

Chapter 4: Near and Far: Spatial variation in the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing.

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On April 16, 2013, the day after bombs placed near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killed three and injured 140, the front pages of newspapers across the US were as grim as they were predictable. Headlines screamed, "Marathon Terror" (Boston Globe), "Deadly Blasts Rock Boston" (Wall Street Journal) and "Terror in Boston" (Los Angeles Times). The Indianapolis Star's front page announced, "It Can Happen Any Time, Any Place." Article leads told of two bomb blasts releasing "orange balls of fire into the air" (Washington Post), "shattered glass and severed limbs" (Indian River Press Journal), and scenes of "chaos and carnage" (Chicago Tribune). Front-page pictures depicted scenes of blood-soaked streets and badly wounded runners.

For those who follow terrorism reporting closely, the day-after coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing offers few surprises. On the contrary, the news media's initial reporting on the Marathon bombing accentuated unsettling information, as critics anticipated. News audiences read graphic details of the attack, interviews with frightened eye-witnesses, and speculation about future strikes. One angry reader accused The Boston Globe of re-terrorizing the community with its coverage (Waltham, 2013 A10).

Something unexpected, however, started to happen on the second day of reporting on the Marathon bombing. Reporters for Boston's newspapers moderated the tone of their reporting relative to journalists from outside the Boston area. Stories about those injured and killed in the attack continued, but Boston's newspapers also provided readers news about acts of fellowship, heroism, and resilience during the crisis. National and international journalists paid less attention to these good news stories.

The differences that arose in the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing are puzzling. The tendency for journalists to report in "packs" suggests that coverage of the bombing and its aftermath would be consistent across news outlets. Instead, differences emerged. The pattern of negativity is also curious. Local journalists are thought to accentuate bad news more than other reporters (Kaniss 1991, Gartner 2004), but national journalists got more negative while Boston's journalists did the opposite.

Building on the work of Sandman and Paden {, 1979} and Trope and Liberman (2010), I advance what I am calling the "sensitive media thesis." The essence of the argument is this. Reporting on crises brought about by acts of terrorism reflect the sensitivities journalists have to the potential for public panic during these events and the responses journalists and their audiences have to distant events.

Instead of pouring on the negativity during crises, journalists moderate the tone of their reporting. The spectre of public panic motivates this change.

Reporters worry that making the news too negative could raise public anxiety to dangerous levels.

Some journalists, however, temper their reporting more than others. Journalists who serve communities that are physically distant from the places where crises take place report on crisis events more negatively than journalists who serve communities that are physically proximate to the crises. Physical distance influences the way people think about events. The further away people are from the location of an event, the more they think about that event in abstract terms. The more abstractly audiences think about distant events, the more journalists use negative language to drive the relevance of distant events home to their readers.

At the same time, journalists are subject to the same cognitive process that produces abstract thinking in their audiences. The result is that while journalists from distant communities report more negatively about crisis events, they also report more abstractly about those events. In contrast, journalists who serve communities that are proximate to crisis events cover those events less negatively and more concretely than their distant counterparts.

In this chapter, I use variation in the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing to examine the plausibility of this sensitive media thesis. Using automated text analysis, I show that the tone of the Boston Marathon bombing coverage varied as an inverse function of the distance between newspaper cities and the city of Boston. Coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing got more negative the farther away a newspaper's home city was from the city of Boston.

In addition, I find that more distant newspapers used more abstract language to discuss the Marathon bombing than newspapers located closer to the point of attack.

These findings suggest that journalists implicitly tune their reporting to their audiences. During crises, the news media offers some markets more reassuring messages than it provides others. Below, I describe what we know about this pattern of reporting and why it emerges.

Crisis Reporting on the Three Mile Island Nuclear Disaster

The story behind the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing begins almost thirty-five years earlier in Pennsylvania. It's 4:00 a.m. Wednesday, March 28, 1979 and the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor just experienced partial meltdown.

Feedwater pumps designed to assist in cooling the reactor failed, causing the reactor to heat up (Nuclear Regulatory Commission 2018, accessed December 8, 2020: <https://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/3mile-isle.html>). As pressure within the reactor increased, a release valve opened. The valve, however, did not close once pressure within the reactor returned to normal levels, allowing the reactor's remaining coolant water to leak out.

Employees at Three Mile Island misread the situation. Not realizing that the release valve remained open and that replacement water was being pushed

into the reactor to address increasing temperature, plant workers cut the flow of water to the core (World Nuclear Organization 2020. Accessed December 8, 2020. <https://www.world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/three-mile-island-accident.aspx>). The error pushed temperatures in the plant's nuclear core to dangerous levels.

The public begins learning about the accident at 8:25 a.m., when the story broke on WKBO, a local radio station in Pennsylvania. The station's traffic reporter heard on his CB radio that local firefighters were heading to the Three Mile Island plant; he contacted the station's news director, Mike Pintek, who called the plant. A communications director for Metropolitan Edison ("Met Ed"), the company that operated the reactor, told Pintek that the accident posed no risk to the public (Pell 2020 <https://physicstoday.scitation.org/doi/10.1063/PT.6.4.20200505a/full/>).

Met Ed vice president Jack Herbein, also downplayed the seriousness of the situation at Three Mile Island. "I wouldn't call it a very serious accident at this point," he said (Ayres Jr. 1979, A1). A surprising turn of events at the reactor on May 30th, though, appeared to call this assessment into question.

The release of two radiation bursts from the plant on the morning of May 30th had public officials worried the reactor might explode (World Nuclear Association, 2012). Pennsylvania Governor Richard Thornburgh advised pregnant women and all school-age children within a five-mile radius of the plant to evacuate the area. Approximately 140,000 people fled (<http://>

www.atomicarchive.com/History/coldwar/page19.shtml), under the blair of warning sirens in nearby Harrisburg (Ayres Jr., 1979, A1).

Three Mile Island in the Eyes of Local and National Reporters

The contingent of more than 300 reporters who set up shop in Harrisburg to cover the developing story at Three Mile Island were not among those who evacuated the Keystone state Sandman and Paden 1979b. Despite the apparent danger, reporters on the scene in Harrisburg were not going to miss the opportunity to report about the worst nuclear accident in US history.

