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Abstract:

North Carolina has not carried out an execution since 2006 because a series of legal and policy hurdles led to a de facto death penalty moratorium. Despite efforts by the Republican General Assembly to restart capital punishment, executions remain on hold indefinitely. There is more than a century of evidence suggesting newspaper coverage influences death penalty policy. More recent scholarship established connections between certain frames and modes of coverage and public death penalty support. My study entailed analyzing a representative sample of 16 years of death penalty articles in four of North Carolina's highest circulation newspapers to examine how the moratorium impacted coverage. I used a scoring scheme to calculate how much prominence death penalty coverage received pre- and post-moratorium, as indicated by article placement, word count and photograph and graphic inclusion. I also studied source choices and stances expressed by those sources, the inclusion of "innocence frames" and whether articles cited the death penalty's alternative punishment: life without parole. I found that coverage has steadily declined since 2001 but dropped precipitously after the moratorium came into effect. My findings also demonstrated how articles post-moratorium received less prominence while references to innocence and life without parole trended downward. In sum, the moratorium had a profound impact on the amount of death penalty information newspaper readers receive. Future research should examine death penalty coverage in other states to help researchers develop a deeper understanding for how legal and policy developments impact widely disseminated information about this policy topic.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

How North Carolina's newspapers cover state capital punishment practices and policies has been a source of controversy for more than a century. Not long after the popular press arose out of 19th century technological advances, state officials realized the way reporters wrote about executions – word choice, story angles, and interviews – dramatically affected public opinion.¹ Media's power to influence attitudes toward a controversial area of public policy makes capital punishment coverage an important field of research.

In November 1897, Lillington authorities hanged 19-year-old Ed Purvis for killing flagman W.J. Blackwell, in what became North Carolina's last public execution.² Twelve years later, state officials seized control of capital punishment from local jurisdictions and started carrying out executions with more discretion. The state moved executions from town squares to closed chambers, hiding them from public view.³ As a result, executions became veiled affairs to which only select groups gained access. This selective practice shielded the public from scenes of state-sanctioned violence and made executions less of a public spectacle.⁴ However, admission restrictions also impeded people's ability to scrutinize whether government officials were adhering to state policies and upholding constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment.

¹ See Seitz, Trina N. 2004. "The Killing Chair." *North Carolina Historical Review* 81, no. 1: 38-72. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

² Ibid, 40.

³ Ibid, 39.

⁴ Ibid.

As conduits to the public, newspaper reporters were among the few allowed into North Carolina's execution chamber. As a result, newspapers fast became the public's primary source of information about capital punishment.⁵ In fact, as penal policy reforms moved executions behind prison walls, newspaper circulation skyrocketed. So in a sense, the death penalty helped make printed pages the nation's most ubiquitous mass medium.⁶

Not long after reporters became the public's ears and eyes inside the execution chamber, their power to effect changes in criminal justice policies came into sharp relief.⁷ Reporters used vivid descriptions to convey the sights and sounds as inmates died in the electric chair, employing such grisly metaphors as "frying bacon" and "crackling, cooking sounds."⁸ As such graphic depictions swayed public opinion against the electric chair, state officials started searching for an alternative execution method. In 1936, North Carolina adopted the gas chamber, billing it as a more humane way to kill. But it did not take long before public outcry roared anew thanks to harrowing newspaper accounts about inmates suffocating to death on toxic fumes.⁹ Now the state has done away with both those execution methods entirely, replacing them with something less violent and more broadly palatable.

⁵ Haines, Herb. 1992. "Flawed Executions, the Anti-Death Penalty Movement, and the Politics of Capital Punishment." *Social Problems* 39, no. 2: 132. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

⁶ Stevens, John D. 1985. "Social Utility of Sensational News: Murder and Divorce in the 1920's." *Journalism Quarterly* 62, no. 1: 54. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

⁷ Seitz, "The Killing Chair," 46.

⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

⁹ *Ibid*, 63-64.

As public support for capital punishment started falling in the early 1950s, North Carolina began encountering legal challenges to its policies.¹⁰ In 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court quashed North Carolina's capital sentencing laws, saying the state could not mandate the death penalty for certain offenses. Death sentences for 120 inmates were vacated as a result of the court's ruling. Many of those inmates received new trials, and most received new sentences of life in prison.¹¹ In 1983, the N.C. General Assembly started giving inmates the option to die via lethal injection. Fifteen years later, state lawmakers scrapped the gas chamber entirely, making lethal injection the state's sole execution method.¹² Today, the public overwhelmingly favors lethal injection over all other approaches.¹³

Capital punishment remains a popular penalty for convicted killers, though support is waning.¹⁴ Nationally, 60 percent of Americans support capital punishment, a low not seen since 1972, when 57 percent supported it.¹⁵ Polls show a majority of North Carolinians favors capital punishment, but support drops markedly when surveyors reference alternative sentences. For example, a 2013 Public Policy Polling survey found 68 percent of state residents supported life without parole over the death penalty if

¹⁰ "Death Penalty," *Gallup* (October 13, 2014): Accessed October 13, 2014, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1606/death-penalty.aspx>

¹¹ "History of Capital Punishment in North Carolina," *North Carolina Department of Public Safety* (December 20, 2013): Accessed October 8, 2014, <https://www.ncdps.gov/Index2.cfm?a=000003,002240,002327,002330>

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Death Penalty," *Gallup*.

