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Instructor: Michael Svoboda

Alexander Neumann
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# Double Sided Shield:
# The Duality of Law Enforcement Imagery in Recent News Media

**Abstract**

This article analyzes online news images of law enforcement during four recent major American policing events. This was done using quantitative visual content analysis to sort images in order to determine in what light American police, notably their militarized units, are portrayed. The final breakdown of this analytical process revealed that the visual representation of militarized police in online news media changes between crowd control and stopping a shooting. This study was conducted to better understand the presence of media bias when covering police, as well as how situational changes affect the visual portrayal of law enforcement. Understanding of the existence of this bias and circumstantial effect could not only help police effectively deal with media during major events, but help those who absorb this content to become aware of the framing of issues in news media images.

**Introduction**

Law enforcement in the United States has come under increased scrutiny in the last five years, partially due to their perceived antagonism towards civilians, and also their use of militaristic equipment and tactics. The portrayal of police officers becoming more like "warrior-cops" has sparked criticism from many across the political spectrum. Media coverage of police during major news events has played a significant role in this narrative, but how, and to what degree?

In order to determine whether the visual framing of police in media changes between coverage of protests and coverage of threats to the populous, I will examine online news images using quantitative visual analysis. Additional focus will be paid to the portrayal of militarized police units compared to ordinary uniformed officers. Four major policing events in recent history will be examined: the August 2014 Ferguson unrest, the Charlottesville protests, the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting, and the ambush of Dallas police officers. These events were chosen due to their mass media coverage, as

well as their diversity in situation. Ferguson is an example of police responding to mass protest and riot in an often-militarized manner that was criticized. Charlottesville is an example of police responding to two protests at odds with each other with a militarized response that was criticized by some for failing to maintain a peace. Orlando is an example of police responding in a militarized manner to an active shooter and hostage situation. Dallas is an example of police responding in a militarized manner to an active shooter that is specifically targeting law enforcement.

**Review of Literature**

Framing focuses on how those in the media create content that is absorbed by the public. With news media, the focus is upon how journalists create the news for public consumption and portray reality to the public. Verbally expressed news has been shown to be less effective in conveying a message to the audience than visual media, which is more often seen as closer to the truth than other forms (Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017). Miller and Roberts (2010, pg. 43) have shown that news audiences "…derived a common feeling and meaning from the media images." News photos have even been theorized to affect those who don't actively consume the news (Dahmen, 2018). This wide and common acceptance of news images by the public allows those who create media content to have a significant amount of power determining what others take away from an image, and therefore a topic, using framing. Visual imagery becomes more prevalent in news media when covering traumatic events and human suffering. The portrayal of traumatic events to the public by media images have been shown to not be neutral, and the selective use of photographic depiction can influence the public perception of events and issues (Zhang and Hellmueller, 2017).

The relationship of police with the public has long been an adversarial one. Since 2014, a large group of publicized events in a relatively short period of time have brought about a long lasting negative view of law enforcement (Weitzer, 2015). A driving force behind this is the recent public view that the police in many western liberal democracies, particularly the United States, are becoming more militarized. Flares of critical observation to this supposed trend most often occur after incidents where police are portrayed in a negative light. This view results from police departments gaining more equipment and training that is designed for combat situations (McMichael, 2017).

In the last two decades, police departments have been able to receive generous amounts of military hardware, such as vehicles and small arms, from the Department of Defense. There has also been an expansion and increased utilization of Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) units, who often execute high risk warrants and respond to hostile situations that normal officers are not equipped or trained for (Myers-Montgomery, 2016). Police militarization theory has become prevalent in the public's eye when law enforcement personnel are shown responding to crowd control situations, from a small peaceful protest to a large riot. Law enforcement utilizes intelligence infrastructure, emergency management and the deployment of specialized equipment when responding to these situations (Wood, 2014). Most often the most visible part of these operations are officers deployed directly to the crowd with heavy equipment such as riot shields, and sometimes military style weapons. While most militarized police units, such as SWAT teams, are most often utilized today to execute search warrants, they are extremely prevalent in the news media for their presence at crowd control activities and their response to an active threat in society, such as a shooter.