Crises, like the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, command public attention {Althaus, 2002 #; Baum, 2003 #1515}. These brief episodes have all the hallmarks of great news. Crises involve a palpable sense of threat and the perception that consequential decisions must be made quickly, without the benefit of full information (Lebow 1981). Crises also upend citizen routines and the powers governments call on to maintain order, producing unusual patterns of political, economic, and social activity.

As Peter M. Sandman and Mary Paden (1979b), a noted, the Three Mile Island nuclear accident disrupted journalistic routines as well. Sent to Harrisburg at the behest of The Columbia Journalism Review to “cover the coverage” (Sandman 2004), the two discovered reporting patterns that genuinely surprised them.

Some journalists played to type. Walter Cronkite opened his Friday evening broadcast ominously, saying “the world has never known a day quite like today” (Sandman and Paden 1979). Nevertheless, alarmist stories like this were unusual. Reporters mostly provided sober accounts of events surrounding the accident.

Journalists who worked for the Harrisburg, PA Patriot and Evening News produced the most cautious reporting. Each of the local reporters Sandman and Paden spoke to told them the same thing: “. . .we don’t want to start a panic with an inaccurate story. Or even, perhaps, an accurate one” (Sandman and Paden 1979b).

In contrast, national news outlets were less concerned about panic in the local area. The Associated Press broke a story that the reactor might explode, but none of the local television channels used it. Indeed, Joseph Higgins, the general manager of WHP, the local CBS affiliate, called CBS News to complain that the network was trying to “. . .make the story as dramatic as possible, much to the detriment of the local viewing public” (Sandman and Paden 1979b).

Explaining Spatial Variation in Crisis Coverage

As the quote from Joseph Higgins implies, Sandman and Paden explain variation in the coverage of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident by focusing on the responses of local journalists to the crisis. Local journalists moderated their tone in response to concerns about panic in the communities

they served. National journalists did not have the same concerns. Consequently, reporters from outside the Pennsylvania area covered Three Mile Island more negatively.

Sandman and Paden's argument about the behavior of local journalists is appealing. Local journalists may think of themselves as advocates for and protectors of the communities they work in {Hatcher and Havik, 2014}. Moreover, this argument does a good job of explaining not only the behavior of local journalists during the Three Mile Island crisis, but their stated motives for reporting more cautiously as well.

Nevertheless, focusing on local journalists cannot account for all the variation in reporting Sandman and Paden observed. Even though some reporting on Three Mile Island was more provocative than others, Sandman and Paden report that all the reporting they considered was less negative than usual. This implies a change on the part of all or most journalists, not just local journalists.

Sandman and Paden's argument also has a demarcation problem: it is difficult to know where the categories of national journalists begin and local journalists end. If reporters in Harrisburg (12 miles from Three Mile Island) were concerned about panic in their community, surely reporters in Lancaster PA (24 miles from Three Mile Island) were as well. Philadelphia's and New York City's journalists might be concerned as well. The Three Mile Island nuclear accident engendered widespread anxiety. People in the US worried, to borrow a line from the comedian Johnny Carson, that "two pound turkeys and fifty pound

cranberries” -- Thanksgiving at Three Mile Island -- might be what their Thanksgiving celebrations looked like too.

I suggest that a better explanation of variation in the coverage of crisis events focuses on concerns about public panic during crises and the physical distance between news audiences and crisis events. Concerns about public panic make journalists report more cautiously than normal. The way news audiences and journalists react to distant events explains the spatial variation in reporting within crises. I explain how and why these factors work below.

The Threat of Public Panic

Crises raise the spectre of public panic. Although, research by sociologists and historians suggests that public panics during crises are rare {Jones, 2004 #961; Wessely, 2005 #960; Critcher 2008}, elites believe that public panics must be guarded against during crisis events {Clarke and Ches 2008}. In a speech to the National Press Club, for example, former Governor of Pennsylvania, Richard Thornburgh, recalled the situation in his state on March 28, 1979 (<https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/ag/legacy/2011/08/23/03-28-1989.pdf>. Accessed December 14, 2020): “[F]ew people realized there really was no danger of an actual nuclear explosion -- mushroom cloud and all -- from a nuclear power plant.” As public faith in the experts in charge of managing the accident eroded, Thornburgh came to believe that,

the credibility of the governor's office was to become much more than simply a political asset for its occupant. That credibility was to become, perhaps, the last check against a possible breakdown in civil authority, and the chaos and panic such a breakdown surely would ignite. Obviously, we were determined to preserve that check.

An unfortunate coincidence amplified the apparent risk posed by the Three Mile Island accident. At the same time the Three Mile Island accident took place, the movie *The China Syndrome*, about a meltdown at a nuclear power plant, played in theaters. The film described the risk of meltdown as capable of contaminating an “area the size of Pennsylvania.” (quoted in Thornburgh 1989). Television news stations interspersed shots of the Three Mile Island reactor with scenes from *The China Syndrome*, adding drama to the events (Dubner and Levitt 2007 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/16/magazine/16wwln-freakonomics-t.html>. Accessed December 14, 2020).

Reporters, who get their information from many of the same people who worry about public panic, are susceptible to the idea that their reporting could alarm the public. Writing about the Zika virus, the journalist Al Tomkins wrote, “I don’t know of any journalist who sets out to scare people, but reporters may unintentionally alarm their audiences with shoddy coverage of a virus that’s entered a frenzied news cycle that may lead to panic and ineffective overreaction” <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-newsrooms-can-tone-down-their-coronavirus-coverage-while-still-reporting-responsibly/> Accessed December 14, 2020).

In response to these concerns, journalists often will temper their reporting. Some respond this way in line with the do no harm ethic that reporters consider

one of the bedrock principles of their profession (<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are/5-principles-of-journalism> Accessed 13 December 2020). Others use a more cautious tone when reporting on crises because they understand that the events stir their audiences' emotions on their own. As the Society for Professional Journalists advises, "Journalists also should recognize that news of grief and tragedy circulates quickly. The news will draw attention no matter the presentation. In other words, media will receive higher marks if they present the stories in responsible fashion without resorting to sensationalism in words or photos" (<https://blogs.spjnetwork.org/ethicscode/?p=173> Accessed December 14, 2020).