¹⁴ See Death Penalty Information Center. "State Polls and Studies," (2014): Accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/state-polls-and-studies?scid=23&did=210#NorthCarolina>

¹⁵ Jones, Jeffrey M. "U.S. Death Penalty Support Lowest in More Than 40 Years," *Gallup* (October 29, 2013): Accessed October 5, 2014,

offenders were required to work and pay restitution to victims' families.¹⁶ Public Policy's findings suggest residents take less punitive stances when keeping offenders alive would benefit those impacted by crimes.

North Carolina is one of the 32 states that have the death penalty.¹⁷ But unlike most other capital states, North Carolina has been under a de facto moratorium for the last eight years. A string of lawsuits and other roadblocks have prevented North Carolina from carrying out executions since 2006. The pause began when death row inmates challenged their sentences on constitutional grounds, saying lethal injection violated the Eighth Amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment.¹⁸ Another setback came in 2009, when the highly publicized exoneration of three black men prompted the then-mostly Democratic General Assembly to pass the Racial Justice Act.¹⁹ The law allowed defendants to use anecdotal evidence and statistics to argue race played a role in their receiving death sentences.²⁰ While the law drew widespread acclaim from death penalty

¹⁶ White, Herbert. "Poll: N.C. residents reject death penalty," *The Charlotte Post* (March 4, 2013): Accessed October 8 2014, http://www.thecharlottepost.com/index.php?src=permalinks/News:_Poll:_N_C_residents_reject_death_penalty

¹⁷ Death Penalty Information Center. "States With and Without the Death Penalty." (2014): Accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/states-and-without-death-penalty>

¹⁸ Blythe, Anne. "NC executions put on hold by 2007 lawsuit," *The News & Observer* (April 30, 2014): Accessed October 8, 2014, http://www.newsobserver.com/2014/04/30/3824603_what-the-death-penalty-status.html?rh=1

¹⁹ Parker, Molly. "Goolsby: 'First-degree murderers deserve the death penalty,'" *The StarNews* (January 5, 2014): Accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20140105/ARTICLES/140109870/0/search?p=1&tc=pg>

²⁰ Ibid. See also, "Editorial: The Racial Injustice Act," *The StarNews* (June 9, 2013): Accessed October 8, 2014, <http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20130609/ARTICLES/130609648/0/search?p=1&tc=pg>

opponents, conservative Republicans who captured control of the legislature in 2010 repealed the measure.

Critics blasted the Racial Justice Act for allowing death row inmates to tie cases up in litigation, effectively delaying their executions indefinitely.²¹ In signing the repeal, Gov. Pat McCrory said the act must be scrapped because it virtually banned capital punishment in the state.²² And he was right. Death row inmates from all races filed challenges under the law. As of October 2014, North Carolina's death row housed 152 inmates, including two women. Of those, 77 inmates were black, 61 were white, seven were listed as "Indian," and five were listed as "Other."²³ All but two of those inmates filed challenges under either the Racial Justice Act or cruel and unusual claims, or both, potentially suspending executions for years while courts sort out the issue.²⁴

Since Republicans seized the General Assembly, newly emboldened conservative lawmakers have been trying to roll back anti-death penalty policies implemented under their more liberal predecessors. In addition to repealing the Racial Justice Act, the legislature in 2013 passed a series of policy changes aimed at getting the state's execution

²¹ Ibid.

²² Smith, Matt. "'Racial Justice Act' repealed in North Carolina," CNN (June 21, 2013): Accessed November 11, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/justice/north-carolina-death-penalty/>

²³ "Offenders on Death Row," *North Carolina Department of Public Safety* (September 3, 2014): Accessed October 8, 2014,

<https://www.ncdps.gov/index2.cfm?a=000003,002240,002327,002328>

²⁴ Freskos, Brian. "Repeal of Racial Justice Act would leave many questions," *The StarNews* (April 13, 2014): Accessed October 8, 2014,

<http://www.starnewsonline.com/article/20130413/ARTICLES/130419822/0/search?p=4&tc=pg>.

See also, Blythe, Anne. "NC high court to review sentences changed under Racial Justice Act," *North Raleigh News* (April 14, 2014): Accessed October 8, 2014,

http://www.northraleighnews.com/2014/04/14/3784340_nc-high-court-to-review-sentences.html?rh=1

chamber operating again. But even with Republican legislative victories, executions remain stalled. One reason executions have not resumed is the state's highest court is still mulling whether lawmakers can retroactively undo challenges brought under the Racial Justice Act while it was an existing law.²⁵ In April 2014, the N.C. Supreme Court heard arguments from four inmates whose death sentences were converted to life without parole after proving racial biases tainted their cases.²⁶ The decision, which justices had yet to announce as of the time of this writing, would have a dramatic effect on whether claims filed under the Racial Justice Act can continue and, thus, whether executions may resume.