The law and media have had a lengthy relationship, with crime having a major effect on popular media. Non-fictional media such as reality television shows and viral videos that feature illegal activities have become more prevalent (Yar, 2012); accordingly, a reality driven view of law enforcement in the media has risen. Law enforcement, in order to function as an effective force, must maintain a certain level of legitimacy and form a relationship with the rest of society that is based around their necessity. Firsthand experience between individuals and law enforcement during normal policing activities forms an idea of what people think of police, but the media creates a less personal experience where as many as two thirds of people have their entire opinions of police influenced (Stewart, 2013).

Media serves as a standard go between for the police and the public, with the public viewing the actions of police through this display and the police responding to calls by the public using the media as a microphone. Episodic coverage, in which sensationalized images of individuals are pushed very much in the moment, is a common practice for coverage of protest events and even in coverage of tragedy (Schulenberg and Chenier, 2014). Stewart (2013) theorizes how during the fall of apartheid, South African media used a conflict frame of police-public interactions, playing into the falling trust of the community in their police force. This conflict frame was executed either as normal clash between law enforcement and public, or as the antagonistic apartheid formed police oppressing the struggling black public. Images were used in this to display both these frames.

Law enforcement officers have been shown to react to this unfriendly news coverage, with over 80% of some sampled sheriff's deputies expressing their belief that

hostile media coverage toward police, increases crime, a belief based largely on how the civilians they come in contact with on the job cooperate with them (Nix and Pickett, 2017). As has already been determined, photographs drive narratives in news media. In the case of Ferguson, one study found more photographs of law enforcement contained police with militaristic equipment than those without. Additionally, three times as many images in a given sample displayed law enforcement with militarized equipment than regular police equipment. In the same study, violent interaction between protestors and police were more common in news coverage than of images of retaining law and order with their presence alone (Cowart, Saunders, and Blackstone, 2016). Photographic coverage of law enforcement is also prevalent during situations where someone is a threat to society, like a mass shooter. Dahmam (2018) found that police were in 11% of front page photographs in the three days following three mass shootings. Police were only in two percentage points less of the photographs than were vigils. This is significant when lined up against what others could argue are more stark images, such as those of the deceased, the injured, the families affected, or the perpetrator.

**Methods**

Images that were gathered were from two common media sources across all four incidents and one media source local to each incident. The two common sources chosen were the Associated Press and *The New York Times*. The local sources were: the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in the case of Ferguson, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in the case of Charlottesville, and the *Dallas Morning News* and *Orlando Sentinel*, respectively. The Associated Press was chosen for its prominence as a news collector widely cited in other media outlets, specifically with its photographic journalism being an extremely common

resource news publications. *The New York Times* was chosen for position as the daily newspaper with the number one combined print and digital circulation, and for being a common source for photographic journalism on major media events. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was chosen for its publication's close proximity to Ferguson, and prominence as the major newspaper in the state of Missouri. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* was chosen for its publication's close proximity to Charlottesville, as well as its wide circulation in Virginia – where it is the newspaper of record. The *Dallas Morning News* was chosen due to its local position to the police shooting, as well as its recent history of Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalism. The *Orlando Sentinel* was chosen for its local position to the nightclub shooting, as well as its dominating circulation in the Orlando and Central Florida region. No significant bias was found in the outlets. The four events consisted of hard news that was published very soon after events, leading to the conclusion that the outlet's political leanings would have had little to no effect on the outcome of the study.

