the media towards a particular group is difficult because of the various forms in which bias can be presented. Bias can appear not only in what is said, but how it is said. This is especially true when examining visual media. Context is another determining factor. What is going on at the time the story is printed or presented can have a lot to do with whether or not it is considered to be biased. Who presents the story, meaning what type of media outlet, is an additional variable. For example, with the retirement announcement of chief 3, one of the local newspapers presented a story which explained all the challenges he has had to endure during his time with the force highlighting almost none of his accomplishments. Alternatively, the Colorado Springs City website described how he was able to achieve a number of initiatives in the midst of an ever-declining budget (Aubrey, 2011). This example, however, is not presented with the intent to prove that the newspaper must therefore be biased and the website not. The idea of bias is far more complex than what an article did or did not print.

This will be an exploratory, mixed methods study utilizing second source data to look at media bias towards the CSPD. Babbie (2010) explains this is a valid method of looking at the question of bias as the researcher is hoping to familiarize themselves with a topic that while not new, has not been studied in relation to the CSPD. This study will be conducted under the guidance of three specific exploratory research questions (RQs). The first question (RQ1) asks how bias is determined. Once a method of determining bias is established, the second research question (RQ2) of whether there is bias toward the CSPD can be answered. A final intent of this study (RQ3) is to determine if the bias is coming from one, all or no specific media outlets. In order to be able to answer these questions as precisely as possible, this project will be conducted through the use of content analysis. Content analysis utilizes words and text to scientifically code data (Babbie, 2010). While coding can be conducted on any type of writing or occurrence of recorded communication, this project will focus solely on written communication from both newspapers and television stations. As stated earlier, the way in which something is said or the nonverbal language associated with the story can potentially indicate bias. However, this can also mean that a researcher's own biased opinions of how something was presented could get mixed with the results. Therefore, this study will use frequency of words within a given article to prove or disprove the notion of bias toward the CSPD.

The underlying cause of bias is often difficult to determine as there are a number of outside factors that can be involved. While there may be no one right or wrong way of conducting such an analysis, it is most important to present the data in such a way that helps eliminate personal researcher bias toward one group or another as well as the actual content being analyzed. To help take the researcher out of the study, it is useful to not only utilize



the aforementioned scientific methods of coding but to also focus specifically on the relationship occurring between the media and the police department. The most useful theory in explaining interaction between the police and its media onlookers is the Social Exchange Theory. While its roots are traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, it is still very useful today thanks to those largely responsible for its identification in today's society: George Homans, John Thibaut, Harold Kelley, and Peter Blau (Emerson, 1976). According to Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005), the premise behind the theory is that there are a number of interactions which spawn obligations. The transactions are interdependent, like it would be between the media and the police, and have the ability to produce high-quality relationships, which may only occur under certain circumstances (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This theory is used to help convey the need for relational interaction between a group of people who are very much in the public eye and those who are most directly responsible for placing them there.

Fortunately, most police departments, including the CSPD, have public information officers (PIO) who help with providing the media material for their story selections. The role of a PIO "allows an agency to centralize its message and to have someone who can focus fully on providing information to the public and media" (Friend & Martinez, 2010, p. 1). As an example, the police can choose not to release a crime report and thus not have it included in the news. Unfortunately, a passer-by may have seen or recorded the whole event, and can pressure the media to air the story. This then forces the police department to provide some detail to help accommodate the needs of the reporter so the department is not ridiculed for omitting information.

Knowing there are many factors to consider in determining bias and the potential for eliminating it from occurring, this project hopes to present the results in such a way that benefit not only the CSPD but other agencies that might be looking to understand, based strictly on content analysis, if bias does exist. This is only one approach of many that can be used to look at the idea of bias and the impact it may have on a police department. Once the results are discussed, suggestions for further research will be provided for those looking to take the study in other directions.

#### Limitations/Delimitations

The first limitation is sample size. Accessibility to articles from all seven media outlets is going to vary based on what archived information is readily available to the public. The newspapers will have a majority of their archives dating back ten years online whereas the TV stations will prove to be a different challenge with their online archives dating back only a few years. A second limitation of the study is the unfortunate inevitability that some researcher bias may be difficult to avoid. While the study will be conducted as objectively as possible, the background data gathered from the succession of the three police chiefs is already a challenge as there is a perception of how the media has reacted and changed over the last ten years. The final limitation is time constraint. Gathering enough meaningful data from ten years and seven different media outlets can and will take time. However, time is not infinite knowing the CSPD would like the study to be presented in the near future. Therefore, the research will need to be done efficiently to pull the most amount of data possible keeping in mind the time needed to analyze and interpret the findings.

A delimitation to this study is the population it is researching. The CSPD and the media outlets in Colorado Springs, Colorado are the only subjects of this study. It would be very

difficult to take the findings of this study and generalize them to another police department and its relationship with the media. What will be useful for other departments looking to do a similar study is for them to follow a comparable procedure given the methods utilized to see how the media in their area may or may not be reporting in a biased manner against that department. This study will serve as a starting point for additional studies but will not be able to generalize to multiple departments across the U.S.

### Definition of Terms

#### Media

Media is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a medium of cultivation, conveyance, or expression” (Merriam-Webster website, 2011, para. 1). Additionally, mass media can be further defined as organizations which use technological channels to distribute messages that attract and condition audiences with repeated exposure of messages that will help them to increase their own understanding of the world in which they live (Potter, 2011). For the purposes of this study, this definition will be used to describe printed television and newspaper articles and how they may cultivate, convey, or express bias, which is defined below. Most people live in a place in which it is difficult to escape any type of media influence whether printed in a newspaper, listened to on television, or read while surfing the web. Furthermore, many audiences believe that they should and do have control over their media experience. Therefore, disappointment and frustration can occur if they perceive they have been given anything less than what is expected (Reich, 2009). The media, television station or newspaper, is well aware of this sentiment and does its best to cater to the needs of their audience. Ultimately, the media must be the carriers through which mass communication messages are transmitted and received by their audience (Vivian, 2009). Therefore the audience relies on the media to give

them what they want in much of the same way the media relies on its audience to tell them what they want.

## Bias

Bias is a challenging word to define as those defining it may inflict their own biases into the definition itself. However, a specific definition must be applied for the purpose of this study. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, bias is defined as “an inclination of temperament or outlook; a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment” (Merriam-Webster website, 2011, para. 6). Ordinary citizens are quick to claim bias in what they read and see, yet a clear definition is difficult to ascertain (Entman, 2007). Entman (2007) also argues that bias can take on three over-arching meanings. The first is distortion bias in which the news may distort reality. The second is content bias that favors one side rather than giving equal treatment to both sides in a given conflict. The third is decision-making bias which accounts for the idea that the motivation of journalists creates biased content within the news stories. While the other two meanings can be significant in whether bias in a news story is perceived, this study will focus most directly on content bias as it examines the actual content within the story to make a determination of bias.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review provides insight into three major topics related to the perception of bias in the media towards police departments and subsequently, how it is defined. The first section will analyze media in American society. Understanding how the media typically covers stories of criminal activity can be examined through the ideas of newsworthiness, the role of the police department's public information officer (PIO) and the relationships that exist between the police and the media. Social Exchange Theory fits into well this equation because of its two-sided, mutually reliant and rewarding nature which involves exchanges amongst two parties (Emerson, 1976). Deviance, especially as it relates to criminal activity, is almost always a useful predictor of what will be covered by the media (Lee, 2008). Knowing that crime is a hot topic for the media when it determines what is newsworthy, the best tool a police force can utilize is their public relations department, specifically the PIO who will help to establish a sound relationship with the media in an effort to curb many of the potential negative effects a story can have on the general public (Dennis, 2001).

The next section will focus on how media can influence bias; specifically biased perceptions of citizens toward law enforcement. Media has one of the most powerful social influences over people living in the world today. Therefore, it is subject to strong licensing laws and regulations over its content (Flew, 2000). The review will analyze the effect media can have on sensitivity to bias as well as the role a citizen plays in filtering the information given to them. The population is no longer similar in its views on the society in which they live and has not been for quite some time. Instead, people will react very differently to the same messages (Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). An understanding of how each side can help create or

prevent bias is needed to help substantiate the argument that bias toward a police department, specifically the CSPD, can exist.

The final section will look more specifically at how law enforcement views the media. This section is guided by the relationship between the police and the media. The review will work from the idea that there are three primary patterns which exist because of this relationship in existence between the media and law enforcement. These patterns are closing ranks, watchdogs, and conciliations (Simmons, 1999). In addition, the hostile media effect is examined to provide insight into why bias may be perceived by law enforcement even if no analytical evidence exists. “The process by which some news consumers rate ostensibly neutral stories biased against their point-of-view and/or in favor of someone else’s point of view has been termed the hostile media effect” (Arpan & Raney, 2003, p. 266). In understanding how law enforcement views the media, social exchange theory is yet again needed to explain the certain rules, guidelines and negotiations of exchange. If one group supplies something beneficial, the receiving party should respond kindly (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Yet, it is often the case that parties will perceive the other as being hostile and may refuse to compromise regardless of the benefit that could be attained.

#### Newsworthiness in America

People have been and will always be fascinated by things that others do wrong. The television news, newspapers, Internet and prime time dramas are full of stories about deviance in U.S. society. If the news spent the first 15 minutes of their newscast discussing positive events like the latest philanthropic effort to rebuild a struggling part of the city, viewership would be likely to eventually go down. The public has become so accustomed to being given bad news first, and if there is time or it is intriguing enough, will be given good news second. Knowing

media's influential stance, if given time and resources to do so, it would seem that the media might be able to shift people's obsession with the bad and replace it with the good. For many, what is presented to them from whatever media outlet they chose to consume is the only news they ever receive. If they were given good news stories first, their perception of the world or even the city in which they live might slowly begin to shift. Yet the world, and more importantly media, does not work that way. People seek out information on what is going wrong in their environments because they feel threatened. The more informed they feel, the more secure they feel (Lee, 2008). Media, on the other hand, is part of the private sector and is in the business of making money. Like every other industry in the U.S. they too have had to cut back on budgets and resources. Crime stories are easy to report. Interviewing now essentially consists of finding the first live body that can be found and putting their testimony in the news. Even though this does not serve the public well, they rarely are aware this is what is happening (Stoll & McManus, 2005).