Death penalty opponents have pointed to wrongful conviction cases as a reason to altogether scrap the death penalty. North Carolina witnessed a series of exonerations in recent years as technological innovations such as DNA provided nearly infallible proof of a person's guilt or innocence.²⁷ The state recorded 36 exonerations since 1943; however, 24 of those occurred in the 2000s.²⁸ Policymakers have tacitly acknowledged that people are, in fact, serving time in prison for crimes they did not commit. In 2006, the state established The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission to investigate claims of innocence. As of January 2014, the commission had received 1661 cases, four of which resulted in exonerations.²⁹

²⁵ Freskos, "Repeal of Racial Justice Act would leave many questions."

²⁶ Blythe, "NC high court to review sentences changed under Racial Justice Act."

²⁷ See "North Carolina DNA Exoneration Cases," *The North Carolina Center on Actual Innocence*: Accessed October 17, 2014, <http://www.nccai.org/nccases.html>

²⁸ *North Carolina Exonerations*, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://ncexonerations.weebly.com/>

²⁹ "The North Carolina Innocence Inquiry Commission: A State Agency." *North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts*. Accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.innocencecommission-nc.gov/>

It is undoubtedly an interesting time for reporters covering North Carolina's capital punishment system. In 2006, the state suspended capital punishment in the face of mounting legal challenges. Four years later, voters ushered in a new conservative political leadership bent on carrying out the death sentences that courts imposed. As a result of the historic partisan shift, a return to the pre-2006 capital punishment era is a real possibility. These political developments unfolded against a backdrop of shifting public opinion as the national press increasingly focused on wrongful convictions.³⁰ Now, the N.C. Supreme Court's upcoming ruling would decide whether to toss out inmates' pending claims and allow the state to begin executing them. Whatever the court's decision, the outcome will define coverage for years to come.

My study sought to examine how North Carolina's biggest newspapers cover what is arguably the most divisive criminal justice policy of our era. While the Internet is quickly changing how people consume news, newspapers and the websites they operate are still major players.³¹ My results show from whom newspapers gather their information and demonstrate how source choices and policy developments influence coverage. Newspapers indirectly affect policies that literally determine whether death row inmates live or die. Because of their awesome power, how newspapers cover capital punishment is a topic worthy of continued academic study.

³⁰ See Dardis, Frank E., Frank R. Baumgartner, Amber E. Boydston, Suzanna De Boef, and Fuyuan Shen. 2008. "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses." *Mass Communication & Society* 11, no. 2: 115-140. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

³¹ For more on changing news consumption, see Mitchell, Amy, "State of the News Media 2014," *Pew Research Center*, last updated March 26, 2014, <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/state-of-the-news-media-2014-overview/>

Literature Review

North Carolina's pivot to increasingly less violent execution methods in the 20th century underscores mass media's potential to affect criminal justice policy. Recent scholars have studied whether media treat the death penalty in different ways and how variations influence public opinion. Some research shows longitudinal differences in frames, with stories reflecting national culture and public attitudes.³² Other studies demonstrate media coverage's power to influence public support for capital punishment.³³ Here I present an overview of recent scholarship, focusing on research that examined newspaper organizations in particular. But I also draw on research from other spheres to show how reporters face difficulties in communicating information about capital punishment to audiences. I begin by synthesizing research on the evolving nature of newspaper coverage over recent decades, emphasizing dramatic shifts between 1960 and 2000. I point out how newspapers increasingly framed stories around wrongful convictions as exonerations increased and caused people to evaluate capital punishment through a new lens. I then recount research showing how newspaper coverage influences more than public policy debates and actually reaches jury boxes to alter trial outcomes. Finally, I touch on the trauma that journalists experience while covering fraught stories dealing with life and death, showing how reporters battle with emotionally taxing topics.

³² Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 115-140.

³³ Fan, David P., Kathy A. Kelner, and Robert O. Wyatt. 2002. "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States." *International Journal Of Public Opinion Research* 14, no. 4: 439-452. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

Newspapers have long garnered criticism for sensationalizing stories to boost sales.³⁴ That is particularly true in regards to murder coverage. From a rigid professional viewpoint, newspapers cover murders because they inevitably contain conflict, impact and other values that increase their newsworthiness, and first-degree murder is the only crime that carries a possible death sentence.³⁵ Whether media practice objectivity in murder coverage is an important research topic because news is a mechanism through which information travels rapidly and on such wide scales that it becomes “the public’s primary frame of reference for issues of crime and control.”³⁶

When stories weight toward one point of view, the public takes notice, undermining reader trust. Christian stressed the importance of teaching journalists how natural thinking habits lead to distortions and errors when left unchecked.³⁷ Showing how errors actually affect newspapers’ bottom lines, Niven demonstrated how media credibility influences people’s reaction to news and affects media consumption.³⁸ That readers will turn away from less credible news sources presents a huge problem given

³⁴ Stevens, “Social Utility of Sensational News: Murder and Divorce in the 1920’s,” 53.

³⁵ Fullerton, Romaine Smith, and Maggie Jones Patterson. 2006. "Murder in Our Midst: Expanding Coverage to Include Care and Responsibility." *Journal Of Mass Media Ethics* 21, no. 4: 304-321. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

Also, see North Carolina General Statute 14-17.