Physical Distance and the Negativity of News: Insights from Construal Level Theory

In addition to reporting differently on crisis events than non-crisis events, journalists report about crises differently based on the physical distance between their audiences and the locations of the events they cover. As the distance between news audiences and events increase, the language journalists use in their reporting gets more negative, but also more abstract.

This relationship between physical distance and the language of news has its origins in the connections people have to more or less distant events. Distance promotes detachment. People can only experience directly that which is in the immediate grasp of their senses. People understand the rest by forming

mental representations of distal objects that vary in their levels of abstraction
Henderson, et al. 2011.

According to Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman (2010), the authors of construal level theory, the greater the distance between people and distal objects in either space or time, the more abstractly they represent those objects in their minds. In contrast, the smaller the distance between people and objects in either space or time, the more concretely people think about those objects. Physical distance between people and events increases the psychological distance between them and those events (Liberman, et al. 2007).

When it comes to terrorism, for example, only those who are at the site of an attack experience its effects directly. Those who witness attacks directly may recall minute details about the moments before, during, and after the attack: what people around them were wearing, smells and sounds they detected, the looks on the faces of others who were nearby, and maybe even the weather.

Everyone other than the immediate victims experiences the attack vicariously, but with an intensity and immediacy that declines with their proximity to the location of the event. During this process of construing the attack, distant observers overlook inessential or transient features of the event in favor of more general representations. Exactly what the attacker yelled before striking might not get much attention from the distant observer, but the magnitude of the attack -- the number of casualties caused by the attack -- will be noted.

The detachment that results from construing distal objects and events is why studies repeatedly find the consequences of terrorism diminish as they

radiate outward (Silver, et al. 2002, Bonanno, et al. 2006, Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014, Avdan and Webb 2019). Psychological responses to 9/11 are illustrative of this relationship. After 9/11, 61% of people living within 100 miles of the World Trade Center suffered some form of acute stress. In contrast, 48% of people living 100 to 1000 miles away and 36% of people living more than 1000 miles from New York suffered similar distress (Schuster, et al. 2001).

Abstract thinking and the negativity of news

This tendency to think abstractly about distant events is why journalists write more negatively and more abstractly for distant audiences than they do for proximate ones. The inclination to use more negative language when covering distant events stems from the challenge of grabbing the attention of news audiences.

The famed, Pulitzer Prize winning crime reporter, Edna Buchanan, explained that a good news lead should make a reader eating breakfast with his wife, “spit out his coffee, clutch his chest and say, ‘My god, Martha. Did you read this?’” (quoted in Bloch 2016 <https://training.npr.org/2016/10/12/leads-are-hard-heres-how-to-write-a-good-one/>. Accessed December 16, 2020). Audiences that think in abstract terms about events are less likely to have this reaction to the news. A tendency on the part of news audiences to think in abstract terms about the world makes the attention grabbing elements of reporting more difficult.

Journalists implicitly understand that they must find ways to connect their audiences to the events they report on in order to make the news relevant to their audiences. Finding a “local angle,” some aspect of an event that directly impacts

the distant community or individual members of it, is the easiest way to make this connection.

Journalists, though, have another strategy for breaking down the psychological distance between their readers and the events they cover: they can report on those events using negative language that gives the event in question an urgency for readers who otherwise do not see the connection to themselves. Negative words and phrases help people think about the consequences of otherwise abstract events in personal terms because these words convey that which people are inclined to attend to: threats and their consequences. Indeed, several studies show that news stories containing more negative words than positive ones get more “clicks” on social media Ng and Zhao 2018 and more attention from readers (Trussler and Soroka 2014, Albertson and Gadarian 2015).

Local journalists do not need to accentuate the negative to their audiences during crises because the local community experiences the event itself. The sense of danger during crises and the significance of events is manifest to local residents without the help of reporters. In fact, crisis situations can seem so tenuous that local journalists temper their normal reporting patterns in an effort to avoid contributing to public panic (Sandman 2004).

Abstract thinking and the abstractness of news

Underscoring negative information to draw the attention of distant audiences comes naturally to reporters. Journalists understand that their jobs

revolve around bad news. As The New York Times' Nicholas Kristof puts it, reporters focus on the planes that crash, not the ones that take off successfully {Kristof, October 1, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/opinion/nicholas-kristof-the-most-important-thing-and-its-almost-a-secret.html> Accessed December 16, 2020}

The cognitive processes that influence the way news audiences think about distant events, however, also influence journalists that serve distant communities. In other words, just like their readers, journalists who cover distant events are inclined to think in more abstract terms about those events. And, just like their readers Snefjella and Kuperman 2015, journalists from distant communities are inclined to write about distant events and places using more abstract terms.

In contrast, reporters who serve communities that are local to crisis events write more concretely about those events than their come-from-away counterparts. Local reporters know their communities intimately and so do their audiences. Journalists from distant communities, however, write more abstractly because they are more removed from the details of the far away events they sometimes cover.

Even though many news agencies have employees who scrutinize the quality of news reports prior to publication (Palmer 2017), it is difficult for distant news organizations to eliminate abstractions about distant places from appearing in their reports. The inclination to think abstractly about distant places and events influences everyone in distant newsrooms, not just reporters. In contrast, people

who work in newsrooms that are proximate to crisis locations have an easier time rooting generalities out of their reporting. In this way, the subtle biases of distant reporters insinuate themselves in their reports to a greater extent than those produced by proximate reporters.

Alternative explanations

The sensitive media thesis implied that reporting on the Boston Marathon bombing will exhibit the following characteristics: 1) Local news outlets will be inclined to balance negative news with more positive reports; 2) reporting on the bombing and its aftermath in local news outlets will be less negative than that produced by distant newspapers; even as 3) the language used in newspaper coverage of the Marathon bombing will be less negative than the language newspapers normally use to cover terrorism; and 4) coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing by local news outlets will use more concrete language than the coverage that appears in the pages of distant newspapers.

The sensitive media thesis is not, however, the only way to explain variation in the coverage of crises, like the one created by the attacks at the 2013 Boston Marathon. Two other explanations have to be considered as well: That the coverage of crises is affected by the ability of reporters to find local angles for their stories and by the reliance on wire services for information.