All images were gathered online. For Associated Press photographs, all were taken from *apimages.com*. For *New York Times* photographs, all were searched for and taken from articles on their website, *nytimes.com*. For *St. Louis Herald-Dispatch* photographs, all were searched for under their images search option and taken from their website, *stltoday.com*. For *Richmond Times-Dispatch* photographs, all were searched for under their image search option and taken from their website, *richmond.com*. For *the Dallas Morning News*, all images were taken from articles found on their website, at *dallasnews.com*. For *the Orlando Sentinel*, all images searched for under their photo search option and were taken from their website, *orlanodsentinel.com*. Images and

articles for the AP and *NYT* were found using the search term of the place where each event took place, i.e. "Ferguson" for the Ferguson unrest. This was also done for the local sources in the case of the Ferguson unrest and the Charlottesville protests, for the newspapers are not published in the city the event took place in. In the case of *the Dallas Morning News* and *the Orlando Sentinel*, a more specific term was used to find images and articles because searching for the name of the major city the newspaper was located in was deemed too general. For the Dallas police shootings, the term "Police" was used as the search keyword. For the Orlando nightclub shooting, the term "Pulse" was used as the search keyword. Images and articles were only chosen if they were published during a specific time period for each event. In each case, this was the starting date of the event, and one additional day after the end of the event. For Ferguson, the date range chosen using this criterion were August 9-26, 2014. For Charlottesville, the date range was August 11-13, 2017. For Dallas, the date range was July 7-9, 2016. For Orlando, the date range was June 12-13, 2016.

Only still images were chosen for this study. Images were only chosen if they contained law enforcement officers or vehicles in the location of the incident, responding to it in the field. This excludes press conferences, events in other parts of the country in reaction to the incident being studied, and crime scene personnel working the scene after the fact. Photos containing the media were included, but only if law enforcement officers were shown reacting to the situation ongoing and not the media. For example, a police officer doing an on-camera interview would not be included, but a police officer talking with a protestor with journalists in the frame would be. Additionally, images must have contained law enforcement reacting to the events as they unfolded or immediately

afterword. For example, photos of law enforcement officers at the hospital after a fellow officer had been shot several hours earlier were included, but not police officers at vigils during the day if the incident was resolved during the nighttime. For the purpose of this study, law enforcement did not include any national guard personnel.

All images were analyzed using quantitative visual content analysis. Zhang and Hellmueller (2017) display how quantitative visual content analysis can be used to examine image content and media frames, by using a systematic and statistical method to classify image communication and then infer from this data the meaning of the frames. Using a method similar to Cowart (2016), we'll identify themes within sample images from a certain date range, and compile statistics descriptive to those themes across all four policing events. In this study, all images will be classified in two separate sections, with three categories for each section, to measure how often images with a certain theme are displayed in the overall narrative of media coverage.

The first section will measure the level of police militarization from an ordinary uniformed police officer, to an officer equipped with riot control equipment, to an officer equipped with offensive tactical gear. For this, the presence of vehicles will also be a determinate factor. For this determinate classification, the presence of any factors that would bring the image from a lower category to a higher one would classify the entire image as displaying officers in that higher category. For example, a law enforcement officer in a regular uniform and regular duty ballistic vest who is wielding a rifle would be classify the image as "Militarized" even though the officer is wearing a uniform that would classify as a "Patrol" uniform.

Factors that would lead to an image of police to move up from the "Patrol" category to the "Riot" category would be the presence of a light weight protective devices like a riot shield or a non-ballistic helmet; both are designed to stop projectiles and not bullets. Batons, bullhorns, normal tear gas canisters and gas masks are also items that would lead images to be classified in the "Riot" category. Factors that would lead an image to be moved up from the "Riot" category to the "Militarized" category include the presence of a long gun, like a shotgun or rifle. Additionally, the use of "riot gun" which is designed to fire "less than lethal" ammunition like rubber bullets, or a firearm designed to launch tear gas canisters, would move an image into this category. This equipment doesn't fall into the "Riot" category because these weapons are typically offensive and do not use mere physical strength or simple ways of delivering tear gas to control a crowd. Heavy bullet resistant vests and ballistic shields, which are designed to help protect against bullets would also move an image up. The presence of Armored vehicles, as opposed to normal police cars, would classify a photo as "Militarized."