³⁶ Kort-Butler, Lisa A., and Kelley J. Sittner Hartshorn. 2011. “Watching The Detectives: Crime Programming, Fear Of Crime, And Attitudes About The Criminal Justice System.” *Sociological Quarterly* 52, no. 1: 40. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

³⁷ Christian, Sue Ellen. 2013. "Cognitive Biases and Errors as Cause—and Journalistic Best Practices as Effect." *Journal Of Mass Media Ethics* 28, no. 3: 160-174. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 17, 2014).

³⁸ Niven, David. 2003. "Objective Evidence On Media Bias: Newspaper Coverage Of Congressional Party Switchers." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, no. 2: 311-326. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 17, 2014).

how today's newspaper industry suffers from a credibility crisis. When a 2013 Gallup poll asked Americans to rate the honesty and ethical standards of professionals in various fields, newspaper reporters ranked toward the bottom, behind 16 other professions.³⁹ Gallup's findings underscore how, for an industry already shedding jobs, maintaining credibility is paramount.

But despite public opprobrium toward newspapers, researchers believe death penalty coverage has generally improved. Today's newspapers employ less sensationalism and more objectivity.⁴⁰ This progress, however, has not been credited to newspapers changing their approach. Rather, researchers believe sensationalism has declined because modern executions are carried out in much less dramatic ways.⁴¹ Lethal injection is the primary execution method in all 50 states.⁴² Long gone are scenes of inmates frying like breakfast meat in the electric chair or gasping for breath in the gas chamber. Moreover, public support is diminishing for punitive policies and increasing for restorative practices that emphasize victims' rights.⁴³ While the former prevails as the dominant mechanism through which convicted criminals face punishment, death penalty

³⁹ Swift, Art, "Honesty and Ethics Rating of Clergy Slides to New Low," *Gallup*, last modified December 16, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166298/honesty-ethics-rating-clergy-slides-new-low.aspx>

⁴⁰ "Splashed the fluids into his flesh: News coverage of executions." *Conference Papers - International Communication Association 3. Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Death Penalty Information Center. "Lethal Injection." Access Date: Sept. 22, 2014. <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/lethal-injection-moratorium-executions-ends-after-supreme-court-decision>

⁴³ De Mesmaecker, Vicky. "Building social support for restorative justice through the media: is taking the victim perspective the most appropriate strategy?" *Contemporary Justice Review* 13, no. 3 (September 2010): 241. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 23, 2014).

coverage could reflect softening public attitudes.⁴⁴ Despite general improvements, many researchers say fairness remains a persistent problem, with stories implicitly supporting one side over another.

Some critics believe the Internet's introduction spelled the end of printed news mediums.⁴⁵ While the media landscape has grown increasingly saturated, newspapers continue to fill an important role in American civic society. Most citizens have no direct exposure to the criminal justice system and must rely on other information sources to form their value judgments.⁴⁶ Newspapers fill this vacuum, disseminating cultural images about crime and shaping public policy debates.⁴⁷

How newspapers cover an issue matters. Framing theory suggests communicators highlight some bits of information about subjects while ignoring others.⁴⁸ Frames define the problem for readers, diagnose its causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies.⁴⁹ Frames elevate the salience of certain aspects of an issue, increasing the likelihood readers will perceive certain information, discern its meaning and store it in their memories.⁵⁰ Under this theory, frames in death penalty stories influence reader

⁴⁴ See Fan et al, "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States," 439-452, for evidence of the connection between media coverage and public support for the death penalty.

⁴⁵ Rogers, Tony, "Are Newspapers Dying?" *About.com*, accessed March 29, 2015, journalism.about.com/od/trends/a/dyingpapers.htm

⁴⁶ Kort-Butler and Hartshorn, "Watching The Detectives: Crime Programming, Fear Of Crime, And Attitudes About The Criminal Justice System," 40.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Entman, Robert M. 1993. "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm." *Journal Of Communication* 43, no. 4: 51-58. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 9, 2015).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

perceptions of the complex issues involved and how states should go about trying to remedy them.

How much space publications devote to articles is one indicator of how important editors consider topics.⁵¹ The page on which articles appear is another indicator of importance. In their content analysis of articles about physician-assisted suicide, Pollock and Yulis looked at four areas of “prominence”: placement, headline size, story length and presence of photos.⁵² They scored articles within ranges, with the most prominent articles – that is, the ones more likely to attract reader attention – receiving the highest scores.⁵³ There is other research to corroborate the assertion that certain attributes yield greater readership. Mateos et al pointed out how article length is a sign that journalists give importance and priority to topics.⁵⁴ They found, for example, women appear more frequently in shorter articles, which the researchers interpreted as males’ association with newsworthiness.⁵⁵ The Poynter Institute studied how photographs attract viewership, concluding that photos are among the first visual stops for readers.⁵⁶ In my study, I

⁵¹ Pollock, John C., and Spiro G. Yulis. 2004. "Nationwide Newspaper Coverage of Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Community Structure Approach." *Journal Of Health Communication* 9, no. 4: 281-307. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 30, 2015).