Local angles in the news

The idea that coverage is influenced by the ability of journalists to connect the stories they cover to people and events that are meaningful to the

communities reporters serve derives from an understanding of journalistic practice {Galtung, 1965 # 932; Shoemaker, 2007 2089} as well as the scholarly literature on “local casualties” (Gartner and Segura 2000, Gartner 2004, Karol and Miguel 2007, Althaus, et al. 2012, Kriner and Shen). Journalists have the challenge of making events intelligible to their audiences. This includes convincing readers that the events journalists cover are worthy of their attention. One way journalists accomplish these goals is by localising their coverage. In other words, finding ways to show news audiences that distant events influence them or their communities.

This impulse to draw connections between events and local audiences is strong. Whether acts of terrorism are covered at all appears to be influenced by where attacks take place, with attacks in more salient regions crowding out attacks from less salient ones (Weimann and Winn 1994, Chermak and Gruenewald 2006). Localising the news also affects the way the news is framed, with journalists searching for ways to tie even major events, like the 9/11 attacks, to the local communities they serve (Ruigrok and van Atteveldt 2007).

Research on the effects of localising the news confirms that this strategy influences how audiences understand and relate to the world {Kriner, 2012 #2086}. Work on local casualties further suggests that attention to the local impact of news influences the amount of time newspapers attend to distant events Gartner 2004. Exactly how localising events, like terrorist attacks, influences the language of the news is unknown, but it is generally assumed to play a meaningful role in coverage (Hayes and Myers 2009).

Reliance on wire services

Crisis reporting also may be influenced by the use of content provided by wire services, like the Associated Press (AP) and Reuters. Wire services provide their subscribers with reporting on domestic and international events (most news outlets subscribe to at least one wire service). Wire service reporters cover events and subscribers are permitted to publish these reports in their own outlets either in part or in total. It is common, for example, to find newspapers augmenting their own coverage of events with reporting provided by a wire service.

News outlets rely on wire services because these services enable news organizations to extend their reporting to events and places that they otherwise would be unable to cover. The wire services, for example, provide the lion's share of international news reported in US newspapers (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 1998).

Writing for such a large and varied audience, however, is likely to influence both the negativity and the concreteness of the news wire services provide their subscribers. Unlike the reporters who write for a particular community, the reporters for wire services have to be much more general in their approach. The news from the wire services has to appeal to a much wider audience.

This suggests that the reporting from the wire services is likely to be more negative than what newspaper reporters provide. As a general matter, negative news appeals to readers (Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Soroka 2014). Wire

service reporters, therefore, will be more inclined to rely on this base instinct in their coverage.

At the same time, the news from wire service reporters is likely to be less concrete than the news produced by other journalists. The physical spaces wire service reporters cover is much larger than the physical spaces local newspaper reporters cover. Dell'Orto 2015, for example, points out that foreign correspondents for the Associated Press can have responsibility for reporting on several countries at a time. This suggests that wire service reporters have less familiarity with the places they cover than local journalists. The result is that their reporting is likely to be a bit more abstract.

Local and National Coverage of The Boston Marathon Bombing.

The sensitive media thesis seems to explain differences and similarities in the negativity of the reporting of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, but does it also explain the coverage of terrorism crises? In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the plausibility of the ability of this argument to explain variation in coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing.

If news coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing is explained by the sensitive media thesis then we would expect to find the following patterns: 1) reporting about the Marathon bombing by local reporters will be sensitive to the potential effects of the news on the local community. Local reporters will show an inclination to balance negative news with more positive reports; 2) reporting on the bombing and its aftermath by local journalists will be less negative than that produced by journalists from other locales; even as 3) the language used by

journalists to cover the Marathon bombing, regardless of where their newspapers are located, will be less negative than the language journalists normally use to cover terrorism.

Background

Variation in the reporting about the Boston Marathon bombing and the five day period that followed it, ending with the death and capture of the two perpetrators, should be explained by the sensitive media thesis. Just like the Three Mile Island nuclear accident, the Boston Marathon bombing and its aftermath created a crisis. President Barack Obama ordered the full resources of the federal government be devoted to insure the safety and security of Boston after the attack. This included mobilizing response teams from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Department of Homeland Security. The President also consulted with Congressional leaders about the US government's response to the attack (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2013/04/15/obama-statement-text-boston-marathon-explosions/2086129/>).

In Boston, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick and Boston Police Commissioner Ed Davis counseled people to stay indoors, while authorities searched for additional bombs. A no-fly zone was established in the vicinity of the attacks and local airports were shut down (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/15/boston-marathon-explosion-finish-line>). Cell phone service to the city of Boston was cut off, to prevent unexploded bombs from being activated remotely (<https://www.masslive.com/news/boston/2013/04/>

massachusetts.gov/deval_patric.html). The Police Commissioner asked the public to remain calm while the investigation unfolded (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/15/boston-marathon-explosion-finish-line>). WBUR, a local radio station in Boston, played classical music to calm the nerves of its listeners.

The events that triggered this intense state of affairs took place near the finish line of the 117th running of the Boston Marathon. At approximately 2:50 p.m. on April 15th, as runners complete the race, two deadly bombs exploded twelve seconds apart, killing Martin Richard, Krystle Campbell, and Lingzi Lu. The explosions injured many more, some seriously.

Quickly labeled an act of terror by the White House, the attack, gripped the attention of Boston and cities around the world. Bostonians reported feeling “shaken” by the attack (Lazar, Johnson, and Wen 2013, A6) and nervous about the future. A fire at a library on the campus of Harvard University that turned out to be unrelated to the Marathon bombing contributed to the sense that more attacks might be coming Boston’s way. Marathon organizers in London and in other cities expressed concern as well. If an attack could happen at the Boston marathon, it could happen at other marathons too.

The Boston police department and the FBI launched investigations aimed at identifying and apprehending those responsible for the attack. On April 17th, three days into the crisis, investigators caught a break. Video footage showed images of two men carrying large backpacks near the race’s finish line. The police and FBI launched a search for the suspects.

Meanwhile, residents of the city of Boston licked their wounds. An interfaith healing service attended by US President Barack Obama on April 18th was the signature event in this process. Bostonians, however, also took comfort in the slogan, “Boston Strong” that became a kind of rallying cry in the city. The sale of shirts carrying this phrase generated one million dollars in support for charities in Boston (Marcello 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/tragedy-strong-campaign-64847150>, Accessed December 9, 2020).