Knowing that crime sells, it is essential to first understand what makes a story newsworthy in the eyes of both the media and the public. Newsworthiness is determined at many different levels within a media organization. Stories chosen are not only competing for space, but also for headline potential, relationship between the journalist and the head of that section, outside cultural events, and sources of the news. Essentially, journalism is an activity without specific scientific methodology making it difficult to give specific conditions around what story is chosen to be presented (De Semir, 1996). Even though there are a number of factors in considering newsworthiness, crime will likely always have headline potential and be timely in what is happening in the cultural and social contexts surrounding an event. Research consistently shows that crime is one of the most frequently reported topics, attracts and maintains

viewership, and is relatively uncomplicated so that it can be shortened or lengthened to fill needed space (Chermak & Chapman, 2007). Sadly, a reporter trying to get a story into print or on television that consists of information regarding a medical breakthrough in cancer research will assuredly have to go through more lines of approval than the reporter sent out to cover the latest high-speed car chase. Specialist reporters in areas of medical research, for example, have to navigate around the types of stories their company typically covers, the biases of the editors or chiefs, and how much experience their fellow co-workers perceive them to have (De Semir, 1996). For the crime reporter, those boundaries do not exist. Not only is crime almost always considered newsworthy, it is central to entertainment in U.S. society (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006).

With it being as easy as it is to get a story about crime into the media, it would be difficult to argue that the media is not the central factor in how people view and filter criminological ideas (Dowler et al., 2006). Dowler & Muzzatti (2006) explain that the news also selects specific crime stories which are more violent and sensational because it helps to raise the fears of both viewers and readers. In this case, both sides are getting benefit from the interaction. The media gets the viewership and the public gets the rewarding stimulation. It is almost a quid pro quo in which there is a reciprocity where positive treatment is returned for positive treatment; or another building block of social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The more bizarre or violent the story, the more people will consume it. They contend this could also be why true-crime novels have risen in such popularity in the last few years. Essentially, to make the news at a national level, the story has to be extreme enough to get response from all types of viewers. Take, for example, terrorism. In a study conducted in 2008 examining media coverage of terrorism, it was found the type of terrorist group determined whether and to what



extent the incident was reported. For example, eco-terrorism, also considered special interest terrorism and the most common type of terrorism in the U.S., was least likely to be reported. Because these types of terrorists have tactics that do not kill people and spread fear amongst the general public, they are considered more of a nuisance than a terrorist group (Kovacic, 2008). A reporter hoping to cover eco-terrorism would have to work harder to get the story to air because it does not illicit as much of a reaction of fear from the public consumer.

Newsworthiness, and its relationship with deviance, is well understood and studied by the media. As stated earlier, media is in business for profit and knows that this will provide for their bottom line. Lee (2008) explains media's decision to report stories of crime in terms of the limited capacity model of mediated message processing. This model explains that messages are processed in three steps: encoding, storage and retrieval. During encoding, only certain pieces of the entire message are either controlled or automatically selected and stored in short-term memory. If controlled, the recipient initiates the type of response they feel whereas automatic selection means that the sheer nature of the message elicits response. Anything that produces a thought of change or unexpected occurrence in the environment is automatically selected. Deviant behaviors are seen as a threat or risk to the recipient and are therefore chosen by the media to be newsworthy as they do not have to work hard to get the audience to consume the information. Crime is, therefore, easy to report and easy to consume.

Having established that crime fits the definition of newsworthiness, one final factor that must be further considered is the type of crime that is reported. The idea of sensational and violent crime was described above as being an important predicator of what will make the final cut. Luckily, those types of crimes do not occur every day. Therefore, there are aspects of crime reporting that must be additionally explored. The first is that media cannot report on every

single crime that occurs and must choose which incident will make the news. According to Chermak & Chapman (2007) this is neither random nor an accurate exemplification of crime in America. If the public were to take the stories seen in the media as an accurate representation of reality, they would be severely misled as the unusual being epitomized with the routine forgotten.

In Chermak & Chapman (2007) research, they found certain key factors which influence how crime is presented in the news. First is the seriousness of the offense. Research has found that there is virtually no relationship between crime presented in the media and how frequently it occurs in society. Violent crime is overrepresented with property crime underrepresented. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, there were almost sixteen million victims of property crime and less than 2 million victims of serious violent crime in 2009 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Therefore, what is reported in the news does not give the public a truthful view of crimes occurring in their environment. Chermak & Chapman (2007) found the second key factor to be characteristics of victims and offenders in the news. These characteristics included age, gender, occupation, and number of victims and offenders. Cases with young offenders and/or victims were more likely to be covered. Males were overrepresented as the offender and females as the victim. Occupation is generally left out of the report, but the higher the status of the victim or offender, the more likely it is to be covered. Finally, as the number of victims or offenders increased, so did the likelihood of the story being covered. The third key factor found in the study was that salience varies by location. There was little relationship found in the amount of crime news reported when comparing various sized cities and their levels of crime. In fact, some evidence pointed to a larger amount of crime reports coming from lower crime rate cities.

This study was important in that it recognized how much the media focuses on the individual, victim or offender, as opposed to a social or structural problem in American Society. Focusing on the victim and offender also increases the fear of victimization in the general public. As referenced in the Chermak & Chapman (2007) study, what is portrayed in the news is that “media criminals have become more animalistic, irrational and predatory...and their crimes more violent, senseless, and sensational, and while their victims have become more random, helpless, and innocent” (p. 354).

The second aspect of crime reporting that must be examined is that media has the ability to reuse stories as needed to help garner reaction from the public and keep them an engaged patron of that specific news source. According to Dowler, et al. (2006) news on crime tends to be highly repetitive. Reporters have the ability to revive recognized stories in hopes of using them to contextualize related stories or provide updates to the original story. There will always be stories about crime, especially those that have gone unsolved or were especially violent. These stories will bring out an emotional response from the public no matter how many times they have heard it or how many years it has been since the original crime occurred. For instance, the name JonBenet Ramsey still evokes response fifteen years later because of the nature of the crime and the fact that it is still unsolved. The stories surrounding Natalee Holloway, Chandra Levy, Laci Peterson and Andrea Yates are also emotionally charged. Any time a story is compared to one of theirs or new evidence is brought forward in any of their cases, the story qualifies for newsworthiness.

Even though the media will make the determination on which stories are eventually the most newsworthy to be aired or printed, the law enforcement agency is actually part of the first line of defense in determining which crimes will become news. Law enforcement has the ability

to negotiate the rules which is an important part of social exchange. These negotiated exchanges tend to be more explicit and the duties and obligations more clearly understood (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). It is important for law enforcement to use this to their advantage and is often done by means of the public information officer (PIO). Crime reporters will initially contact the PIO for information about crimes. The PIO has an important responsibility as the gatekeeper who regulates the flow of information about crime to the media while also hoping to promote a positive view of their organization (Chermak & Chapman, 2007). Essentially, the PIO determines what is newsworthy from the police department's view long before the media makes the final decision of what to present. The PIO and their public relations department are a crucial part of law enforcement agencies (Staszak, 2001) because of the media's need to reach out to them first as an inexpensive method of gathering stories (Chermak & Chapman, 2007).

This is a much-needed opportunity for the reporter, representing the news agency, and the PIO, representing the police department, to establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Starting more than a decade ago and continuing today, media outlets, as profit-driven companies, have needed to keep an eye on ratings and subscriptions. This is especially important in a time of economic downturn where print media is continuing to make its way toward extinction (Stoll & McManus, 2005). Thus, there are fewer reporters. Those few reporters will be charged with covering a much larger array of stories across multiple industries of which they may have little in-depth knowledge about. Given the time and ability, the PIO can help the reporter understand the law enforcement profession so that what they report is as accurate as possible. The PIO should then use this opportunity to establish a rapport with the reporter to learn the challenges they face, especially when trying to reduce twenty pages of notes into a twenty line article (Staszak, 2001). Staszak (2001) explains that "a progressive police department will make sure

that good stories reach the media” (p.12). Staszak (2001) also confirms that even if serious crime has and does continue to decrease in the U.S., the media will still carry on covering the incidents, often at an increased rate. This is because it has always been a priority to the media, people expect it to be covered and are interested, and it is easy to report. Therefore, the police department must continue providing details of crime while, at the same time, proactively providing information around nontraditional news like community outreach programs.

The public affairs department within a law enforcement agency has the ability to influence the media before the media has the opportunity to influence the public. Therefore, the PIO should use their role to establish themselves as a liaison who will ensure accurate reporting. The relationship that exists between the police and the media is important to understand. When someone from a law enforcement agency speaks to the media, they are actually speaking to the public at large (Friend & Martinez, 2010). This is why it is essential to have a spokesperson who comprehends the role of the media and has a good connection with them. This relationship can best be described through the use of the social exchange theory. Simmons (1999) explained that collaboration between a reporter and their source, or the law enforcement agency, often decreases during conflict. The best way to resurrect or keep the cooperation should be through the PIO. Using the social exchange model, more cooperation will be observed between the two sides when they see there must be a benefit to them staying in partnership with one another (Simmons, 1999).

The benefit for the PIO is that they will be able to enhance the department’s public image through what is reported to the community through the media. Additionally, the police may, at times, use the media to help solve crimes. For example, during the 2002 sniper killings in the Washington, D.C. area, the police used news media to talk to the unknown sniper at the

time. The technique had been successfully used in the past during a 2000 bank robbery in Seattle where a police officer was wounded in a shootout and, more famously, with David Berkowitz, or Son of Sam (Butterfield & Flynn, 2002). The benefit for the reporter is that they will get the information needed for their stories so their company will keep subscriptions, increase ratings and maintain the bottom line. While a reporter can listen to the police wire and arrive on the scene of a crime, it is still very beneficial for them to have a link to the PIO as police work is known to be secretive in nature and the media ultimately depends on them for their information (Simmons, 1999).

Having a better understanding of newsworthiness in the eyes of the media does not necessarily substantiate bias must exist. While there are factors that point to the media choosing stories which will be popular with the public while leaving out pieces of information that may not be interesting to their audience, along with asking their reporters to increase the bottom line by cranking out stories, additional examination needs to be conducted to prove the media biased.

#### Media Influence on Bias

The media has the power to shape public perception like no other organization, or arguably person, in the world today. As referred to by Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005) when discussing social exchange theory, the public finds itself in what Meeker calls “group gain” (p.879). This means that “individuals take what they need from this common pool regardless of their particular contribution” (p.879). Thus, public knowledge of what is crime and what is justice comes mainly from the “pool” of information provided by the media. This information is seen not only in news reports on television and in print but also the movies, television shows, books, magazines, and conversations people have every day with one another (Dowler, 2003). There have been multiple studies conducted to substantiate the hypothesis that depiction of

violent crime, whether fiction or non, creates fear and a feeling of victimization amongst the general public. Interestingly, the results of these studies have been mixed, but do seem to show that people who watch more television feel a greater threat of crime, are more precautionous and assume that crime is more prevalent than it actually is (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielle, 1980). In addition, there is a relationship between the characteristics of the message and the audience. If there is an abundance of local crime news, the public is more afraid. However, if the crimes are shown to be happening elsewhere, people feel safer due to the fact that the crime is not occurring close to home (Dowler, 2003). While the news and law enforcement agencies have direct effect over “real” news, they have little say in what types of and how crimes are portrayed in television crime shows. Because the public makes the choice to consume these shows, they are ultimately responsible to help provide a non-blurred picture between what is real and what is not.