⁵² Ibid, 291.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Mateos de Cabo, Ruth, Ricardo Gimeno, Miryam Martínez, and Luis López. 2014. "Perpetuating Gender Inequality via the Internet? An Analysis of Women's Presence in Spanish Online Newspapers." *Sex Roles* 70, no. 1/2: 57-71. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 30, 2015).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Eyetracking The News: A Study of Print & Online Reading,” *Poynter Institute*, accessed on March 30, 2015, http://www.poynter.org/extra/Eyetrack/keys_01.html

tailored Pollock and Yulis's prominence scoring scheme to examine how much importance North Carolina's newspapers assign to capital punishment.⁵⁷

Whether news organizations prioritize coverage of particular topics can affect public attitudes and policy processes. Research suggests media coverage tells the public which issues matter most, a role known as the agenda-setting function.⁵⁸ Lee et al highlighted how the public perceives particular issues as more important when media pay attention to them.⁵⁹ Through their reporting, media outlets cultivate public interest, which affects what people think about and how they think about it. In a summarization of studies about agenda setting, Camaj noted how "people devote more thought to issues and objects that are more salient in the media coverage."⁶⁰ In addition to affecting how people think, media also help them sort information and prioritize it.⁶¹ In other words, media move issues from obscurity to the top of the public's priority list.

Given the media's agenda-setting power, researchers believe it is important to know how much attention news organizations pay to capital punishment. Between 1960 and 2003, death penalty stories in the *New York Times Index* increased and decreased in

⁵⁷ Pollock and Yulis, "Nationwide Newspaper Coverage of Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Community Structure Approach," 281-307.

⁵⁸ Eissler, Rebecca, Annelise Russell, and Bryan D. Jones. 2014. "New Avenues for the Study of Agenda Setting." *Policy Studies Journal* 42, S76. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 6, 2015).

⁵⁹ Lee Hunter, Mark, Luk N. Van Wassenhove, Maria Besiou, and Mignon van Halderen. 2013. "The Agenda-Setting Power of Stakeholder Media." *California Management Review* 56, no. 1: 24-49. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 6, 2015).

⁶⁰ Camaj, Lindita. 2014. "The Consequences of Attribute Agenda-Setting Effects for Political Trust, Participation, and Protest Behavior." *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 58, no. 4: 634. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 6, 2015).

⁶¹ Eissler et al, "New Avenues for the Study of Agenda Setting," 42.

step with major legal and policy developments.⁶² For example, the Supreme Court's reinstatement of capital punishment in 1976 after a four-year hiatus caused a spike in news coverage.⁶³ Coverage shot up again in 2000, when issues about the size of death row, juvenile and mentally handicapped defendants, and exonerations garnered headlines.⁶⁴ While coverage rose and fell from one year to the next, Dardis et al found, overall, death penalty stories have been appearing more frequently.⁶⁵ The increase in coverage over time suggests reporters are finding new angles to write about and national news organizations consider the issue a priority.

There are disparities between actual public support for capital punishment and what the media portray. Most Americans say they favor capital punishment when asked outright whether death should be a penalty for murder. But more comprehensive polls suggest public opinion is more nuanced.⁶⁶ When surveyors ask whether respondents prefer the death penalty versus life without parole plus restitution, a majority chooses the latter option.⁶⁷ In essence, the public will weigh alternative punishment forms when explicitly asked to do so.⁶⁸ Even so, Niven found media frame capital punishment as if Americans overwhelmingly support it, ignoring the fact that most people prefer to lock up murderers for life if they were required to compensate their victim's family

⁶² Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 115-140.

⁶³ Ibid, 122.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 122-123.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 122.

⁶⁶ Niven, David. 2002. "Bolstering an Illusory Majority: The Effects of the Media's Portrayal of Death Penalty Support." *Social Science Quarterly (Wiley-Blackwell)* 83, no. 3: 671-689. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 16, 2014).

⁶⁷ Ibid, 673.

⁶⁸ De Mesmaecker, "Building social support for restorative justice through the media: is taking the victim perspective the most appropriate strategy?" 239.

members.⁶⁹ When newspapers portray capital punishment as overwhelmingly popular, death penalty opponents are less likely to express their beliefs because they wrongly feel part of a small minority of critics.⁷⁰ In Niven's analysis of 4,190 articles between 1996 and 2001, only 7.2 percent mentioned popular support for life without parole. In articles that did discuss the alternative punishment, most alluded to its existence as an aside and cast it in a negative light.⁷¹

Previous research noted variations in how individual publications treat capital punishment. These variations have been observed both over time and over different regions. According to Day and Golan, some newspapers are more balanced in coverage while others focus squarely on one viewpoint.⁷² Their analysis of Op-Ed articles credited *The New York Times* with including near-equal space for voices on both sides of the debate. *The Washington Post* was not so fair, granting space to staff writers who were anti-death penalty while affording less space to guest columnists who offered a different point of view.⁷³ Likewise, Dardis et al found that stories leading up to the Supreme Court's 1972 ban on capital punishment weighted against capital punishment.⁷⁴ But coverage turned decidedly pro-death for the next several decades as states tried to fashion laws that would pass constitutional muster. In the mid-1990s, coverage turned against