The fifth and final day of the crisis ended in a frenzied chase of the suspected bombers by authorities. Massachusetts’ Governor, Deval Patrick, issued a shelter-at-home request, while police searched for the second suspect. The first bombing suspect was killed during a shoot-out with police the night before. Police finally captured the second suspect at approximately 8:46 p.m., ending the city-wide manhunt for the perpetrators.

The Boston Marathon Bombing in the Boston Globe

The Columbia Journalism Review did not ask me to cover the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing, but it remains possible to assess the quality of reporting on the attack by reading published news on the crisis. In this section, I focus on the coverage of the bombing that appeared in The Boston Globe.

The Globe is the most widely read newspaper in Massachusetts. As such, the articles it published provide an important window into what local coverage of the Marathon bombing looked like. As I detail below, consistent with the sensitive media thesis, reporters for The Boston Globe did a good deal of “silver

lining” {McIntyre and Gibson 2016} reporting during the crisis. In other words, The Globe’s staff delivered a lot of uplifting stories and messages to their readers.

Day one

As one might expect, the Globe’s initial reporting on the attack reflected all the shock, confusion, and sense of vulnerability that terrorism is good at generating. The Boston Globe ran a front-page picture of an injured spectator receiving help on a blood-soaked section of Boylston Street, near the finish line. The headline blared, “Marathon Terror.” The paper’s lead story described the attack. Other front page articles included a first-hand account of the bombing and a story about a woman whose two sons both lost legs in the blast.

Articles inside the paper underscored themes of threat and tragedy and raised questions about when the sense of normalcy would return. An interview with an internist at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center highlighted the magnitude and severity of the injuries caused by the blasts (Lazar, Johnson, and Wen 2013, A6). Kevin Cullen, one of The Globe’s Metro section columnists, lamented that Boston would get through the tragedy, but would “never be the same” (2013, B4).

Not all the first-day coverage was negative, however. Eleven of the thirty-eight stories The Globe published on April 16, 2013 conveyed positive messages -- not in praise of the bombing, such a message in The Boston Globe would be absurd, but about responses to the attack. Scot Leigh’s (2013, A14) editorial, for example, expressed defiance:

Yes, we have to learn from this. And we will. We'll need to examine the security plan for the marathon and ask whether this could have been prevented. And we'll have to apply the lessons we learn to other public events. But life here will go on. We won't be paralyzed by fear. We'll take reasonable precautions, yes. But we won't take cover. And we won't cower. This, after all, is Boston.

Other positive articles discussed Bostonian's determination to deny the attackers a victory, the heroism of first responders, and President Obama's confidence that justice would be served.

Day two

The Globe's second day of coverage started like the first. The front-page headline -- "A grim hunt for answers" -- and front-page picture of investigators perched on a roof above the site of the second explosion underlined the continuing sense of confusion and uncertainty in Boston. Stories about eight-year-old Martin Richard and twenty-nine-year-old Krystle Campbell appeared below. A person glancing at this would certainly conclude that April 17, 2013 was another bad news day.

Careful readers, however, would have found more nuanced reporting on day two. By my count, thirty-one of the day's articles were dominated by negative sentiments, but twenty-seven articles contained more positive sentiments than negative ones. Arsenault and Murphy's front page story on the investigation illustrates this interplay of negative and positive information. On the one hand, the two reporters described the scene of the attack as "grim," and reminded readers that seventy people remained in local hospitals, including twenty-four who were

in critical condition. On the other hand, Arsenault and Murphy reported that investigators identified the materials used to fashion the bombs used in the attack – a significant step in the investigation. They also reported on displays of solidarity with Boston that occurred across the US: The New York Yankees, Boston’s hated rival in baseball, even declared “United We Stand” (Arsenault and Murphy 2013, A1).

The tenor of the material appearing on the Opinion pages also differed from those published the previous day. In contrast to the essays suggesting that Boston would never be the same, The Globe published, “Things will be the same again” (Jacoby 2013, A11) and, “Runners, the race still matters. It must. Celebrate what can never be taken away” (Bernstein 2013, A11). The final contribution to the Opinion pages called on Bostonians to create a charitable foundation in order to “turn a day of tragedy and trauma into something that can help those whose lives were irrevocably altered in a few seconds” (Leigh 2013, A11).

Day three

Articles stressing community resilience continued to appear on the third day of coverage as did articles expressing positive sentiments, like resolve and hope. By my count, articles with predominantly positive themes outnumber those expressing negative themes, like grief and dread, by about two to one (29:14). The front page reflected this shift. Instead of highlighting damage done by the attack, the paper’s lead story on April 18th focused on the discovery of possible

suspects. Unnamed sources said that authorities were “‘very close’ in their pursuit of the bomber” (Aresenault and Murphy 2013, A1).

Not surprisingly, negative news still appeared in *The Globe* on April 18th alongside the more encouraging reports. Allen Evan (2013, A1) profiled Lingzi Lu, the third person killed in the bombings. *The Globe*’s editorial board reported that Attorney General Martha Coakley’s office issued a warning to people about the existence of fraudulent charities that were created to dupe people out of their money (A16). *The Globe* also ran a letter from a New Yorker living in the Boston area that warned readers, “Once the heart has a hole in it, it is there. How we try to fill it back up again is up to each of us, and it is a very personal process. But it won’t happen any time soon, if ever. I can tell you that from experience” (Hingham A16).

Nevertheless, the day’s news was dominated by more upbeat stories. Callum Borchers (A20) described advances in prosthetics that might allow bombing victims who lost limbs in the bombings to resume active lifestyles. Letters to the editor offered inspiration from Martin Luther King, Jr. and lessons about resilience from the Battle of Lexington. Kevin Cullen (2013, A19) wrote about a Harvard student who refused to let the bombing scare her away from her home in Brookline.

Day four

Continuing the pattern from the day before, *The Globe*’s Marathon bombing coverage on April 19th had more relatively positive than negative news in it. “Above the fold” on the front page, *The Globe* announced that a manhunt

was underway for two bombing suspects. A second, larger headline, highlighted President Obama's reassurance during an interfaith service in Boston that the city would "run again."

"Below the fold," The Globe ran stories about an outpouring of financial support for a newly married couple who both lost legs in the attack (Moskowitz 2013, A1). An article about people who attended the interfaith service involving the President looking for solace also appeared on page one (Powers and Lowery 2013, A1).