Understanding how or even if the media can create bias in the general public should be first examined through the concept of ethics. Over the last few decades, media ethics has become a field of its own requiring would-be and current journalists to take required courses on the subject (Plaisance, 2011). Augusto Blasi, a psychologist studying moral cognition, stated

I assume that it is impossible to understand the moral quality, positive or negative, of an action without resorting to the agent’s judgment, that moral judgments reflect the individual’s general understanding of himself or herself, other people, social relations, and situations, and that this understanding can and does change as a result of the development of one’s intelligence and of richer and more complex experience with the social world. (Plaisance, 2011, p. 96)

Blasi was making an attempt to understand ethical decision making. This can be further complicated when one’s own beliefs clash with the ethics set forth by the organization with which one is employed, such as the media. The essential goal of the journalist should be to provide balance and context. Balance means that journalists provide information from one

source along with information from another legitimate source of which will likely contain competing claims. Context means that a journalist provides more facts than those provided to them in a selective manner by another source (Elliott, 2003). Furthermore, a journalist should always be prepared to state the facts in a truthful manner. Elliott (2003) explains that this means if they use the word “said” as opposed to “claimed” or “alleged” they are implying that the statement is true. It is completely acceptable to use “claimed” or “alleged” as long as they and their audience members are aware that external verification is needed. Unfortunately, most people do not seek external verification for what they hear or see in the news.

The ethical integrity of journalism is often called into question at the individual reporter level. What is not realized, however, is that the journalist is often working under the rules, regulations and code of conduct of those higher up in the company. Therefore, journalists also have the ability and should question the moral integrity of the company for which they work. Because of the challenges associated with the economic downturn, one reporter working for a television station in San Francisco has had reservations about the ethics of the television station he has been employed with for twenty-seven years. “Morale is going down precipitously, and people are feeling the bottom-line pressures like never before. There are still highly ethical people working, but the economic overlay is grinding them down” (Stoll & McManus, 2005, p. 10). Stoll & McManus (2005) explain the concern is that there are rapid changes being made in the industry without the debate among the working journalists. In addition, there has been speculation about standards being lowered simply to increase the bottom-line. William F. Woo, a professor of journalism at Stanford University and a former editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch still believes, however, there is a social contract that is agreed upon when a news organization receives First Amendment protections, and free use of public airwaves. He claims



“There’s a taxpayer investment through subsidies of the press. The quid pro quo is that it has to do the best journalism that it can” (Stoll & McManus, 2005, p. 10).

The media faces ethical dilemmas every day for which they must make educated decisions. If they were to take Woo’s stance on journalism to heart, there might be less questions of integrity. The reality of the situation is that decisions are being made in a matter of seconds and editors must choose what they think is the right thing to print given fierce competition and pressure from the public to be informed. There are numerous examples in the political realm where it has been found that balance and context were ignored. Elliott (2003) explains this is because

Government rhetoric, in the United States, as elsewhere around the world, has the primary agenda of promoting the governmental position. When news media repeat governmental rhetoric rather than reporting on it, citizens are robbed of the opportunity to think critically about what is being said. (Elliott, 2003, p. 19).

Crime, too, is no exception to the ethical dilemma issue. A common example of this occurs when a suspect has been named but not yet prosecuted and found guilty of a crime. Editors must make the choice of when to print the name of someone who has only been accused, not convicted, of a crime and when to wait (Strupp & Phillips, 2000). Most people understand that in the U.S. people are innocent until proven guilty. However, many media outlets find themselves in a predicament with this exact situation especially when the police department was willing to release the name.

The decision to report an unproven suspects’ name can have both positive and negative consequences. Strupp & Phillips (2000) elucidate on the idea that if a city mayor is being investigated for alleged claims, it affects the public because of the ability to serve them effectively might be called into question. However, placing a picture of a beloved football coach on the front page of the newspaper prior to him actually being found guilty of a crime with the

potential to ruin his reputation forever might be a little more risky. When this situation happened in Wisconsin in 1999, the local paper continued its coverage of the story even though he was never arrested and no charges were ever filed. Regardless, he lost his job, credentials, and credibility. The paper justified their continued reporting of the accusations based on their stance that “It had a lot to do with his position as a teacher...it was newsworthy, and we did what we had to do to present the information” (Strupp & Phillips, 2000, para. 4). Right or wrong, many newspaper veterans make the decision based on “who is accused, how many people are affected, and how “on the record” law enforcement is willing to be” (Strupp & Phillips, 2000, para. 9).

These ethical dilemmas of when to name a suspect and when to wait can also have detrimental effects on the newspaper or television station reporting the story. Strupp & Phillips (2000) give an example of this from the Dallas Morning News. In 1999 the paper chose to report the story of the Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Michael Irvin who had been named as a suspect in a drug-related case. The paper claimed they reported on it because that was what other local media were doing. It was important to keep up with the competition. Irvin was later cleared but the paper took a hit. Managing editor at the time Stuart Wilk asserted that because of Irvin’s public figure status “if it happened again, we would have no choice but to do it again. I don’t know how you would not name him” (para 24). The Denver Post, on the other hand, made the choice not to print the name of suspect because of how well-known he was in the Denver area. The case involved a local Baptist minister who was being investigated for alleged sexual harassment. The editor was worried that if the Post named the man, his reputation would be completely ruined. This proved to be a good decision as he was never formally charged and the case was dismissed.

With a very hazy picture of what is right and wrong as it pertains to media ethics, the media will not be able to deny that it has at least some effect on citizen perceptions of the police. According to a U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) report which measured contact between the police and the public in 2008, nine out of ten residents who came in contact with the police felt the police had acted properly. With 16.9% of U.S. residents age sixteen or older having made contact with the police during that year, it appears that the outcome was very positive (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011). The numbers state that people have satisfaction with law enforcement, yet opinions can be easily swayed. The media has the ability to portray police officers as heroic and professional while, at the same time, representing them to be ineffective and incompetent. There is a legitimate need for the police, which the media does a decent job of presenting. It is as though the media is utilizing these exchange relationships with law enforcement in order to find some sort of repayment of a particular tip or news story (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Yet, officers are also heavily scrutinized, which ultimately wears down the legitimacy built up by the media (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006). Essentially, people are left confused as to how they should view the role of the police officer regardless of the type of personal interaction they may have had with law enforcement.

Closer examination of the idea of “useful myths,” a term coined by social scientists as stories that everyone knows are not exactly true but are chosen to be believed because they validate what is already known (Alterman, 2003), can help provide some insight into why the media presents information to the public the way they do. For example, police departments are usually effective in showing positive images of themselves when covering routine crime. The image changes when the department undergoes any sort of internal crisis such as corruption, excessive use of force or the inability to solve cases (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald,

2006). The myth here is that all police departments are or will eventually become corrupt. As long as citizens are able to valid this myth via what they see in the news, even though it only happens occasionally and certainly does not include every officer or every department, they feel their beliefs are substantiated. The challenge is that the media grasps onto these stories because they elicit a very specific reaction from the public. Chermak, et al (2006) explains that the media presents these stories very differently than it would a routine criminal case. They are typically covered multiple times in a very short period. Unfortunately, there has been little research on how these types of stories affect public attitude toward the police. It would be helpful to examine more closely whether people are more likely to position blame on only the individuals involved in the misconduct or if it is placed on the entire organization.

Researchers and theorists have no trouble arguing the media has a strong influence over their audience's perceptions of events going on around them, yet what is often ignored is the citizen's active and vital role in their interaction with the news (Tsfati, 2003). People have the choice to take what they read or see for exactly what it is at face-value. They also have the choice to question or do further research into the story. Reciprocity should be taking place on both sides to make the interaction between the media and its citizens mutually rewarding. Take, for example, the recent undercover operation with the CSPD at a local Hooters restaurant. One of the newspaper headlines in a local paper read "Cops Bought Alcohol at 4 Bars Day of Sting" (Chacon, 2011, p. 5). Taking the headline at face-value without reading the rest of the article it could be inferred that the city has a number of potentially intoxicated cops "working" at bars in Colorado Springs. The Gazette article makes mention of the fact that "the department has specific protocols for the amount of alcohol that is acceptable for officers to drink while conducting undercover operations" (Chacon, 2011, para. 1). In same breath the article cited that

the officers spent 44 dollars on food and drinks, thus suggesting that it might be a bit excessive for an undercover operation.

What should people believe? It would seem that if media were following a code of ethics, their audience should be able to trust what is being presented to them as fact to the best of what the media knows to be true. Instead, what has happened is that people are becoming more critical and skeptical of the media. “The cynicism that has undermined every social institution is undermining the institutions of news, which less than twenty-five years ago were the paragons of trust, even for those least trusting of the government” (Tsfati, 2003, p. 65). In the study conducted by Tsfati (2003), he wanted to be able to show that if the audience trusts the media, they will then accept the mood of public opinion that is offered through the media. Likewise, if they distrust the media, they will reject what is being portrayed as the public opinion climate. His findings demonstrated exactly what he was hoping to find. Trusting audiences are more influenced by the media than are skeptic audiences. Tsfati substantiates his findings through theories of communication that state “the media do not tell us what to think, but they can be very influential in telling us what other people think” (p.78).

Skepticism is one possible way to interpret people’s mistrust of the media. Another way of understanding this mistrust is through people’s rigidity and refusal to accept realities as reported in the media (Tsfati, 2003). Take, for example, the role of a partisan. Partisans, by definition, are individuals or groups that will tend to move to and not sway from one side of an issue. Their attitudes can also be seen as extreme (Christen & Huberty, 2007). More often than not, partisans will see news media stories as biased against their own point of view regardless of the supposed neutrality of the report (Schmitt et al., 2004). The media cannot win in these

situations even when presenting just the stated facts as they are battling the ideal that everything reported is slanted and bias.

In a research study conducted by Schmitt, et al. (2007) the hope was to better understand the partisan view as it related to the hostile media effect. The hostile media effect occurs when viewers rate purported neutral stories biased against their own point-of-view or in favor of someone else's (Arpan & Raney, 2003). Schmitt, et al (2007) proposed three processes. The first process is selective recall in which partisans choose to remember only the pieces of content that appear to be hostile toward their side. The second is selective categorization in which opposing partisans on either end of the spectrum assign different meaning to the same content. Third, is different standards in which both sides agree on the content but view the information that favors the other side is invalid or irrelevant. Schmitt, et al (2007) found the only process that provided substantiation for the hostile media effect was selective categorization. A partisan's determination of something being favorable, neutral or unfavorable to their point-of-view depended greatly on the context in which it was offered.

In a separate study also conducted in 2007, the relevance of partisanship and hostile media effect was again examined. Suspicion of the truthfulness of the media and the role of partisans influencing public opinion can have effect on ratings, viewership and readership. In an economy where some media outlets are struggling to simply stay in business, it is important to understand what might be fueling the fire of skepticism. The study conducted by Kim & Pasadeos (2007) asked the question of "who influences the evaluation of news credibility: the press (i.e. news story structure) or the individual reader (i.e. partisanship), especially in the case of controversial partisan issues" (p. 99). Previous studies have had difficulty proving that the news media is more influential than personal characteristics in shaping sensitivities to news bias.