⁶⁹ Niven, "Bolstering an Illusory Majority: The Effects of the Media's Portrayal of Death Penalty Support," 673-674.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 674

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Day, Anita, and Guy Golan. 2005. "Source and content diversity in Op-Ed Pages: assessing editorial strategies in The New York Times and the Washington Post." *Journalism Studies* 6, no. 1: 61-71. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 123.

capital punishment yet again, with stories about innocent people on death row exposing serious systematic flaws. By 2000, anti-death penalty news became consistent, with coverage more imbalanced than at any time during their study period.⁷⁵ Publications can differ regionally, also. Newspaper stories originating in California tended to weight against capital punishment. Coverage in Texas newspapers, meanwhile, strongly upheld the policy, “sometimes omitting key factors in the debate about the method.”⁷⁶

In covering individual capital cases, reporters highlight key developments but ignore parts where defendants’ crimes are contextualized. Haines and Green concluded media focus on pretrial and verdict phases but disregard sentencing phases, when defendants’ social and historical backgrounds emerge.⁷⁷ Reporters also frequently rely on prosecutors and law enforcement sources for information about defendants, a practice that leads to unfair portrayals of the accused.⁷⁸ Given how people turn to media for information about capital punishment, newspapers omitting contextual details about capital defendants may undermine the public’s appreciation for the social and biological traits shown to predispose people to criminal behavior.⁷⁹ According to Fullerton and Patterson, news reports about murder probe deeply into the lives of those involved but ultimately present “cheaply sketched, stick-figure portraits.”⁸⁰ News portrays perpetrators

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ "Splashed the fluids into his flesh": News coverage of executions," 10.

⁷⁷ Haney, Craig, and Susan Greene. 2004. "Capital Constructions: Newspaper Reporting in Death Penalty Cases." *Analyses Of Social Issues & Public Policy* 4, no. 1: 129-150. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 138.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁸⁰ Fullerton and Patterson, "Murder in Our Midst: Expanding Coverage to Include Care and Responsibility," 306.

as bad seeds, evildoers unworthy of mercy.⁸¹ But crime's causes are much more complex. A deeper examination of crime's origins and consequences could spur community conversations about responsibility, social justice and reconciliation.⁸²

Beyond undermining the public's appreciation for crime's many complexities, coverage has demonstrable effects on public opinion as it relates to crime and capital punishment. This relationship has been documented as far back as 19th century Great Britain, when increasing crime coverage engendered false perceptions among residents that violence was on the rise.⁸³ British policymakers had been considering abolishing capital punishment. But the false, media-fueled perceptions made any such attempt politically explosive, prompting policymakers to back off.⁸⁴ More recently, Niven found that subjects who read more realistic accounts about the death penalty debate became less supportive and believed capital punishment would become less common in the future.⁸⁵ Haines suggested newspaper coverage about flawed convictions casts capital punishment's "carefully groomed image of humaneness" into doubt, potentially eroding support for it.⁸⁶ Dardis et al found stories about the system's flaws caused readers who supported capital punishment to re-evaluate their positions.⁸⁷ Newspapers long framed the death penalty debate as a moral question about whether it was right or wrong to kill

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 304.

⁸³ Casey, Christopher A. 2011. "Common Misperceptions: The Press and Victorian Views of Crime." *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History* 41, no. 3: 367-391. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 18, 2014).

⁸⁴ Ibid, 368-369.

⁸⁵ Niven, "Bolstering an Illusory Majority: The Effects of the Media's Portrayal of Death Penalty Support," 671.

⁸⁶ Haines, "Flawed Executions, the Anti-Death Penalty Movement, and the Politics of Capital Punishment," 126.

⁸⁷ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 128-133.

someone for committing crimes. But the innocence frame causes people to consider a new dimension and rethink their beliefs.⁸⁸ This frame is likely to continue to appear. While not every mishap garners the same level of media attention, imperfections in the criminal justice system are generally newsworthy events.⁸⁹

Media's shift from moral frames to innocence ones may reverberate beyond the public policy realm. The number of death sentences handed down by American juries has been steadily declining since 1995. In 2012, that figure reached its lowest point since the 1970s.⁹⁰ Here again, the innocence frame could be a cause. Fan et al found juries are less likely to apply death sentences when news coverage focuses on the uncomfortable possibility of executing innocent people.⁹¹ The rise in articles about exonerations makes citizens less trusting of the criminal justice system and thus less comfortable about sending people to death row.⁹² If citizens feel more antagonistic toward capital punishment, juries are less likely to support it. If juries are less likely to support it, prosecutors are less likely to expend the considerable resources that capital cases require.⁹³ North Carolina saw these relationships borne out. State juries handed down

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Haines, "Flawed Executions, the Anti-Death Penalty Movement, and the Politics of Capital Punishment," 131-135.