In a special section devoted to the bombings that The Globe ran throughout the week, Peter Demarco reported that marathoners were signing up in record numbers for a half-marathon traditionally held over Memorial Day weekend. A police officer's heroic efforts to help those injured in the attack was detailed on page A25 (Irons 2013). Mayor Thomas Menino's grit – against his doctors' advice, he left his hospital bed shortly after leg surgery to help manage the crisis -- was detailed on the first page of the Metro section (B1).

Negative news stories appeared as well. A police officer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was murdered, although it was unclear at the time if the attack was related to the Marathon bombing (it was). The Globe reported that Muslims around the country feared for their safety (Sacchetti 2013, A13). A "person of interest" in the investigation, who was identified publicly by the New York Post, reported being afraid to leave his home. Congregants from Trinity Church were unable to enter their sanctuary because of its location inside the crime scene.

These negative news stories, however, were in the minority in The Globe's April 19th edition. In all, only seven of the thirty-four stories The Globe printed on the bombing that day were dominated by negative themes.

Day five

The Globe's front page on April 20, 2017, the fifth and final day of crisis coverage, suggested the run of good news continued. Authorities caught the second of two bombing suspects and announced the death of the first. The largest photograph on page one showed a woman, flanked by others on Arsenal Street in Boston, cheering and waving an American flag. The headline, "Nightmare's end," seemed to say it all.

Details of the evening's events, however, revealed a harrowing night in which residents of several of Boston's neighborhoods were ordered by authorities to remain in doors while police searched for the suspects. One reporter wrote "[t]he region felt as if gripped by martial law" (Ryan 2013, A13). Child development specialists were interviewed for insights about how to explain the previous night's events to young children (Woolhouse 2013, A8).

Uplifting material appeared in The Globe on the last day of the crisis, but unlike the previous two days, positive stories were outnumbered by negative ones. I found only thirteen items in the newspaper on April 20th that contained mostly positive content. Twenty-nine of the forty-three stories about the attack were dominated by negative sentiments like anger, anxiety, and grief. (I rated one story as having a neutral tone). The end of the crisis, it seems, brought about a return to usual journalistic practices.

Coverage of the Boston Marathon Bombing: A Quantitative Examination

Consistent with Sandman and Paden's (1979b) observations about reporting on Three Mile Island, local coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing by The Boston Globe certainly seemed to emphasize the positive to an unexpected degree. Reporters at The Globe could not make the pall that hung over the news the week of April 15th, 2020 disappear, but they consistently found "silver linings" {McIntyre and Gibson 2016} that shone through, providing hope.

My analysis, however, leaves several questions unanswered. Did news outlets outside the Boston area report on the Marathon crisis more negatively than The Globe? Was coverage of the crisis more or less negative than routine terrorism coverage? The pattern found in the Three Mile Island case suggests that reporters outside the Boston area covered the Marathon bombing more negatively than their Bostonian counterparts. At the same time, the Three Mile Island pattern implies that reporting on the crisis was less negative than reporting on terrorism normally. Reporters, in other words, are inclined to moderate their tone during crises.

I took a different approach than I did above to answer these questions. Instead of the qualitative approach I used to examine articles in The Boston Globe, I assessed the positivity and negativity of the words appearing in articles about the Marathon bombing using Lexicoder, an automated sentiment dictionary developed to identify positive and negative words in political news Young and

Soroka 2012. Specifically, I used Lexicoder to compare content about the bombing published in The Boston Globe to a random sample of articles on the Marathon bombing that appeared in other newspapers during the crisis.

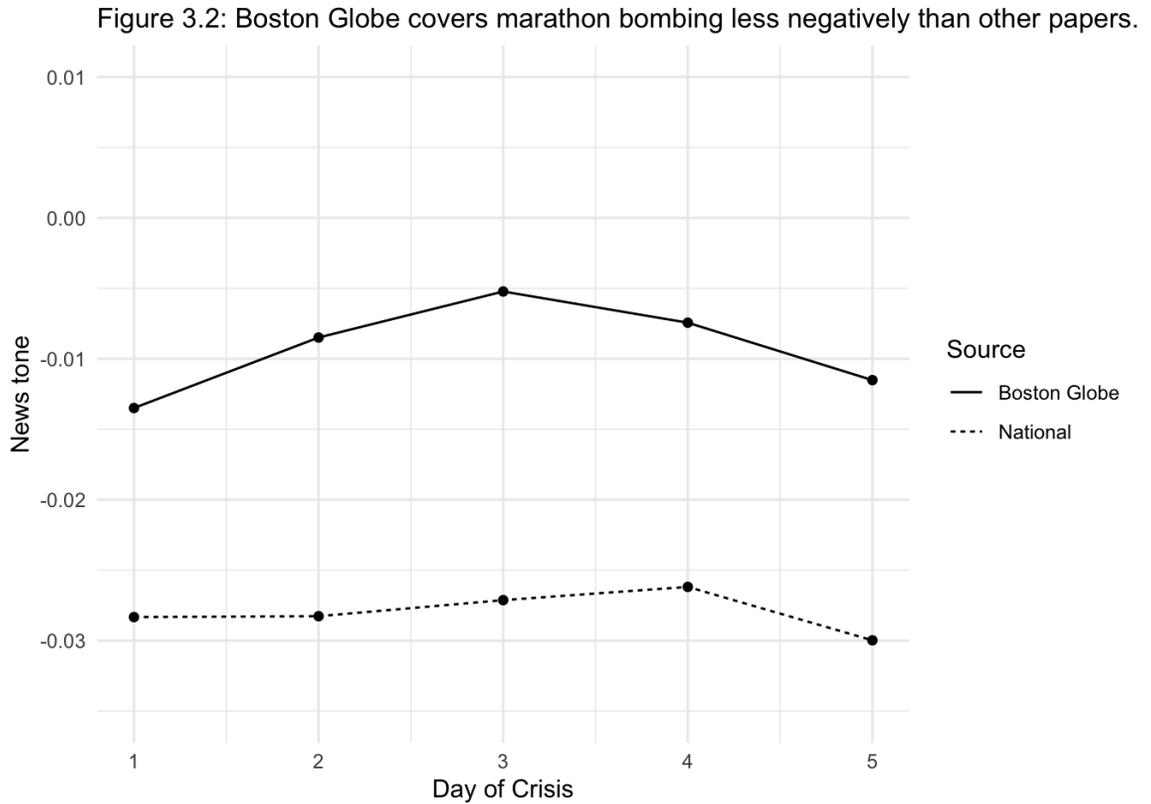
Lexicoder offers a transparent and reproducible method for assessing the tone of news reporting. Lexicoder assumes that the tone of news coverage reflects the relative number of negative and positive words in published articles. Negative news has more negative words than positive words; positive words outnumber negative words in positive news.

