



# **How Local News in the Great Depression Era Framed Blame, Attribution of Responsibility & Tone**

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# ITALIAN BOMBERS ELUDE CAPTURE

## Mussolini Sends Message Condolence To Stricken Supporter

Philadelphia, Jan. 30.—  
authorities continued their  
tigation today of the bombi  
the John Di Silvestro hom  
made for capture of the ho

## JOBLESS HUSBAND KILLS WIFE, GIRL; COMMITTS SUICIDE

Runs Amuck After Quarrel

## Shackers Appropriate Abandoned Farm Houses

Standish, Mich., Jan. 2.—With  
widespread unemployment in the  
cities, hordes of shackers, as  
squatters are known in Michigan,  
are roaming through rural sec-  
tions of the state, appropriating  
abandoned farms.

Most of the shackers are single

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wife, Mar-  
ghter, Vir-  
ted suicide  
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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- \* How is blame framed?
- \* How is sensational or factual language used to frame crime stories?
- \* What patterns emerge in attribution of responsibility?
- \* How/ if distance influences blame framing, attribution of responsibility and tone.
- \* How do these reflect the social, political and financial context of the 1930s?

# RESEARCH GAP

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## **Framing studies focus on:**

- National media
- Contemporary contexts

## **Limited work on:**

- Local newspapers
- Historical emergence of framing practices especially in local press.

# DOMINANT JOURNALISM TRENDS

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- **The legacy of Yellow Journalism (1890s - early 1930s):** sensationalized, emotional, evoking shock or sympathy with dramatic language
- **The rise of objectivity & professionalization (1920s & 1930s):** Fact based, neutral reporting, accuracy, fairness
- **The Tabloid and Jazz Journalism (1920s & 1930s):** widely popular in cities like NYC, Chicago, Philadelphia and they cover celebrity scandals, kidnappings, gangsters, police chases, murder trials.

## Perspective as an international student

- Many patterns still exist in journalism today in crime reporting (sensationalism, moral framing, focus on violent crimes)

# ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

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- A frame that presents an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for its cause or **solution** to individuals, groups, institutions, or broader systems.”

- (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Iyengar, 1991)

## OUR VARIABLES:

1. Personal
2. Systemic
3. Ambiguous

# BLAME FRAMING

## ✦ Diagnosing causes + moral judgment

- **Blame is often conveyed through:**
  - Loaded language (e.g., “brutal,” “monster”)
  - Selective detail
- Emotional tone

### OUR VARIABLES:

1. Explicit : ?
2. Implicit: ?
3. Victim blaming: ?
4. No blame:?
5. Context Dependent: ?

# BLAME FRAMING

Blame is not always produced by a single word or feature, but by the accumulation of framing elements: **Label** (bandit, killer) / **Action** (shooting, beating, hunting, stealing)/ **Victim** (child, police, wealthy, beautiful girl) **Motive** (jealousy, fear, despondent)/ **Context** (pursuit, strike, jobless)

## EXAMPLE 1:

- “Two men robbed a bank”
- “Bandits robbed a bank”
- “Ruthless bandits terrorized the town during bank robbery”

## EXAMPLE 2:

- “Police failed to respond quickly” - attribution of responsibility
- “Police negligence led to tragedy” - blame

# Blame was coded along a four-level spectrum:

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## ● No Blame

- Procedural or neutral language
- No moral evaluation
- Examples: “held,” “reported,” “accident”

## ● Implicit Blame (Low–Moderate)

- Action-based negativity without evaluation
- Minimal descriptive framing
- Example: “stealing,” “beating”

## ● Implicit Blame (Moderate–Strong)

- Reinforced through:
  - labels (*bandits, kidnappers*)
  - motives (*jealousy, dispute*)
  - victims (*child, police*)
  - metaphors (*warlike, free-for-all*)

## ● Explicit Blame

- Direct moral judgment
- Condemnatory or ideological language
- Example: “mutinous,” “killer,” “wanton cruelty”

# EXAMPLES FROM OUR DATA

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## Explicit Blame through Moral and Identity Labeling

At the highest level, headlines employ **direct moral and identity-based labeling**, such as:

- *“Backwoods cult killer on trial” - EXPLICIT*
- *“Mutinous native Sumatran crew” - EXPLICIT*
- *“Wife lures her rival to death” - EXPLICIT*
- *“The victim was intoxicated at the time.” - IMPLICIT*
- *“Policeman and bandit die in a gun battle” - IMPLICIT*
- *“Kidnappers hunted after shooting man.” - IMPLICIT*
- *“Family quarrel ends in shooting” - IMPLICIT*
- *“He (the suspect) had been freed by jury before.” -IMPLICIT*

(Entman, 1993; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Hall, 1997)

## ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

1. Personal: 24.42%
2. Systemic: 10.6%
3. Ambiguous: 64.98%

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## BLAME FRAMING

1. Explicit : 9.63%
2. Implicit: 37.61%
3. Victim: 1.84%
4. No blame: 44.04%
5. Context Dependent: 6.88%

# tone: sensational vs factual

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- **Sensational** → emotional, dramatic, vivid
- **Factual** → procedural, neutral, descriptive

## Why it matters:

- Shapes emotional engagement
- Influences interpretation of responsibility, moral panic while shaping perception of certain social groups, crimes, victims and offenders as well.