These findings substantiate the need for hostile media effect as a valid explanation for perceived bias as it has been proven that individuals on opposite sides of an issue will judge the exact same story as biased against them (Kim & Pasadeos, 2007). The Kim & Pasadeos study had participants read various news stories which were fabricated by the researchers to be either completely neutral and balanced or slanted in one direction. The findings proved that partisans saw the balanced stories as bias toward their particular point-of-view. The purposefully slanted stories, however, were viewed by both sides in the direction of the slant. These results indicate that “a balanced news story structure may be the only condition under which the absolute hostile media perception occurs” (Kim & Pasadeos, 2007, p. 104).

Whether examining the ethical obligation the media has when reporting news or the responsibility a citizen has to deciphering or filtering information given to them, there is little dissention that influence, whether purposeful or not, results from what is portrayed in the media. On August 27, 1996, a group of white off-duty Indianapolis police officers were accused of being loud and intoxicated, slinging racial and sexist slurs, repetitively hitting two males, one of which was African-American, and finally arresting them (Chermak et al., 2006). Unfortunately, this type of story is automatically newsworthy not only because of the deviance and corruption surrounding the police officers but also because it involved racial discrimination. According to Chermak, et al (2006) the race factor was perceived by the citizens of Indianapolis as the main reason for the crime. In addition, the city was recovering from protests the year before which occurred because of the way police were treating African American males. The ongoing issues of racial discrimination helped people justify their perceptions that the police department was prejudiced against the African American community. After a number of issues surrounding the incident surfaced, such as the potential cover-up and witness testimony that the officers

instigated the fight, the media ran the saga as the “downtown police brawl” buttressing the public’s notion that the department was corrupt. The chief of police resigned and multiple officers were moved both within and outside of the department. The trial ended in a hung jury. Regardless, the reputation of the Indianapolis Police Department was tarnished and it would now be up to the organization to rebuild trust in the community with or without the help of the media.

Media’s ability to shape biased perceptions is arguably quite real. However, the question remains as to who is ultimately responsible for their biased views of any given topic. The media does their part in putting out the information for the public to consume, whether factual or not, yet the consumer should have the obligation to filter what is real or important to their life. While this question of who is responsible could be debated until the end of time, it proves the need for this study which seeks to find proof of bias based on content. If none is discovered, it leaves room to examine public perceptions more closely regardless of what was presented to them through more careful examination of ideas such as the hostile media effect.

#### How Police View the Media

“Every law enforcement academy in the United States trains officers for the possibility that they may have to use force, meaning any physical force up to and including deadly force” (Bohrer, 2005, p. 8). According to Bohrer (2008), in the event force must be used, officers are trained to see the event clearly. The understanding in the law enforcement community is that force was a necessary to save a citizen, fellow officer or themselves from injury or death. At this point, the press is likely to be already involved. In many cases, the officer may hear about a possible internal inquiry into the event or the chief’s agreement to meet with the prosecutor’s office through what they see or read in the media before the department has the opportunity to communicate this information directly to them. Often, the events portrayed in the media are



unexpected for the officer which, in turn, causes additional stress. It is, therefore, the department's responsibility to communicate to their officers that they have the initial right to fully investigate the incident internally. Although the information will be limited, statements will need to be made to the media about the situation. Irrespective of whether the officer knows or understands the protocol in these situations, they may view the media's reports as insensitive and untimely furthering the rift that might already exist between the two agencies.

Understanding the relationship between the police and the media is one filled with a number of complicated dynamics. In an effort to narrow the scope, this section of the review will focus on data presented in a 1999 study that identified three specific patterns which stem from the relationship between law enforcement and the media. In addition, the hostile media effect will be more closely examined to help identify why officers, like many public citizens, view the media as biased toward their group.

Simmons (1999) conducted a study in which he provided questionnaires to 88 law enforcement professionals ranging from line officers to administrators and public information officers. The same questionnaires were distributed to 26 reporters who regularly covered law enforcement agencies. Further open-ended interviews were then conducted with a sampling from both groups. The results found three relational patterns emerge from the 44 statements provided in the questionnaire. These patterns factored in how law enforcement and reporters view one another, their relationship, and information about what type of news reaches the public. The three patterns identified were closing ranks, watchdogs, and conciliation.

According to the Simmons (1999) study, the largest group fell under the closing ranks pattern. This group consists of law enforcement personnel who are critical of a reporter's tactics while developing greater respect for their own profession. The general consensus was that it is

important to have a more cooperative relationship between the two agencies for the benefit of the citizens, yet that trusting relationship will only occur after it has been nurtured for a long period of time. This group was supportive of the role the public information officer (PIO) and media relations department plays in dealing with the media. One police administrator asserted

Our operational people don't always have the time or the patience to deal with reporters. And the reporters don't cultivate sources and develop personal relationships much these days...So, we would have a more adversarial relationship with the media without the PIO. (p. 81)

Individuals in this category are also more likely to have tendencies that align with the hostile media effect perceiving what they see in the media, even if reported in a neutral manner, to be slanted against the department.

There may be a feeling of injustice in the way that the police are represented in the media, especially in incidences that involve any sort of police misconduct. One high-profile event can single-handedly tarnish the reputation of the department as citizen satisfaction and confidence in the officers is worn away. Research has shown that confidence in the department can return to pre-incident levels, but there is still the possibility that long-term damage, especially if minority communities are involved, will never be recovered (Weitzer, 2002). Even though officers and a majority of the public will forgive and forget knowing that these types of incidents are the exception rather than the rule, some in law enforcement will carry resentment of the media because of their need to over report on these rare incidents portraying to the public they happen all the time. While this is just one example of why there may be hostility between the two groups, it is not the only. There is a severe lack of trust within this group that can be summarized by one Sheriff administrator's comment: "The entire philosophy has changed since the 70's. There is a lack of trust. There is no such thing as 'off the record'" (Simmons, 1999, p. 79).

The second pattern that emerged in Simmons (1999) study was that of the watchdog. This smaller group consisted of all reporters. They felt their goal should be to “challenge, not maintain, the status quo in law enforcement agencies” (p. 81). They appreciate their counterparts at the police department, but are quick to defend their actions as reporters seeking the truth. They argue that they are more interested in informing the public over beating out the competition and value their ethical integrity as journalists. In terms of their view of the PIO, they respect their interactions with them, but are guarded when it comes to the PIO being their sole source of information. One television reporter explained “the PIOs help to an extent but...keep in mind who pays them. There is no reason for them to jeopardize their position. If you are a good cop reporter, you should not rely strictly on the PIO” (p. 84).

The skepticism found in this group stems from the belief that law enforcement agencies will disclose only the information that will help to promote their image. Law enforcement has an obligation to inform the general public of their activities and almost always uses the media to do so (Brooks, 1999). Knowing the ethical obligation the media has when it comes to reporting information they know to be factual, the question surfaces as to whether the law enforcement has the same obligation. Brooks (1999) utilized the example of an agency using “no comment” when asked about a specific incident that the police have information about but feel they cannot or should not share with the public. Even though the courts can force law enforcement to give information to the media, many feel using “no comment” is a morally sound response. There may be valid reason for the agency to purposely deceive the media, and therefore the general public. For example, if a criminal is unknown, false information may bring the offender forward. There may also be cases where law enforcement needs to divert media attention from

sensitive issues in high profile cases. Ultimately, Brooks emphasizes, “they must be willing to justify the act [of deception] publicly” (Brooks, 1999, p. 24).

The third pattern which emerged in the Simmons (1999) study was conciliation. This group consisted of both journalists and law enforcement personnel. They have and strive for a greater amount of cooperation or exchange by building mutually respectful relationships. Interestingly, the study found that law enforcement professionals in this group were typically older, have a higher rank, and are more educated than their counterparts in closing ranks. Both sides feel they must work together to get information to the public. One sheriff’s detective interviewed during the study commented on the reciprocal relationship between the police and the media:

The press puts demands on us because they have demands placed on them. On certain stories they abide by our wishes to hold back, and we will give them the best stories when we can. It goes both ways. I don’t have statistics on this, but the publicity they have given us has helped greatly in identifying suspects and making arrests. Trust is the key. Some people say familiarity breeds contempt. In this case, I think it breeds trust. (Simmons, 1999, p. 85)

Utilizing social exchange theory with this group of law enforcement and media professionals shows how the action of one group rewards the reactions of another. Over time, this provides a mutually rewarding environment for both parties (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Even though this appears to be the ideal pattern for which both sides should strive, neither group is infallible and will have to work through issues of mistrust eventually making it more of the exception rather than the rule.

Further explanation of the hostile media effect is warranted at this point in the review of previous research. While the phenomenon has been defined and alluded to at various times throughout this section, it is a useful tool when attempting to understand what may be going on individually or collectively within a police department to determining why bias is perceived.

Individual and interpersonal beliefs are the most important variable in the determination of hostile media bias or hostile media perception (Eveland & Shah, 2003), two concepts that are used interchangeably. The reason for looking at sensitivities at the individual level is because there has been little evidence throughout multiple empirical research studies to demonstrate there is consistent bias in one direction or another (Eveland & Shah, 2003). Therefore, there must be other factors contributing to these notions.

The hostile media effect dates back to 1985 when Vallone et al (1985) conducted a study in which identical news reports were observed by pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students. The researchers found that each group saw the news coverage to be biased against their own beliefs. Subsequent studies have been able to replicate these findings across multiple issues from presidential elections to sports games (Choi, Yang, & Chang, 2009). Further research has shown that not only will people view a story to be slanted against their own point-of-view but will then attribute hostility toward those responsible for reporting it (Arpan & Raney, 2003). This means that the media outlet airing the story or even the individual journalist reporting the news will likely receive retribution from the viewer who feels slighted. This research also finds that people who hold very strong opinions about an issue are highly unlikely to change their minds when given contrary, often compelling information (Arpan & Raney, 2003).

If one were to take the example of an officer who is part of the closing ranks group and more likely to feel as though the media is in business to challenge their role in law enforcement, they may not be able to see any contradictory evidence to what they already believe to be true. Even if approached with substantiation to the contrary by a higher ranking officer who is supportive of cooperation amongst the media and law enforcement, this may not be compelling enough for them to change their mind. This group is also likely to feel a sense of protection over

their group and that law enforcement is not taken seriously enough (Simmons, 1999). This can be explained through the idea of group attachment. People are motivated to protect their own groups. When faced with content in the media, the group will make judgments of accuracy and bias based on their own political lens (Coe et al., 2008). Perceptions of bias may be best explained at the individual level, especially when evidence points to the media providing factual information. How it is interpreted by the individual may be the bigger question. The importance of this idea as it relates to the current study will be beneficial should bias, based on written content, be proven not to exist. Instead, it may be perceived bias by the individual interpreting the story that will better explain the potential challenges the police department is facing.