This word-by-word standard can, at times, produce misleading results. Articles that have more negative than positive words (or vice versa) can still leave a positive impression on readers. As the difference between “good” and “not good” makes clear, only a few words are needed to reverse the tone of a story, although Lexicoder can handle simple negations like this. Lexicoder cannot detect more complex reversals in tone.

My own reading of the articles on the Marathon bombing, though, suggests that it is not a major problem in this case. In coverage of the Marathon, common negative words include attack, bomb, and terrorist. Positive words used in the Marathon reporting include friends, help, and united. With one or two exceptions, the valence of the tone score produced by Lexicoder comported with my own reading of articles in The Globe.

Figure 3.1, shown below, displays the most common words used in The Boston Globe’s coverage of the marathon bombing. Unsurprisingly, negative

percent difference between negative and positive words on days two, three, and four of the crisis.



As Figure 3.2 makes clear, reporters who did not work for The Boston Globe also used more negative words than positive ones in their coverage of the Marathon bombing. The out-of-town reporters, however, relied on negative words more than positive words at a higher rate than their Globe counterparts. In fact, articles appearing in the out-of-town coverage varied from roughly 2.5% more negative than positive on the first four days of the crisis to 3% more negative than positive on the last day of the crisis.

These differences in the tone of the reporting produced by Globe reporters as compared to the reporting produced by out-of-town journalists are statistically

significant ($t(9.01) = -3.11, p = 0.012$). They are also consistent with Sandman and Paden's observations about reporting about the Three Mile Island nuclear accident.

This, however, is not the only parallel between the reporting on the Boston Marathon bombing and on Three Mile Island. Differences between local and out-of-town reporters aside, those who reported on the Marathon crisis did so less negatively than would otherwise be the case for terrorism coverage. Paden and Sandman made similar observations about the coverage of Three Mile Island. In the case of the Marathon, the average difference in negative versus positive words used in the coverage I examined is about 2%. In contrast, the average difference in negative and positive words used in the coverage of terrorism I examined in Chapter XX is approximately 4%.

In addition, the available evidence suggests that the change in the tone of reporting on the Marathon bombing occurred at least in part in response to the concerns journalists had for their audiences. Reporters from outside the Boston area (Sullivan 2013 https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/public-editor/a-model-of-restraint-in-the-race-for-news.html?_r=1&) emphasized the importance of caution during the crisis. Newspapers that failed this test were the target of public criticism (Shaffer 2013 <http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/04/18/shameless-paper-in-mindless-fog/>).

Reporters for The Boston Globe echoed these sentiments while underscoring the special challenges of covering breaking news in their own community. Teresa Hanafin, Director of Engagement and Social Media for

Boston.com and BostonGlobe.com said she felt a special “responsibility to the extended friends and family of the people who lived in Boston” the day of the attack (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?314488-1/journalists-talk-covering-terrorism-stories>. Accessed 1 January 2021). Hanafin was not alone in this feeling. As The Globe’s Kevin Cullen explained about the Boston media during the crisis, “. . .everybody in the business in our town, I thought responded with incredible professionalism because it was personal to everybody. Its rare in the business that you get something that’s personal and you have to do your job” (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?314488-1/journalists-talk-covering-terrorism-stories>. Accessed 1 January 2021).

Distance and coverage: The sensitive media thesis

So far, what we’ve seen suggests that the reporting patterns found during the Three Mile Island nuclear accident repeated themselves in the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing. In this section, I extend what we know about crisis reporting by focusing on additional aspects of the coverage predicted by the sensitive media thesis, namely: 1) that there is an inverse relationship between the tone of the Marathon coverage and the distance between the city of Boston and the location of the newspapers that published articles about it; and 2) that the abstractness of the language used to report news about the Marathon crisis increased as the distance between newspapers and the city of Boston increased.

I accomplished this goal by using the random sample of articles about the Marathon bombing I relied on above. This sample is actually somewhat biased against the sensitive media thesis because it includes no articles from The Boston Globe at all -- the outlet that is among most likely to have published positive stories during the crisis. Stories from Lowell Massachusetts (about 30 miles from Boston) are this sample's stand-in for nearby coverage.

I calculated the tone of each article in the sample using Lexicoder. I calculated the lexical concreteness of each article using Brysbaert et al's (2014) concreteness ratings for 37,058 words. These ratings were developed using crowdsourcing and have been the focus of studies by Snefjella and Kuperman {, 2018 #1888}, and XXXX.

Then, I measured the distance between the newspaper that published the article and the city of Boston using the number of miles between each newspaper city and the city where the crisis took place. I used air miles in the case of newspapers that were overseas. Data for this variable is drawn from the website www.distancebetweencities.com.

I also coded each article in the sample for evidence that the publisher relied on reporting from a wire service and for the use of a local angle in each story. I identified stories relying on wire service reports by examining information on each story provided by the publishers. I coded any article that listed the author of the article as a reporter from a wire service (e.g., AP) as using wire service content (two outcomes: 0 = no; 1 = yes). I also counted articles that included notes pointing to their use of wire service content in this category. The one

exception is when the content referred to photographs supplied by wire service photographers. I did not count these articles as relying on wire service content since this analysis focuses on text, rather than pictures.