Wang (2012); Uribe & Gunter (2007)

## RESULTS:

- Sensational: **51.4%**
- Factual: **48.6%**

# DOES TONE DETERMINE BLAME?

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Sensational stories:

- Implicit blame: **43.8%**
- Explicit blame: **12.5%**

Factual stories:

- No blame: **54.7%**
- Context dependent: **6.6 %**

**Factual stories avoid blame more clearly. Sensational stories rely on implicit blame. Sensationalism works through suggestion, not direct accusation.**

(Entman, 1993)

# DOES DISTANCE AFFECT TONE?

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- PA stories: 34% sensational
  - Other states: 65.5% sensational
  - International: 62.5% sensational
- ☀ As distance increases, so does sensationalism.

# DISTANCE & ATTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY?

## Ambiguity decreases as distance increases

- PA: **72% ambiguous**
- Other states: **61%**
- International: **50%**

## Systemic attribution increases with distance

- PA: **5% systemic (very low)**
- Other states: **15%**
- International: **25%**

Distance allows both emotional amplification and structural explanation, while proximity produces restraint in tone and suppresses systemic interpretation.

# OFFENDER INTRODUCTION → BLAME FRAMING

## STABILIZING:

- Neutral (man, youths) → No Blame
- Role-based (teacher, banker) → No Blame or Contextual Blame

## DEVIANCE:

- Criminal labels (bandit, gunman) → Implicit Blame
- Moral descriptors (maniac, drug-crazed man) → Explicit blame

✳️ Blame is pre-structured at the moment of introduction

# POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF CRIME FRAMING

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- **Framing shapes public opinion and policy attitudes**  
→ Activates specific interpretations of social problems (*Scheufele, 1999*)
- **Episodic framing → individual responsibility**  
→ Supports punitive responses (policing, incarceration)  
(*Iyengar, 1991*)
- **Thematic framing → systemic responsibility**  
→ Supports social policy solutions (welfare, reform)  
(*Iyengar, 1991; Scheufele, 1999*)
- **Sensational framing → emotional engagement**  
→ Increases fear but limits structural understanding (*Cosand, 2014*)

# CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONTEXT IN THE UNITED STATES (1933)

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**End of Prohibition (1933)**

**Expansion of Federal Crime Enforcement :** Greater federal role in interstate crime

**Growth of Federal Policing (Early FBI):** Focus on bank robbery, kidnapping, organized crime

**Labor Conflict in Industrial States (PA):** Unemployment, strikes, industrial unrest → Law enforcement focused on maintaining order

**Early New Deal Programs Begin (1933) :** Public works programs → Address unemployment and social instability

# PENNSYLVANIA IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION, 1933

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- Collapse of coal and steel industries.
- Massive unemployment :By March only 40 percent of the workforce was employed full time; Black unemployment had reached 50%.
- Early part of the year was marked by severe depression, low wages, and rising anger among miners, setting the stage for massive union organization under the United Mine Workers of America

## **TIME LINE:**

1929 — Stock Market Crash

1930–1932 — Industrial Decline in PA

1933 — Peak Crisis

1933–1935 — New Deal Begins

## **Punitive not structural:**

Despite economic collapse, emphasis remained on **law enforcement, policing of:**

- Strikes
- Prohibition-related crimes
- Public disorder

***Despite widespread economic crisis, crime reporting in Pennsylvania largely framed crime as individual (Episodic) rather than systemic (thematic).***

# FINAL ARGUMENTS ON DATA ANALYSIS

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- Responsibility in crime reporting is often ambiguous but not neutral.
- Blame is implicit rather than explicit.
- Distance increases sensationalism and systemic framing.
- Local reporting minimizes systemic critique
- Crime is constructed as individual moral failure rather than a social problem. (More episodic than thematic)
- Because the 1930s media environment was less interactive and more centralized, local newspapers may have played a particularly powerful role in constructing interpretive frames around crime.
- Local media may indirectly support status quo policies by avoiding structural critique.

# LIMITATIONS

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- Does not capture audience interpretation or reception
- Does not analyze equivalence vs. emphasis framing
- Based on one local newspaper (1933)
- Coding captures patterns, but may miss nuanced or layered meanings in language

# FUTURE RESEARCH

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- Examine audience interpretation (archives, letters, oral histories)
- Analyze race, gender, identity framing.
- Compare rural vs. urban newspapers.
- Expand dataset across years track changes over time
- Explore links between framing and policy discourse & political context - both at the time and right now.

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