The second section will measure in what light the police are being portrayed during the photo. This will be measured by the actions of police in the photo, not the actions of civilians in the image. Similar to the previous section, if any part of the photo displays a factor, then the entire photo will be classified as that. For this there are three categories: negative, neutral, or positive. Negative images will feature police acting in an overly aggressive manner, notably actively opposing the civilians that are also featured in the image. For example, a line of riot police officers calmly containing a crowd wouldn't be a negative image, but it would be if they aim a firearm at a civilian. The positive section features more humanizing images of police, which may include them talking with

civilians in a respectful manner, showing nonaggressive emotion or standing guard over others in the immediate frame (this could include keeping groups separated). Neutral images would be those where police officers are not seen doing anything that would be classified as clearly negative or positive, or one where both are seen but not so much that it could firmly be classified as either. For instance, a photo of officers who are not reacting harshly to protestors or discussing amongst themselves while standing guard over a particular street block would be considered neutral.

**Findings**

The first section that photographs were divided into was the level of militarization displayed in images of law enforcement. Only images that featured law enforcement and were published online in a given time period were analyzed.

For the unrest in Ferguson, a total of 515 photographs were reviewed. 142 (27.6%) of these images were categorized as photographs of police in a Patrol role, 123 (23.9%) were classified as Riot, and 250 (48.5%) of these were categorized as Militarized. For protests in Charlottesville, a total of 61 photographs were reviewed. Of these images, 30 (49.2%) were categorized as Patrol, 18 (29.5%) were categorized as Riot, and 13 (21.3%) were categorized as Militarized. We can see that, although Ferguson and Charlottesville were protests that turned violent, the police at Ferguson were shown as less of a normal uniform force and more of a militarized force compared to Charlottesville.

For the shooting of police officers in Dallas, 63 images were analyzed. Of these 38 (60.3%) were of Patrol officers, and 25 (39.7%) were of Militarized officers. For the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando a total of 31 photographs were reviewed, 16

| Ferguson<br>Total: 515 | Patrol | Riot | Militarized |
|---|---|---|---|
| Negative | AP: 6<br>NYT: 6<br>Local: 4<br>**Total: 16** | AP: 11<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 8<br>**Total: 19** | AP: 58<br>NYT: 17<br>Local: 34<br>**Total:109** |
| Neutral | AP: 33<br>NYT: 6<br>Local: 35<br>**Total: 74** | AP: 59<br>NYT: 10<br>Local: 32<br>**Total: 101** | AP: 65<br>NYT: 12<br>Local: 55<br>**Total: 132** |
| Positive | AP: 18<br>NYT: 3<br>Local: 31<br>**Total: 52** | AP: 1<br>NYT: 1<br>Local: 1<br>**Total: 3** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 9<br>**Total: 9** |

| Charlottesville<br>Total: 61 | Patrol | Riot | Militarized |
|---|---|---|---|
| Negative | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 1<br>**Total: 1** | AP: 1<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 3<br>**Total: 4** | AP: 1<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 1<br>**Total: 2** |
| Neutral | AP: 12<br>NYT: 1<br>Local: 7<br>**Total: 20** | AP: 10<br>NYT: 1<br>Local: 1<br>**Total: 12** | AP: 6<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 2<br>**Total: 8** |
| Positive | AP: 7<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 2<br>**Total: 9** | AP: 2<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 2** | AP: 3<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 3** |

| Dallas Total: 63 | Patrol | Riot | Militarized |
|---|---|---|---|
| Negative | AP: 3<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 3** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 3<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 3<br>**Total: 6** |
| Neutral | AP: 13<br>NYT: 3<br>Local: 4<br>**Total: 20** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 11<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 2<br>**Total: 13** |
| Positive | AP: 5<br>NYT: 3<br>Local: 7<br>**Total: 15** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 3<br>Local: 3<br>**Total: 6** |

| Orlando Total: 31 | Patrol | Riot | Militarized |
|---|---|---|---|
| Negative | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** |
| Neutral | AP: 12<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 2<br>**Total: 14** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 11<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 1<br>**Total: 12** |
| Positive | AP: 1<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 1<br>**Total: 2** | AP: 0<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 0<br>**Total: 0** | AP: 1<br>NYT: 0<br>Local: 2<br>**Total: 3** |

(51.6%) images were classified as showing law enforcement in a Patrol function, while 15 (48.4%) were classified as showing law enforcement in a Militarized function. In Ferguson, Dallas and Orlando the police were displayed as Militarized at relative similar rates – between 39% and 49%.