⁹⁰ The Death Penalty Information Center. "Death Sentences By Year: 1976-2012." Access Date: Sept. 21, 2014. <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/death-sentences-year-1977-2009>

⁹¹ Fan et al, "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States," 439-452.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 134.

only one death sentence in the last two years, compared to an average of 25 per year in the 1990s.⁹⁴

Researchers differ on whether journalists' personal beliefs impact media coverage. Writing specifically about political reporting, Niven noted how journalists worry so much about protecting their credibility that they go to great lengths to avoid expressing personal beliefs in articles.⁹⁵ Sometimes, journalists fear showing bias so much that they unintentionally convey support for the other side. That hesitation means stories are more likely to reflect news managers' or organizations' viewpoints rather than the journalists behind the keyboard.⁹⁶ On the other hand, some researchers found specific examples where personal viewpoints impacted reporting. For example, Peake found coverage of the Bush presidency during a five-month period in 2006 slanted in ways that were partly explained by the political leanings of the newspapers and their respective audiences, behavior that ran afoul of professional journalistic standards.⁹⁷ Kothari says individual beliefs and motives of journalists covering the Darfur conflict between 2003 and 2006 significantly influenced coverage.⁹⁸ Whether or not attitudes influence death penalty coverage, one thing is clear: People seek and interpret information in ways that jibe with their pre-existing beliefs, expectations or hypotheses, a phenomenon known as

⁹⁴ Parker, "Goolsby: First-degree murderers deserve the death penalty."

⁹⁵ Niven, " Objective Evidence On Media Bias: Newspaper Coverage Of Congressional Party Switchers," 311-326.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Peake, Jeffrey S. 2007. "Presidents and Front-page News: How America's Newspapers Cover the Bush Administration." *Harvard International Journal Of Press/Politics* 12, no. 4: 52-70. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 17, 2014).

⁹⁸ Kothari, Ammina. 2010. "The Framing Of The Darfur Conflict In The New York Times: 2003-2006." *Journalism Studies* 11, no. 2: 209-224. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 12, 2014).

confirmation bias.⁹⁹ Christian showed how confirmation bias appears in journalism. Journalists, he says, can be so committed “to a predetermined conclusion such that contrary evidence does not sway the final news report or focus.”¹⁰⁰

Among the most widely studied phenomena is the impact of sourcing. A long line of research consistently demonstrated how source selection affects news coverage.¹⁰¹ In reporting on national and international affairs, reporters most frequently turn to government officials for information.¹⁰² Juyan and Cameron say the emphasis on government officials might be understandable when one considers how reporters seek sources who are accessible and directly engaged with newsworthy events.¹⁰³ Journalists often quote social elites who wield economic and political power while ignoring voices on lower social rungs.¹⁰⁴ Rauhala et al showed media’s predilection for government sources in the debate over universal childcare in Canada.¹⁰⁵ Newspapers covering the issue quoted government sources more often than activists, parents and childcare

⁹⁹ Christian, "Cognitive Biases and Errors as Cause—and Journalistic Best Practices as Effect," 160-174.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 163.

¹⁰¹ For example, see Fogarty, Brian J. 2012. "Local newspapers, House members, and source usage." *Social Science Journal* 49, no. 3: 275-283. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹⁰² Juyan Zhang, Bruce, and Glen T. Cameron. 2003. "Study Finds Sourcing Patterns in Wen Ho Lee Coverage." *Newspaper Research Journal* 24, no. 4: 88-101. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹⁰³ Ibid, 97.

¹⁰⁴ Rauhala, A., P. Albanese, C. Ferns, D. Law, A. Haniff, and L. Macdonald. 2012. "Who Says What: Election Coverage and Sourcing of Child Care in Four Canadian Dailies." *Journal Of Child & Family Studies* 21, no. 1: 95-105. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 96-97.

providers.¹⁰⁶ By showing favoritism toward elites, media give upper classes more opportunities to perpetuate their ideologies.¹⁰⁷

However, in coverage of high-profile legal cases, defenders and plaintiffs deserve equal media representation if news organizations are to uphold values of journalistic fairness.¹⁰⁸ Sometimes representation can change over time. Such was the case in the media circus surrounding the trial of Wen Ho Lee. Researchers found that reporters covering the suspected Chinese spy's trial used anonymous and key official sources when the news first broke but turned elsewhere as the case progressed.¹⁰⁹

Who gets quoted and why has become an intense research subject because source choice affects news quality. Fogarty noted how sources shape coverage and voters' understanding of issues facing their government and their representatives' actions.¹¹⁰ According to Fogarty, limiting sources decreases public comprehension of salient topics.¹¹¹ In a study on science and technology coverage, Ramsey linked story depth to sources' proximity to the subject being covered.¹¹² Articles provided deeper accounts when journalists quoted scientists, conferences and research reports instead of organization spokespersons.¹¹³ Later research took this notion of source influence even further. Swain studied how journalists return to the same sources instead of seeking new

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 96-97.

¹⁰⁸ Juyan Cameron, "Study Finds Sourcing Patterns in Wen Ho Lee Coverage," 97.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 98.