## METHODS

This research study was guided by three questions: How is bias determined; is there bias toward the CSPD; and is the bias coming from one, all or none of the media outlets. Given the research questions and understanding the need to find objective conclusions as explained below, the method chosen for the current study was content analysis. This method was chosen for three main purposes. First, bias is a difficult concept to define as it is highly subjective dependent upon the context within which it may exist, and the individual making the observation. Second, a method was needed that would allow the researcher to be as much removed from open interpretation of the data, and subsequently their own biased views, as possible. Finally, being able to prove or disprove bias based solely on content will help future ideas, theories and studies that might want to examine bias from a different perspective or replicate this study. Content analysis is the study of recorded human communication (Babbie, 2010) and is useful when examining trends and patterns (Stemler, 2001). Babbie (2010) also explains that content analysis is “particularly well suited to the study of communications and to answering the classic question of communications research: Who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect?” (p.333). Stemler (2001) adds that because content analysis, in its most basic form, is essentially performing a word-frequency count, the common assumption is that words which appear most often are the ones of greatest importance or concern. This assumption provided little useful data for the purposes of this study. Therefore, qualitative content analysis methods were utilized in conjunction with word-frequency count to determine how a word of perceived bias may be associated to the context of the article within which it lies.

The unit of analysis, or the basic object studied about which generalizations was made and data collected, was bias. The units of observation, or the entities observed and about which

information is systematically collected, were the articles, the media outlet, and the year of publication. The independent variables for this study were the words and subsequently the context of the article. The dependent variable in this study was bias as it could only be alleged given a specific word or context.

In terms of reproducibility, only one coder was used throughout the study and, at no point, did anyone else look at the articles or context codes to provide additional insight or opinion. Moreover, no one was asked for their perception of media bias or if they felt there was bias toward the police department. The reason this tactic was used was so that any outside, uncontrolled bias could be kept to a minimum so as not to sway the results in either direction. This also meant that there was no second set of eyes reproducing the coding schemes during the study. However, if the study were to be replicated, the exact same coding schemes could be used on the same or additional articles because of the now established context codes. Additionally, the articles were coded based on their natural and intuitive boundary, meaning the code was applied to the entire article (Stemler, 2001). This makes it simplistic for additional researchers to code in the exact same manner.

### Research Design

For the present study, random sampling was used. Babbie (2010) explains this to be a “sampling method in which each element has an equal chance of selection independent of any other event in the selection process” (p.199). It was important to use this method of sampling in this study to help eliminate what Babbie (2010) alludes to as “conscious or unconscious bias” (p.200) by the researcher. By selecting articles at random, the researcher is not seeking out articles that might support or disprove any of the research questions or hypothesis proposed.



107 articles were selected at random for analysis. The methodology for selecting such articles will be explained further in the procedure section. The articles were extracted from six media sources, both newspaper and TV, in the Colorado Springs area. The newspapers examined were *The Gazette*, and *the Colorado Springs Independent*. The TV stations were KKTU, KOAA, KRDO, and Fox21. Only written content was analyzed. Articles were gathered based on the media sources mentioned above as well three distinct time periods which spanned the last three CSPD police chiefs. The first time period was 2001-2002 in which police chief 1 occupied the role of police chief. The second time period was 2003-2006 during the reign of police chief 2. The final time period spanned 2007-2011 in which police chief 3 held the top seat for the department. After having gathered all the articles, the breakdown of how many came from which time period and media source can be seen in table 1.

Table 1

Breakdown of Number of Articles from Each Time Frame and Media Source

| <u>Time Frame</u>    | <u>Number of Articles</u> | <u>Media Source</u> | <u>Number of Articles</u> |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Chief 1<br>2001-2002 | 17                        | Gazette             | 46                        |
| Chief 2<br>2003-2006 | 34                        | Independent         | 21                        |
| Chief 3<br>2007-2011 | 56                        | KKTU                | 14                        |
|                      |                           | KOAA                | 9                         |
|                      |                           | KRDO                | 8                         |
|                      |                           | Fox21               | 7                         |

The materials used to gather the data included newspaper and TV station archives. All archives were found through their respective websites and were either openly accessible or available after a password and/or subscription to the archive was established. Because all

analysis was derived from the articles themselves, there was no need to utilize any additional apparatus' in the gathering of content.

### Procedure

The procedure for gathering the data that would yield results in relation to bias occurred in three distinct phases: selection, coding, and exporting.

#### *Selection of articles*

The idea, especially when conducting a study on bias, is to remain as neutral as possible. Therefore, articles were gathered randomly by searching newspaper and TV station archives. The two newspaper archives were searched first as they were the most easily accessible and contained the greatest amount of archived data that was older than five years. The intent was to gather the same amount of articles from each newspaper, and the same amount from each TV station. After an initial search, collecting the same amount across all mediums would not be possible for this study because of the shortage in availability of data from the TV stations. In both newspaper archives, the advanced search engine was used so that time frame could be included. The first search conducted in each archive was for the time frame of 2001-2002 utilizing the key phrase "Colorado Springs Police Department" in the open search field. The second search changed the dates to be 2003-2006 and used the same key phrase. The third search changed the dates to be 2007-present and used the same key phrase. Because the *Colorado Springs Independent* is a weekly as opposed to daily newspaper, and tended to have lengthier articles, the decision was made to gather twice the amount of articles from *The Gazette* so that the two papers could be compared more evenly based on length of content.

Articles from the TV stations were also gathered utilizing their website's archives. In all four cases, TV station archives meant anything older than the date the site was being viewed and

did not go back farther than 2007, with the exception of KKTV which had news stories from 2006. No passwords or subscriptions were needed for any of the stations. Additionally, none of the websites had the advanced search option. Therefore, the only information typed into the search field was “Colorado Springs Police Department.” The TV station articles all fell within the time period of 2007-2011 aside from KKTV which had archives dating back to 2006.

Consequently, a majority of the articles occurred within the chief 3 era with the exception of four from the chief 2 time frame. The initial design was to gather at least five from each station.

With most being relatively short, and therefore of little to no use for the study, additional articles were collected to help create substance.

#### *Word count and coding of articles*

All articles were loaded and saved into a qualitative data analysis and research software tool called Atlas.ti. An initial word count was conducted on all 107 articles in which 8,575 unique words were found. Even though a frequency list was generated from the word count, this would not represent any useful data for this study as the frequency of a word would not be enough to determine bias. Therefore, the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of bias was used to establish eight key words that could constitute bias when used. These words were given the identifier of “Level 1” words (Table 2). If any of the eight words were included in the 8,575 words incorporated in the word count pulled from the 107 articles, the words and their frequency were listed in a separate spreadsheet. Additional words were gathered by using the technique of defining “level 1” words in the same Merriam-Webster dictionary and then checking the list of 8,575 words to see if any synonyms of those “level 1” words existed. Those were then identified as “level 2” words (Table 2). This technique was repeated again by defining “level 2” words in the same dictionary and checking the list of 8,575 words to see if any synonyms of those “level

2” words existed. Those words were then identified as “level 3” words (Table 2). This was repeated one final time in the same manner as described above in which the final set of words were labeled as “level 4” words (Table 2).

Table 2

## List of Four Levels of Biased Words

| <u>Level 1 Words</u> | <u>Level 2 Words</u> | <u>Level 3 Words</u> | <u>Level 4 Words</u> |
|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Bent                 | Accused              | Advice               | Against              |
| Inclination          | Believe(s)           | Approved             | Allegedly            |
| Influence            | Compared             | Command              | Appear               |
| Instance             | Decide(s)(ed)(sion)  | Concluded            | Claim(ed)(s)         |
| Judge(ment)          | Direct(ion)(ly)      | Conviction(s)        | Might                |
| Outlook              | Disposition          | Determine(d)         | Typically            |
| Prejudice            | Evaluation           | Discovered           | Underwhelming        |
| Temperament          | Favorites            | Disposal(ed)         |                      |
| Tendency             | Find(ing)(ings)      | Order(ed)(s)         |                      |
|                      | Holding              | Right                |                      |
|                      | Opinion              | Supposed             |                      |
|                      | Reason(able)         | Take(s)(n)(ing)      |                      |
|                      | Strong               | Trust                |                      |
|                      | Toward               | View(ed)(s)          |                      |
|                      | Trend                |                      |                      |
|                      | Turn                 |                      |                      |
|                      | Way                  |                      |                      |

After the word count was conducted, the articles were coded based on their context through the use of Atlas.ti. All articles were given a code by reading the headline and the content of the article to determine the main theme. This was done by answering the questions of why it was produced, for what audience and in what context. Because all the articles were already written prior to the study, they were thus considered secondary data. A grounded theory approach was used to determine the codes as the assumption was made that consistent topics would emerge after reading through a handful of articles. Thus, the same codes would be used over and over again. Preconceived categories were avoided as the categories and names for such categories would flow from the data that was being reviewed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The first list totaled 22 different context codes. Those contexts were then reviewed to narrow the list after it was determined that some of the codes had the same meaning and could be grouped under a larger category. There were thirteen contextual codes in the final list that were given a connotation of tone from the researcher in one of three categories: Positive, negative, and undetermined (Table 3).

Table 3

Final List of Context Codes Used and Their Associated Connotation

| <u>Main Context Code</u>          | <u>Alternate Meanings</u>                                  | <u>Connotation<br/>(Negative, Positive,<br/>Undetermined)</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| Child-involved crime              | Sex crime, abuse   | Negative  |
| Citizen perceptions of the police | Blame, External allegations toward CSPD, Position of trust | Negative  |
| Community Involvement             |  | Positive  |
| Communication                     |  | Undetermined  |
| Credibility                       | Police seen in positive light                              | Positive  |
| Crime                             | Shootings, Homicides, Homelessness                         | Undetermined  |
| Drugs                             |  | Undetermined  |
| Financial Strain                  |  | Undetermined  |
| Internal                          | Internal affairs investigation, Internal scandal           | Negative  |
| Police Knowledge of the Situation |  | Negative  |
| Police Use of Force               | Police harassment  | Negative  |
| Racial Profiling                  |  | Negative  |

The final step in this portion of the process was to match the biased words with the context within which they appeared. The procedure for doing this was to code the four levels of words alongside the contextual codes. Within Atlas.ti, all words within a specific level, one through four, were placed in the auto coding tool. A code of Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, or Level 4 was placed next to the contextual code if the word appeared in the content associated to that specific context.

*Exporting*

Once the coding was complete, the data was exported from Atlas.ti to a spreadsheet for analysis and interpretation. This was done by exporting each document family, or grouping of articles under a specific heading, and their subsequent codes to an Excel workbook. The following document families were exported: Chief 1 Era, Chief 2 Era, Chief 3 Era, Gazette, Independent, KKTU, KRDO, KOAA, and Fox21. Each sheet was organized so that the contextual codes were vertical, and the level of bias codes horizontal so that frequency of each level of bias could be matched to a context.