How often the media showed the militarization of police in images was not the purpose of this study. This data, however, helps us to compare these rates of showing militarization against the overall negative or positive view of police. The second section that photographs were divided into was how law enforcement was portrayed, and helped us form a more complete picture of how militarized police are shown in the media.

During Ferguson, 144 (27.9%) photographs which were analyzed displayed police in a negative light, 307 (59.6%) showed police in a neutral light, and 64 (12.5%) showed them in a positive way. In Charlottesville, 7 (11.5%) images showed police in a negative light, 40 (65.5%) showed police in a neutral way, and 14 (23.0%) images showed police in a positive way. During Dallas, there were 9 (14.3%) negative images of police, 33 (52.4%) neutral images, and 21 (33.3%) positive images. Covering the Orlando shooting, there were no negative images of police, 26 (83.9%) neutral images of police, and 5 (16.1%) positive images of police.

In all cases, the majority of images showed police in a neutral way. If we look past the neutral images, we can see how these outlets displayed police in visual media. Ferguson coverage showed police in a negative light more than twice as much as they showed them in a positive light. Charlottesville – surprisingly – was the opposite, with exactly twice as many positive portrayals compared to negative ones. Findings similar to

Charlottesville were found in Dallas, and there was no negative police coverage in Orlando.

**Discussion**

This study showed that – in the cases covered – there was a difference in photographic coverage of law enforcement in online newspapers based on the situations law enforcement was responding to, even if they used the same equipment. Police in Ferguson, Dallas and Orlando were displayed at the militarized level at similar rates even though the police were displayed overall in opposite ways. Law enforcement personnel were shown in a negative light twice as much as it was shown in a positive light during Ferguson, and they were shown in a positive light at least twice as often as they were shown negative light during Dallas and Orlando. This data (notably excluding the example of Charlottesville) alone helps us determine that when police are responding to a protest they are displayed negatively in the media compared to when they are responding to an extremely violent attack.

This point has been shown best by three of the four selected events, but it should be noted that these law enforcement events were not cut and dry and the circumstances of the events affected the coverage in ways statistics cannot display. These affects are diverse, and they can be used to both credit and discredit the idea that photographic media coverage of police is biased based on the event.

Ferguson was notably different as a source from the others because it was a protest of police. The unrest in the St. Louis suburb was spawned by the shooting of an unarmed African American man by a local police officer, and grew to a general critique of police. This critique covered many things, from racial bias in the criminal justice

Militarized Officers arrest a man on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri (Source: New York Times, photo by Curtis Compton)

system to police use of force, but also focused on police militarization. The protestors that militarized officers were engaging were there to protest those militarized officers. This is extremely important, for the media coverage of an event like that could and would reasonably feature militarized officers, and would focus on the negative affect that the protestors are calling to end. This confrontation shouldn't be surprising, as it has already been determined that law enforcement responds more heavy handedly to protests of police than other types (Reynolds-Stenston, 2017). Time should also be noted, with Fergusons lengthy period greatly influencing the number of images collected. The findings of this study reflect the work done by Cowart and Blackstone (2016), who determined that riot and militarized police were shown more often in media images during the Ferguson unrest.