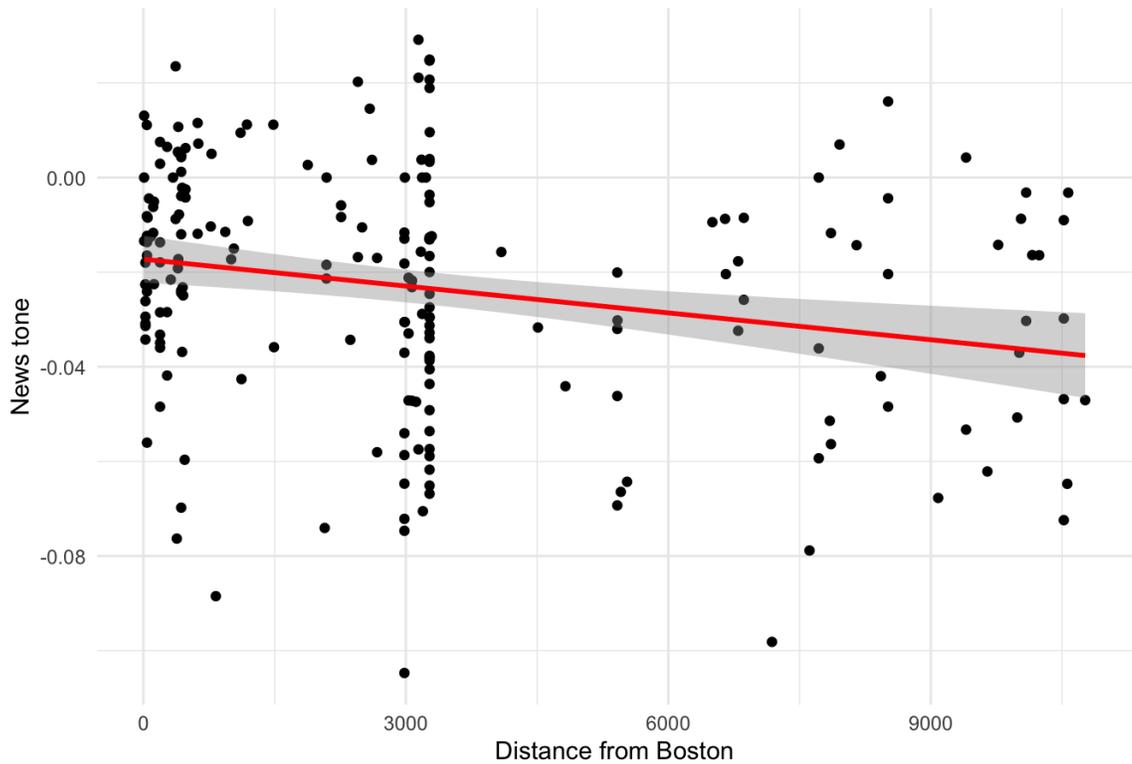
I identified the use of local angles by searching the text of each article for quotes by and/or references to people from the same city or state as the newspaper published in. Since the question of safety at subsequent marathons was raised in the coverage of the Marathon attack, I also counted articles that discussed this issue with their own local marathons in mind as having a local angle. As with the information about wire services, I measured the presence of local angles using a dummy variable (0 = no; 1 = yes).

Distance and tone

I analyzed these data using ordinary least squares regression. The results of the bivariate relationship between distance and tone appear in Figure X.3. As the figure shows, the tone of articles about the Marathon become more negative as the distance between Boston and the reporting newspaper increases ($p = .001$).

The strength of the relationship between distance and tone persists once covariates for the use of wire service content and local angles are included in the regression model. In the multivariate case, the relationship between distance and tone is significant at the .05 level ($p = .04$). The relationship between distance and tone also persists when the day of the crisis is taken into account (time is another factor that could affect the tone of coverage).

Figure 3.3: Proximity and the tone of reporting on the Boston Marathon bombing



Relying on content from wire services appears to be unrelated to the tone of reporting, but including local angles makes a difference. Articles about the Marathon bombing that included a local angle were substantially more negative than articles that did not include this information ($b = -250.20$, $p = .01$). Indeed, finding a local angle made a bigger difference to the tone of the observed coverage than the physical distance between Boston and the publishing newspaper city.

Distance and concreteness

I also used ordinary least squares regression to examine the relationship between distance and concreteness. These tests, however, reveal no direct

relationship between physical distance and the concreteness of the language used in published articles about the Marathon bombing.

Articles that rely on text from a wire service are less concrete than articles that do not ($b = -0.11$, $p = 0.02$). This result, however, does not appear to be a backdoor distance effect since distant newspapers were no more likely than proximate newspapers to rely on material from wire services in their reporting on the Marathon bombing. Instead, it appears to reflect a kind of audience effect. In producing news that any of its subscribers could use, wire service reporters tend to write a bit more abstractly than reporters who have a clearer sense of their readership.

Conclusion

At one level, this examination of the coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing vindicates what media critics say: The news media are insensitive to the ways in which their reporting intensifies the psychological impact of terrorist attacks. News audiences far and wide got graphic stories about the initial attack and the toll it took on people. As the crisis unfolded, the news media showed concern in their reporting for the sensibilities of the most proximate audiences, while continuing to deliver more negative news to more distant audiences.

This reading of the Boston Marathon bombing coverage, however, misses the significance of the ways in which that coverage varied. All of the coverage appears to be less negative than the terrorism coverage news audiences normally receive. This shift toward more positive coverage occurred even though the

events being covered were manifestly worse than what news organizations normally report on. Instead of laying the negativity on thick, news organizations showed restraint.

The critical take on media coverage of terrorism crises also misses the importance of the spatial variation that emerged in the coverage of the Marathon bombing. Variation in the tone of reporting on the Marathon crisis wasn't random, it was systematic. Proximate audiences received significantly less negative news about the crisis than distant audiences. This suggests that reporters tuned their reporting to what they believed their audiences could take. Audiences that had the most at stake during the crisis got the least negative news about the attack and its aftermath. Audiences that had the least at stake during the crisis, got the most negative news about the crisis.

It is possible that the assessments reporters make about just how much negativity their audiences can handle are wrong. The varied pattern of reporting on the Marathon bombing, and on Three Mile Island before that, suggests that reporters are sensitive to this issue. Journalists do not simply produce ever more negative news because that is the path to profitability. The negativity of the news journalists produce also responds to the psychological connections between audiences and events.

More generally, this chapter suggests a limiting condition on the production of negative news. The leading demand-side explanation of negativity bias in the news (e.g., Soroka 2014) assumes that the news is constantly negative even as it recognizes that, in practice, negativity varies. The record of

reporting during the Marathon bombing suggests that the negativity of news diminishes during crises. Whether this pattern and the other patterns uncovered in this chapter are common occurrences during terrorism crises is the subject of the next chapter.

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