The data was then input into SPSS to determine frequency. Univariate analysis was utilized to explore frequency of each variable separately. The reason for exploring the variables separately was a result of the fact that there were a varying number of articles from each source and across each time frame. For example, articles from the chief 1 era were only examined for two years whereas chief 2 and chief 3 spanned longer periods of time. Additionally, the study was unable to collect TV station articles for the time frame of 2001-2002. Therefore, it would not make sense to compare all articles evenly when additional factors needed to be taken into account. The two variables that were examined for frequency in SPSS were context and level of bias. Context and bias occupied the first two columns of the spreadsheet. They were then given a number. Context was numbered one through 13. Level of bias was labeled one through four. The third column represented the number of times a word fitting within a specific level of bias for a given context appeared. Once the worksheet was complete, the data was analyzed by using the "Frequency" output from the "Descriptive Statistics" menu within SPSS.

## RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was media bias toward the CSPD. This question would be answered by examining two other research questions: how is bias determined, and is bias coming from one, all or no media outlet. Because of the need to conduct this study as one of an exploratory nature, a hypothesis was not constructed.

To provide the most objective study as possible and keep researcher bias to a minimum, content analysis was used to identify and quantify certain biased words in the text of articles originating from various media outlets. This would also help to understand the contextual use of words within the content. The expectation was to not infer meaning but rather explore the usage of specific words that might constitute bias (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The first step in this process was to determine an identifiable set of words that could have bias connotations. The next step was to code the articles themselves based on their specific context. The final step was to join the biased words to their context, export and analyze the results to provide meaningful understanding to the research questions asked at the beginning of this study and reminded of above. This section will be organized with results as they relate to determination of bias, the significance of context, and comparison of time frames and media sources.

### Bias

For the purposes of this study, bias was determined based on specific words within an article. It was then further explored to examine how a biased word, when placed within a given context, may validate or nullify the bias. As explained in the methods section, the project identified 46 unique words that were placed on a leveled scale according to how far removed they were from the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of bias. It was found that the only level 1 words that occurred within all 107 articles were influence, judge and judgment. Influence

occurred a total of 13 times, judge a total of 32 times, and judgment a total of two times. These *level 1* words, or those most closely associated with the dictionary definition of bias, were only found in articles written in *The Gazette*, KKTV, FOX21, KOAA and occurred only during the era in which chief 3 was in office.

Level 2, 3, and 4 words were found in varying amounts from one to 102 times throughout the 107 articles (Table 4). Words in levels 2, 3 and 4 appeared an average of nine times more frequently than those in level 1 (Figure 1). The number of times a biased word appeared, regardless of the level, in a given article ranged from one to 54 (Figure 2). 12.7% of the articles had only one biased word in the entire content. 1.3% of the articles had 54 biased words throughout their content.

Table 4

Number of times level 2, 3, and 4 biased words appeared

| <u>Level 2 Words</u> | <u>#</u> | <u>Level 3 Words</u> | <u>#</u> | <u>Level 4 Words</u> | <u>#</u> |
|----------------------|----------|----------------------|----------|----------------------|----------|
| Accused              | 34       | Advice               | 6        | Against              | 102      |
| Believe(s)           | 37       | Approved             | 18       | Allegedly            | 13       |
| Compared             | 5        | Command              | 5        | Appear               | 12       |
| Decide(s)(ed)(sion)  | 69       | Concluded            | 7        | Claim(ed)(s)         | 24       |
| Direct(ion)(ly)      | 24       | Conviction(s)        | 14       | Might                | 41       |
| Disposition          | 5        | Determine(d)         | 16       | Typically            | 10       |
| Evaluation           | 5        | Discovered           | 9        | Underwhelming        | 5        |
| Favorites            | 32       | Disposal(ed)         | 33       |                      |          |
| Find(ing)(ings)      | 82       | Order(ed)(s)         | 48       |                      |          |
| Holding              | 5        | Right                | 32       |                      |          |
| Opinion              | 5        | Supposed             | 7        |                      |          |
| Reason(able)         | 21       | Take(s)(n)(ing)      | 125      |                      |          |
| Strong               | 6        | Trust                | 13       |                      |          |
| Toward               | 15       | View(ed)(s)          | 55       |                      |          |
| Trend                | 5        |                      |          |                      |          |
| Turn                 | 12       |                      |          |                      |          |
| Way                  | 61       |                      |          |                      |          |



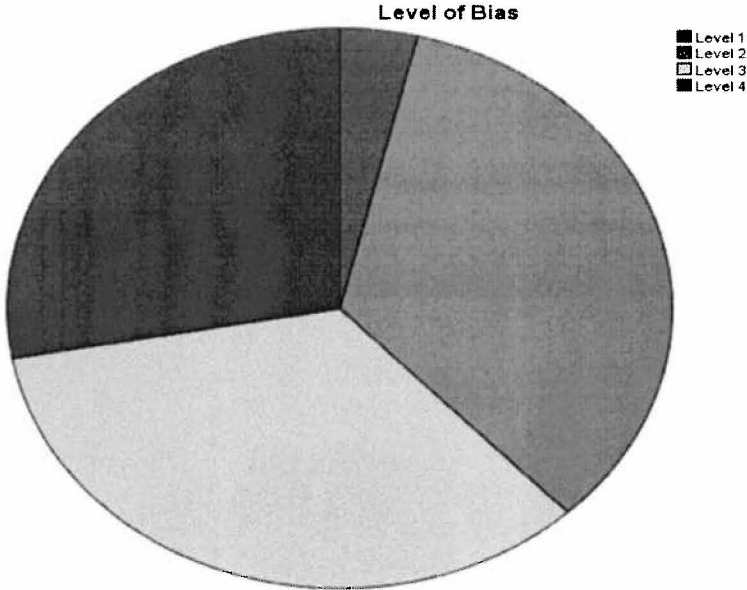


Figure 1 Frequency of level of bias for all articles regardless of time frame or media source

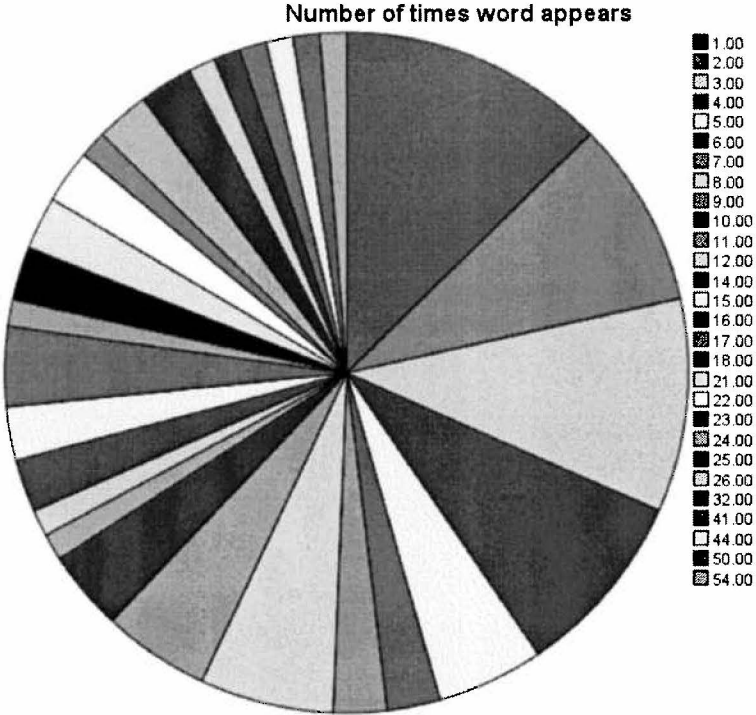


Figure 2 Frequency of number of times a word appears in an article regardless of level of bias, time frame or media source

### Context

This study utilized quantitative analysis through the use of word count and frequency statistics, but also applied a qualitative approach through the examination of context and meaning. Again, to keep researcher bias and subjectivity to a minimum, the study was conducted to assess as much explicit, manifest content as possible when determining context by keeping any latent, or implicit interpretations to a minimum (Babbie, 2010). The title of the article was the primary means for determining the context code with the actual content of the article serving as a source of clarification if needed.

When comparing the context code to the biased words existent within that particular context, it was found that the most frequent occurrence of biased words, 401 to be exact, appeared in the context of *internal*. Additionally, *level 1* words occurred a total of 12 times within this context. The least frequent occurrence of biased words, three, appeared in the context of *police knowledge of the situation*. The full synopsis of context to biased word can be found in Figure 3.

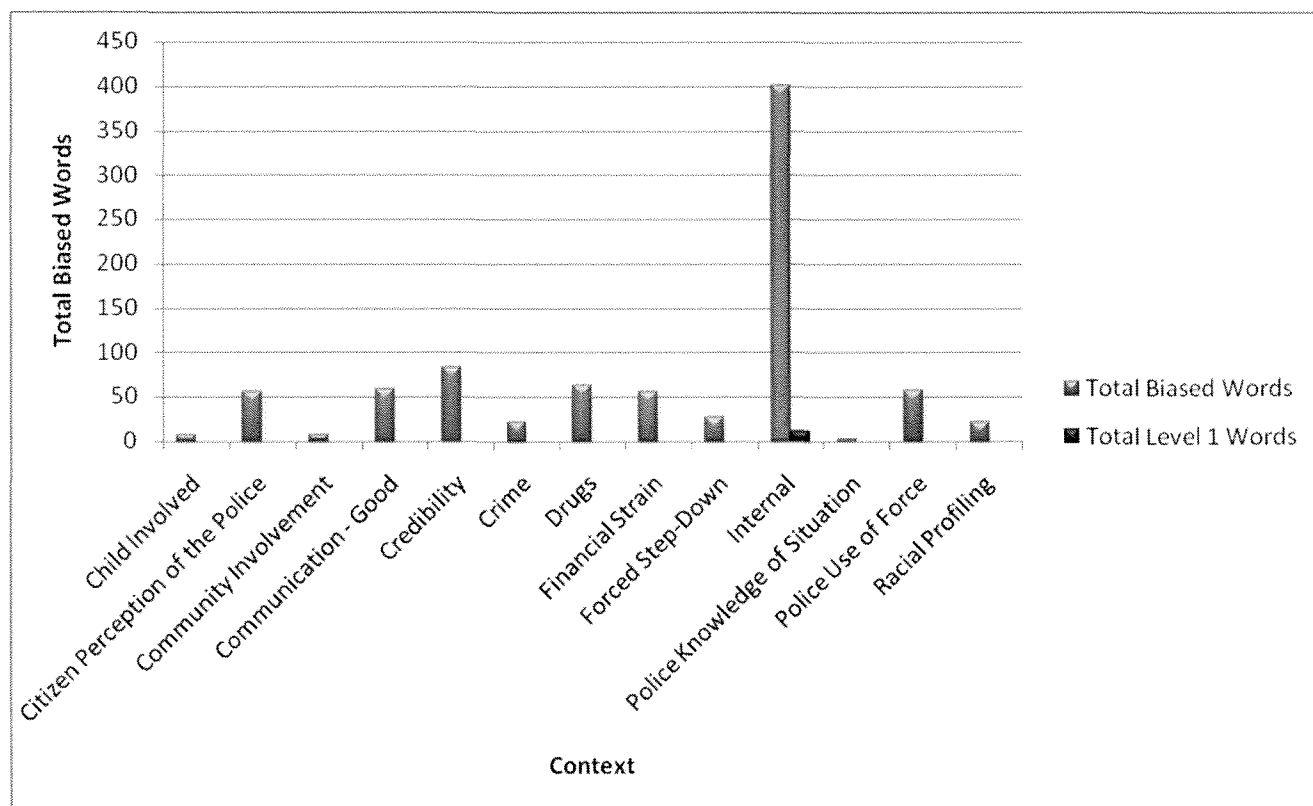


Figure 3 Total number of biased and level 1 words occurring within a specific context