Charlottesville is the outlier in the study, with it being more similar to Dallas and Orlando in the positive/negative militarized police statistics. This could be due a number of factors, including the issue of the protest. As opposed to Ferguson, Charlottesville was not a singular protest directly aimed at the government, but rather two opposing groups of civilians that were heavily divided over moral and political beliefs. The government was not acting as the topic of the protest while responding to it, it was only doing the latter. Law enforcement was there to keep the peace between these two groups. It should also be mentioned that three deaths occurred during the event. The emergency services' response to the automotive attack that killed one person was seen as the government, including law enforcement, assisting people in their time of need. This was part of the protest, but was entirely the opposite of Ferguson. The two other deaths that occurred during the event were of two Virginia State Police officers who perished in after a helicopter, dispatched to assist the public safety efforts in the city, crashed. Additionally, the police in Charlottesville did not deploy nearly as many militarized resources as were used in Ferguson. The sympathetic view of police, as well as the more limited use of militarized units, certainly contributed the results of the study in an unpredicted manner.

Orlando is a more concrete exhibit, with a more militarized response from police and a more sympathetic view towards them. Images of police responding to the event in order to stop the threat, as well as help those affected by it, were similar to the affect that happened during Charlottesville. Police officers with heavily militarized gear were shown in a heroic light, and even their militarized equipment was shown in a positive light – notably a photograph from the Orlando Police Department, which was printed in several media sources, of the Ballistic Kevlar helmet that took damage from a bullet and saved an

An Orlando Police Officer's Kevlar helmet after being struck by a rifle bullet from the Orlando Gunman (Source: AP, photo by Orlando Police Department)

officer's life. Notably, no riot officers were shown, as would be expected in a response to an event like this. It should also be noted that much of the militarized response to the event was not captured or shown in news outlets directly after because of the lack of access and warning of the event taking place. An active shooter, compared to a protest, is a much more violent event with little possibly of journalists to preplan and assemble coverage of it as it occurs. This certainly affected the type of images that were available to publish, especially so soon after the event.

Like Orlando, Dallas featured a heavily militarized response from police, but with an even more sympathetic view of law enforcement. Though Orlando had no negative depictions of police and Dallas did, the police in Dallas who were shown portraying "negative" behavior were almost all shown aiming weapons at a car that they were suspicious of being a threat. Dallas, additionally, had more than double the rate of

Dallas Police Officers salute the deceased as they depart Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas, Texas
(Source: Dallas Morning News, photo by Rosa Baca)

positive images of police. This can be attributed to the circumstances of the event, where

five law enforcement officers were specifically targeted and killed. Officers displayed

raw emotion at the loss of their own and were shown reacting in the moment to their

deaths at the scene and at local hospitals. The Dallas police shooting had the highest

percentage of positive police coverage, even though it was the most militarized action

taken by police in any of these four events, and is perhaps the most militarized violent

police action taken since the Waco Siege in 1993. Dallas SWAT officers, after having

cornered the gunman in a hallway of a local college, for the first time in American

policing used a robot to kill someone. Officers managed to terminate the gunman by

creating a makeshift bomb out of breaching charges and attaching it to a bomb disposal

robot, an unprecedented use of force (Thompson 2018). This drastic juxtaposition

between positive media imagery of police and their extremely militarized use of force is perhaps the best example found in this study of how the situation law enforcement are responding to greatly dictates how their militarized response will be portrayed photographically in the media.

From the data received in this study, the main factor that determines how the media covers militarized law enforcement is the police behavior. Unwise police action, like aiming rifles at civilians, was highlighted in the coverage of Ferguson and not in Charlottesville because Charlottesville didn't have any of that. If the police do anything perceived as irresponsible behavior, the media will cover it more than if they act normally or friendly. The type of negative photographic display of police covered in this study cannot happen without law enforcement officers out in the open behaving in a way that would be deemed negative. According to the statistics from this study, in events where police are performing blatant acts to protect the public, roughly twice as many positive images of law enforcement appear in the media immediately after; the inverse is true if they are performing blatantly antagonistic acts. Future research can be done on different incidents, whether they be protest, active shooter or any other type of police response, to see whether this theory holds true.

For each event and each source, there appeared distinct differences in what was covered and what was not. *The New York Times* came up with the least number of published photographs that fit the criteria for all events. Overall, they would publish few photographs on an event and would repeatedly link the same slideshow of images to many different articles about the event. *The Associated Press* featured the most photographs that fit the criteria, often driving the broader statistics for an event. Local

news sources were found to be more likely to focus on local issues, with protests generating more images of protestor/police interaction, and shootings showing more emotional community reaction – including of law enforcement during Dallas.