### Comparison of Time Frames and Media Sources

A comparison of the eras of police chiefs and the time frames within which they were in office found that articles written during the time of chief 3 had the most frequency of biased words. More specifically, 38% of the articles written during his time contained biased words. The era of chief 2 showed 34.2% of articles written during his lead of the CSPD to contain biased words. Chief 1 was at the bottom of the list with 27.8% of articles written during the two years examined in this study to have contained bias words. Even though a comparison amongst the chiefs was made based on the percentage of biased words that appeared during each of their respective times in power (Figure 4), the varying length of time in position and number of articles gathered for each indicates the data garnered from these results should not be used as anything more than an observation.

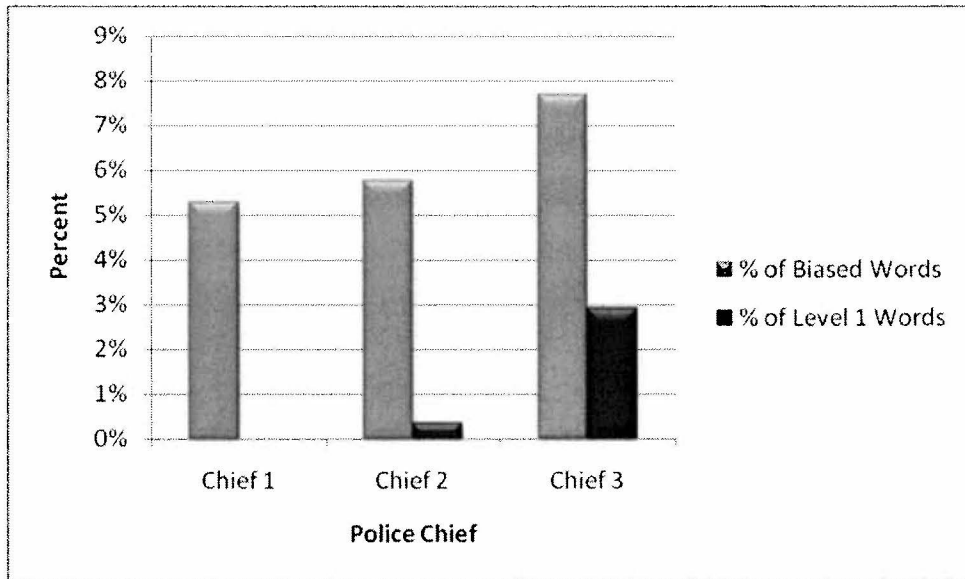


Figure 4 Percent of biased words found in articles written during each chief’s time at the CSPD

Media was compared based on whether it came from a newspaper or TV station because of the inability to obtain articles from the TV stations dating further back than 2007. Therefore, when comparing the two newspapers, *The Gazette* and the *Colorado Springs Independent*, it was found that *The Gazette* contained a slightly less percentage of biased words than the *Colorado Springs Independent*. Alternatively, the *Colorado Springs Independent* did not contain any level 1 bias words (Figure 5).

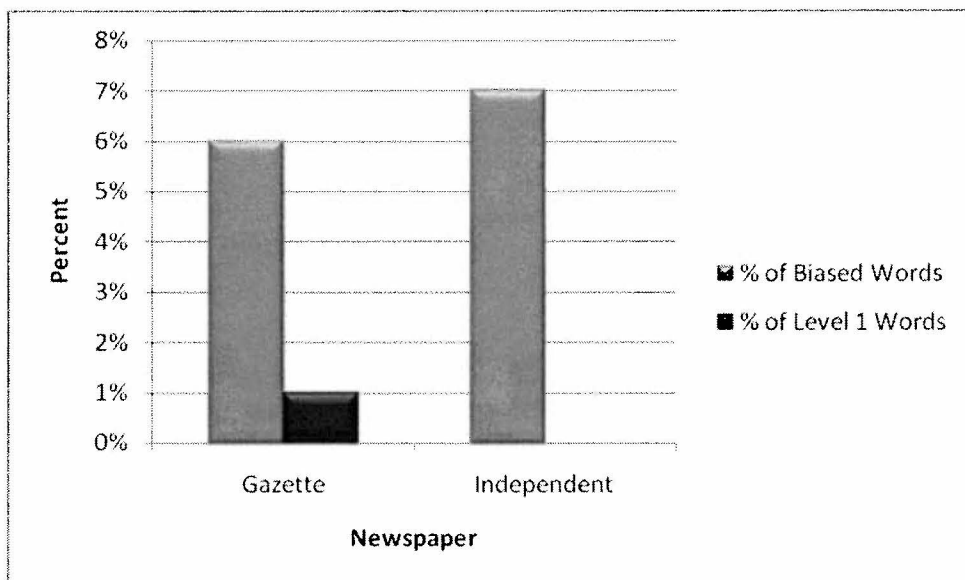


Figure 5 Percent of biased words found in articles written by each newspaper

In comparing the four TV stations, KKTU, KRDO, KOAA, and Fox21 it was found that KKTU accounted for the highest percentage of biased words at 5%, with Fox21 and KOAA at 4%, and KRDO at 2%. All TV stations aside from KRDO had articles that contained *level 1* bias words (Figure 6).

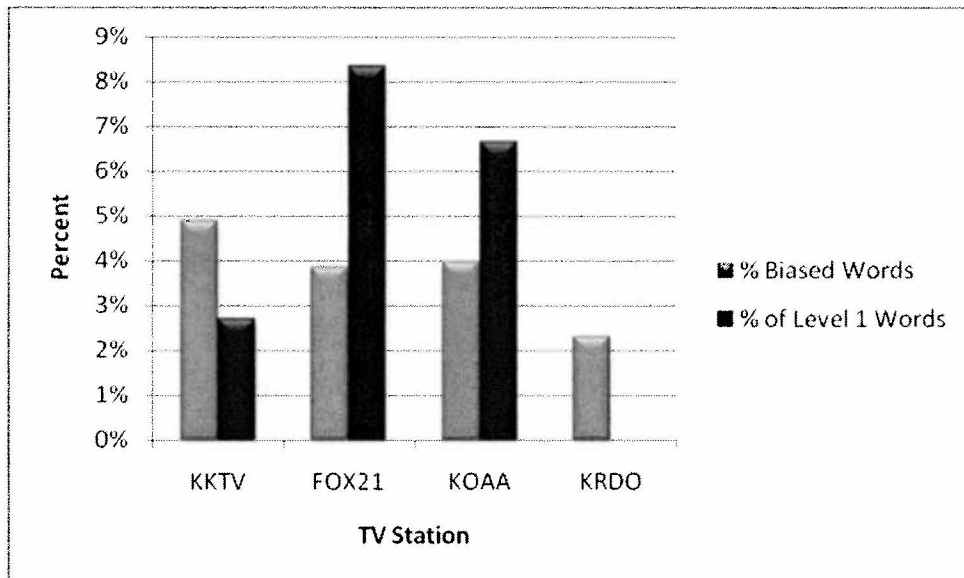


Figure 6 Percent of biased words found in articles written by each TV station

## DISCUSSION

The argument that the media is bias toward the police, toward the politicians, toward the local government, and toward society in general has been in existence as long as media has played an influential role in U.S. society. It is likely that the sentiment of bias will not subside anytime soon, rather it will surely continue to spread and grow as more people become skeptical of both the media and the groups on which it reports. Looking specifically at the bias toward police debate, it is one that has been looming in the eyes of many for a number of years.

According to Anderson (1992), in 1984, an NBC reporter was given the go-ahead to air a series on media bias toward the police in New York City. There had been a couple of police brutality cases that were still smoldering in the public's mind which was unfortunately fueled by the press and television. One of the segments, therefore, was created to demonstrate how police view their TV image and what it does to performance and morale on the force. The segment almost did not make the air as there was a significant amount of anti-cop prejudice that surfaced within the television station when the producers took a look at it to make final edits (Anderson, 1992). The inclusion of this story is significant in that it testifies to the fact that concern for bias toward the police has been in existence far longer than the scope of this study. Additionally, having a reporter be the first to push for this type of information to be seen and heard by the public gives credibility to the media profession and industry.

Bias in 2011 looks much the same as it did in 1984. It is still highly subjective based on the context within which it is presented and the individual or group doing the interpretation of the message. What has changed, however, is how much more transparent society, especially those in the public sector, have become. It is almost as if people feel they now have the right to

be completely abreast with everything and anything going on in all taxpayer subsidized industries. Garland (2001) provides an excellent summation of this opinion by stating

As the confines of the prison, the convent, the family house, the neighborhood, the executive suite, the university campus and the oval office are all invaded through electronics, we must expect a fundamental shift in our perceptions of society, our authorities and ourselves. (Garland, 2001, p. 87)

Because transparency is part of everyday life, especially for the police department, the results of this study will help to provide direction for how potential bias should be managed.

Based on content analysis of words within written communication from six media sources in the Colorado Springs area, conclusive evidence of bias has not been proven by this study to exist. Had a hypothesis been constructed it would likely have determined there was indeed bias in articles written during the later chief's reigns. That hypothesis, however, would have subsequently been nullified. Because this specific study had not been done in the past, there was no comparison of results to another study or the ability to generalize to a larger population. The only way to do so would have been to find a city of similar size that may have looked at the same question of media bias toward their police departments. Having not done this, the research concluded there was not enough evidence for bias regardless if 12% may actually be fairly substantial for a city of this size. Further, more narrowly defined studies may be useful to provide additional backing to the conclusions found in this study. The following sections will explain in greater detail how each of the research questions can be answered based on the results of the study, how the results compare to previous findings, potential limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.

### Research Questions

The focus of this study was to answer three specific research questions to help prove or disprove bias toward the CSPD. As stated above, bias based strictly on content analysis was not

found. However, further discussion on this finding will be discussed by looking at each research question in more detail.

*RQ1: How is bias determined?*

Bias can be defined by the dictionary, by the media, by a specific organization, and even by an individual. The common underlying theme of bias is that everyone appears to have their own biased definition of bias. They use the elements of its definition to meet their specific agenda. This is precisely why it is so difficult to establish one common, overarching definition for bias. Had this study chosen to use only the words that were found in the main dictionary definition of bias, or what was termed *Level 1* in this study, only 47 words out of the 8,575 total words found in all 107 articles would have been found to have any bias connotation.

Furthermore, one of the words, judge, appeared 32 times. At face value, it looks to be a good indicator of bias until the context is examined and it is found that a majority of the times judge occurs is when the article is referring to a judge presiding over a specific case. Having to nullify a majority of the *level 1* words because of the context within which they were embedded, it was necessary to find additional words that could have bias meanings to help substantiate the argument the CSPD was searching for. This is why the process of determining varying “levels” of synonyms was deemed necessary to provide more substantiated data.

Unexpectedly, it was found that articles given the context code of *credibility* in which police were portrayed in a positive light, had a high frequency of biased words. This number came in second to those contexts involving internal issues within the police department, where the police were not being shown favorably. While the assumption here might be that utilizing content analysis to determine bias is inconsequential due to the fact that bias was found in both positively and negatively spun articles, it must be remembered that bias can be either for or



against something. Even though the intent of the study may not have been to look for bias in favor of the department, it is possible that these articles, written positively toward the CSPD, are showing bias in favor of the department. While word analysis was the most objective way to demonstrate the existence of bias, the findings show a need for observing the word within context to be sure that the intended meaning was indeed that of bias or slant and not of something else.

*RQ2: Is there bias toward the CSPD?*

The results of this study, based on content analysis, demonstrate that there is no conclusive evidence that the content being written contains bias. Only 12%, or 1,065, of the total 8,575 words found in all 107 articles had the potential for biased meaning. Of those 1,065 words, some were disqualified based on the context of the article within which they appeared. Even if the study had not used the mixed approach to content analysis by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data, the biased word percentage would still be 12% and not enough to conclude concrete evidence of bias in one direction or the other.

In examining context, it might be easier to argue for bias considering words appeared most frequently in articles which were coded as being internal to the police department. This meant an internal scandal involving one of their own or an internal affairs investigation in which biased words occurred 401 times. Because the media, and consequently the public, is obsessed with corruption, excessive use of force, and inability to solve crimes, these articles are generally not written to show the department's side of the story (Chermak et al., 2006). Even so, as mentioned above, credibility coded articles had a high amount of biased words, 84, and were not written with a negative connotation. Therefore, evidence of negative bias based on context is

also difficult to prove with the findings that biased words appeared frequently in both *internal* and *credibility* contexts.

*RQ3: Is the bias coming from one, all or no sources?*

Seeing as how the results of this study show that bias is not occurring based on words or context, it is also not possible to prove it to be coming from one or multiple sources. Therefore, it should be concluded that bias is not coming from any of the sources. What should be noted, however, is that the TV stations, aside from KRDO, had the highest frequency of *level 1* words even when compared with both newspapers that contained more total words and from which more articles were examined. In the case of Fox21, a little over 8% of the biased words that appeared in their stories were *level 1*. KOAA was close to 7% and KKTU was close to 3%. The question, therefore, remains as to why KRDO, reporting many of the same stories that the other channels reported, did not contain any *level 1* words. While this information may not provide enough evidence for bias, it would be interesting to look more closely at the TV stations in Colorado Springs to gather additional data for further research.

### *Discussion*

In returning to the idea that there had been a hypothesis, the most common assumption, knowing the succession of police chiefs, would have been that more bias would have been found in articles written during the time of chief 2 and chief 3. However, this was not necessarily the case. Even though a word content approach to bias was not able to be proven over any of the time periods, an overall decline in the number of positive articles written during the last ten years surfaced through the course of research. From an outsider's perspective, it was simplistic to infer, through the reading of the articles, that chief 1 was very well liked and respected by not only the citizens of Colorado Springs but the employees of the CSPD. Even after moving to his

position as city manager, articles continued to be written about him and the legacy he left and was continuing to leave for the city. In 2007, when he retired as city manager, an article was written for Fox21 with the headline “Chief of Police to Retire” (Salvo, 2007). If one were to just glance at the article’s headline and not know there had been two chiefs since his time in the role, one might think that he was still police chief as there was no mention of chief 3 anywhere in the article. The article made inference to the city still viewing him as their police chief.

It was difficult to establish a sense in either direction for chief 2; and chief 3, whether effective or not, well-liked or respected, was forging ahead during a very difficult time in which he had to reduce spending in the department by six million (Burke, 2011). Despite the findings, the study is not able to validate the hypothesis without doing further research focused more specifically on context. Additionally, a thorough examination of a greater amount of articles during their specific tenures would be necessary to gather more significant word count data that could prove or disprove bias.

#### Previous Findings and Explanation of Perceived Bias

The interesting thing about bias and the effect that media has over the influence of people’s perceptions, is that there have been hundreds, even thousands of studies conducted. Yet, it is still unclear as to what extent the media is actually able to influence bias. Potter (2011) explains that mass media effects began being studied in the early 1920s and there are, to date, some 4,000 published studies. The most common, primary assumption from mass media scholars is that “media and their content have significant and substantial effects” (Potter, 2011, p. 900). This supposition would provide credibility to the argument that the media does indeed exert a powerful influence over its audience in the form of bias; be it the public or the organization on which it is reporting. For this study, that would mean the police department is

essentially the target of local media prejudice against them. The findings of this project which do not demonstrate a significant measurement of bias, means there is a need to look beyond the media's ability to exert their agenda and how strong that sway actually is. What needs to be assessed is not the historical thinking regarding the media's ability to wield power, but the more modern approach which signifies the audience having the power to negotiate their own meanings (Potter, 2011).

Current research is much more focused on the audience and their interpretation of the messages received. Keep in mind, audience can mean both the public and the group about which the news is reporting. Previous studies have been important in their findings that the personal characteristics of an audience member may be far more important than the media itself in shaping opinions of news bias (Kim & Pasadeos, 2007). The idea of a hostile media effect does have implications on a news agency especially if they are striving to be credible in the eyes of their viewers. Kim & Pasadeos (2007) explain, however, that the content actually being shown on the news may not be as important as the problem in which the public has become far more biased than the press because of the polarization occurring in the political and ideological realms. Politics and ideology are not immune to the police department as both groups are essentially a public service organization that is revered or shunned based on its ability to provide quality services while maintaining a positive public image (Schafer, Huebner, & Bynum, 2003). Therefore, citizens will develop their own biases based on how well they feel they are being served with or without the help of the media. In turn, members of the police force, exposed to the same polarizations as everyone else, will also develop their own viewpoints in regard to how well they feel they are being treated in spite of what the media may or may not say.

With so many additional factors influencing people's lives due to the vast amount of exposure to information at their fingertips, there can no longer be an assumption that the relationship of media and bias is one of cause-and-effect. Potter (2011) explains that "causation is too simple a concept to apply to mass media effect" (p.906). Mass media influence is, in actuality, cyclical in nature and there are always multiple variables in interaction with one another. Social Exchange Theory continues to evolve in its explanation of this complex phenomenon. When one party does something beneficial for the other party, the hope is that the action is reciprocated even when it is not clear at what time and in what form the reciprocation will occur. Possibly, one side feels they have done more for the other side and therefore has a surplus in social balance while the other party is at a deficit and owes favors (Xu & Cai, 2009). There is therefore the possibility that the CSPD and/or the media in Colorado Springs see themselves as having a surplus hoping the other side will provide balance. When this does not occur, one side feels at a loss; or, in the case of this study, having bias placed against them.

However, Potter's (2011) reaffirming of this cyclical idea is precisely why this current study is one of such difficulty in proof as it seems nearly impossible to determine bias based on one variable. Instead, it would be beneficial to examine factors, such as exposure, as being both direct and indirect. This would, at the very least, provide the opportunity to better understand how and why perceived bias exists even when the message itself is not proven to be biased. Potter's (2011) study indicated that indirect exposure can occur through other people, objects such as media advertised products, and rules of institutions that have been shaped by the media. Acknowledging these causes may help in understanding the notion of bias toward the CSPD. If one person, or a small group of officers feel the bias, their conversations with other officers could have persuading effects. More importantly, the negative feelings that arise because of the

way in which media exists to keep government in check and thus shape the rules of institutions including the police department, could cause perceptions of bias.

### Limitations

While this study provided substantial evidence for why bias is such a difficult concept to define and prove, there were certain limitations that existed. The first relies on the fact that exploratory studies, such as the one conducted here, are rarely able to provide satisfactory answers to the research questions. Instead, they are helpful at hinting at answers as well as suggesting future studies that could provide more definitive ones (Babbie, 2010). Second, the challenge in gathering data evenly from each media outlet and across all eras made it so the results could not be effectively compared across the three police chiefs. It was interesting to find that certain inferences could be drawn about how well respected and revered chief 1 was as a police chief given the limited amount of data available. However, those insinuations were not able to be turned into conclusive evidence of greater bias toward the other police chiefs because of them being only assumptions not based on anything more than the researcher's point-of-view. Therefore, another limitation of the study, as much as subjectivity was accounted for, was that by going one step beyond word count analysis to contextual coding, researcher bias did likely occur. Future studies, which will be discussed in more detail below, will need to provide for greater control of researcher bias through the utilization of a pre-determined set of contextual codes and multiple researchers validating the coding to create a greater degree of stability or intra-rater reliability.

### Conclusion

What does this information mean for a police department such as the CSPD? Even though the content chosen for this specific study does not appear to be biased, it does not mean

that bias does not exist. After all, bias can occur overtly by the media or internally through a phenomenon like the hostile media effect. Additional studies would need to be conducted to draw further conclusions of bias based on alternative variables. For example, future studies could focus on how a set group of press releases sent out by the CSPD compares to the actual story aired or written in the media. Alternatively, all articles from a specific media source, such as a local newspaper, over a specified time frame could be examined and coded based on whether they were written about something good the police department did or something negative as it relates to the police department and the media's views insinuated within the article. The key to this type of study would be to have multiple researchers coding the same articles to determine if they saw each article in the same positive or negative manner another did.

Evidence has been substantiated that the public is more willing to pay for police services if they have positive experiences and attitudes toward the public services being provided (Donahue & Miller, 2005). Thus, the media plays a very important role when determining the types of information citizens receive as many will never have direct contact with the police aside from what they see in the news. The police department has the burden of demonstrating their need in the community by having positive relations and exchanges with the media and the public it serves. Therefore, regardless of future studies, the hope for this study is that it has exemplified the need for two things: a re-evaluation of the important role of the public relations department in keeping the department in good relations with the media, as well as an understanding of the inability to transgress from the inevitable transparency of a police officer's role.

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