**Conclusion**

This study analyzed the photographic media coverage of law enforcement in American online newspapers specifically the effect of police militarization, during and/or soon following four recent major policing events. Quantitative visual analysis was used to examine still images that featured law enforcement during the events; the images were picked to see if media coverage of police and its militarization changed depending upon the situation. The unrest in Ferguson and Charlottesville both provided images of police reacting to protest, but, in hindsight, another exhibit besides Charlottesville would have better contributed to the study. The Orlando attack and Dallas shooting both managed to provide images that involved militarized police responding to active shooters, with Dallas providing an exhibit of an attack on police.

The study statistically concluded that Ferguson, Orlando and Dallas had similar rates of images featuring fully militarized law enforcement. From this close similarity, the comparison of whether police were portrayed as negative or positive was brought in to distinguish between protests and violent threats to society. The study concluded that in the chosen protest in Ferguson, police were viewed more than double negative compared to positive; whereas police in Dallas and Orlando were shown positively more than twice the amount as they were shown negatively. This is a stark difference in visual media coverage between the two categories, one which speaks higher volumes when taken into account the many levels of police militarization used in active shooter operations –

especially Dallas. Many outside factors, such as media access and time frame were taken into account, but it is extremely difficult to determine how much these affected the final outcome of exhibits.

The exhibits chosen for this study were from a small number of policing events, with a relatively small number of sources for each event. This study can only estimate how much all visual representation of police militarization changes depending on the circumstances of the situation. However, it is clear in these chosen examples that the situation does a great deal to affect the statistical rate of positive and negative images of militarized law enforcement.

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# Reflection Essay

I chose to examine the topic of police representation in the media because of the major contemporary American societal discussion about police behavior, a discussion I see as heavily boosted by the media. I connected the topic of police militarization and its negative effects on society to the tragedy of recent mass killings and how the police respond to them. These two issues, both of which are prominently featured in recent American media, seemed to have an underrepresented amount of comparative analysis between them.

I feel this topic was important to research for two main reasons. Firstly, because I believe independent thought when absorbing media of any kind is extremely important. As my research progressed, I began to realize how greatly news media changes between negative coverage of police militarization and positive coverage of those same types of law enforcement officers during a violent tragedy. My goal was to highlight this contradiction in an effort to prove that news media can self-contradict itself in an effort to have people think deeper about what they see in the news. Secondly, I felt this topic was important to research in the fashion I did because the media's display of police—through imagery—was entirely dependent on how police behaved. Highlighting how greatly the actions of law enforcement affected how they were shown to the public is key in making the police think twice before they do something that could show them in a negative light.

My audience for this work was mainly academics in the field of Criminal Justice. I believed I achieved the proper styling and presentation of research, arguments and discussion of an academic journal of this type, who's readers would be interested in this topic and could perhaps do continuing research and study on it.

In my research, I utilized the Gelman Library Online Journals to obtain academic articles on the subject of militarized law enforcement images in media. This initial attempt to find research journal articles about this specific topic yielded few results, prompting me to change my strategy and instead look for sources that discussed police in the news, news imagery, and recent police militarization. Combining the previous research from all these different fields helped me to organize my argument with academic sources to support each layer of it. Looking back on the process has helped me realize that when your topic has a small amount of previous research done on it, the best way to tackle the issue is by widening your search to the larger topics that your project involves and then fitting those pieces together to something that works for your work.

Throughout my research, I judged the credibility of sources based off a number of factors. Many of my sources were academic journal articles, so I looked into who published the journal that included the article and how respected they were in academic circles. Additionally, I looked at the authors of the articles to see if they had possessed any clout in the topic's field. Finally, the references that the authors included were important to the accuracy of the article, and thusly I tried to pick articles that had a large body of references from credible sources.