¹¹⁰ Fogarty, "Local newspapers, House members, and source usage," 275-283.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ramsey, Shirley. 1999. "A BENCHMARK STUDY OF ELABORATION AND SOURCING IN SCIENCE STORIES FOR EIGHT AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 76, no. 1: 87-98. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹¹³ Ibid.

ones, and when they are unable to ascertain whether events threaten citizens, they merely inform the public the controversies have occurred and quote key players on both sides of the dispute.¹¹⁴ This strategy, Swain says, empowers sources to suppress facts, manipulate information and announce unfounded conclusions. Sources wield influence to their advantage.¹¹⁵ If journalists are not critical and do not check information, they risk being manipulated by their sources.¹¹⁶

Some reporters may not be ready for the challenges inherent in covering capital murder trials. In addition to finding sources, reporters must watch murders recounted in painstaking detail, see graphic crime scene photographs, listen to 911 recordings and witness emotional testimony. Reporters must cope with their emotions while producing copy on deadline. Grubb and Dworzniak stressed how journalists should undergo trauma training, saying students who covered capital trials were ill prepared for their reactions to them.¹¹⁷ Journalists covering traumatic events must make on-the-spot moral choices.¹¹⁸ The psychological attachments journalists form with the events and people they cover

¹¹⁴ Swain, Kristen Alley. 2012. "Delivering the Scary News: Newspaper Sourcing in a Bioterrorism Crisis." *Online Journal Of Communication & Media Technologies* 2, no. 2: 29-56. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2015).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Juyan and Cameron, "Study Finds Sourcing Patterns in Wen Ho Lee Coverage," 98.

¹¹⁷ Dworzniak, Gretchen, and Max Grubb. 2007. "Preparing for the Worst: Making a Case for Trauma Training in the Journalism Classroom." *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 62, no. 2: 190-210. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2014).

¹¹⁸ Amend, Elyse, Linda Kay, and Rosemary C. Reilly. 2012. "Journalism on the Spot: Ethical Dilemmas When Covering Trauma and the Implications for Journalism Education." *Journal Of Mass Media Ethics* 27, no. 4: 235-247. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2014).

make emotional harm more difficult to reconcile.¹¹⁹ At a murder trial, reporters may wrestle with whether to interview defendants' or victims' family members and how to approach them without causing further trauma to either party. Death penalty coverage presents particular difficulties for novice journalists who lack the forethought that develops with experience. Veteran reporters handle such situations more effectively, applying their knowledge to the issue. Even so, they can also experience trauma symptoms and must take care to soften the effects. No one experiences trauma the same way. Rather, people's reactions depend on past experiences, personality and how someone personally assumed what they witnessed and reported.¹²⁰

Justification

My research took a more focused approach than previous studies. Fan et al and Dardis et al examined valence variations in capital punishment coverage in national sources over time. Fan et al examined articles from *The Washington Post*, a publication geared toward an elite readership, and the *Associated Press*, which appeals to broader segments of the American populace.¹²¹ Dardis et al, meanwhile, analyzed abstracts from *The New York Times Index*, choosing the publication because of its status as the nation's

¹¹⁹ Rentschler, Carrie A. 2010. "Trauma Training and the Reparative Work Of Journalism." *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 4: 447-477. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2014).

¹²⁰ Brayne, Mark. "Trauma & Journalism: A Guide for Journalists, Editors & Managers," *Dart Centre for Journalism & Trauma*: 10 (accessed November 11, 2014), http://dartcenter.org/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf

¹²¹ Fan et al, "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States," 439-452.

newspaper of record.¹²² Both studies found connections between frames and public support for capital punishment. Their findings are an important addition to academia's growing understanding for how newspaper coverage shapes public opinion. But their research focused on publications read across the nation and even the world. I found only one study focused on individual states, but it looked at Texas and California, two places with widely different political cultures.¹²³

I could not find research focused solely on variations in publications produced and distributed primarily among North Carolinians. The history of North Carolina's capital punishment system is unique, and reporters have had a lot to write about. In the early 2000s, death penalty opponents successfully pushed legislation to keep mentally retarded defendants off death row.¹²⁴ They also advocated a law to allow DNA evidence analysis if such testing had not been done during defendants' original trials.¹²⁵ As concerns about wrongful convictions mounted, a movement to temporarily halt executions gained steam. Tensions climaxed in 2006 when legal challenges spawned a de facto moratorium. The pause created a seemingly illogical environment where courts could impose death sentences even though inmates could not be executed. My study marks the first time any research has examined how such developments – the moratorium in particular – affect newspaper coverage.

¹²² Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 115-140.

¹²³ "Splashed the fluids into his flesh": News coverage of executions," 10.

¹²⁴ Weigl, Andrea. 2006. "State drops death row appeal." *News and Observer*. April 18: B5. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹²⁵ Weigl, Andrea. 2005. "DNA tests earn convict new trial." *News & Observer*. July 26: A1. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

My study was inspired by previous research from an array of academics. Fan et al scored for the numbers of paragraphs containing the ideas of favorable, unfavorable, guilt and innocence, as inferred from explicit references in the text.¹²⁶ I also scored for favorability but used stances expressed in quotes and paraphrased remarks. Dardis et al studied the relationship between coverage frequency and current events. I also examined that relationship, theorizing coverage would rise and fall according to major legal and policy developments.¹²⁷ Niven showed how media portray capital punishment as overwhelmingly popular despite polls suggesting a large segment of the American population would rather lock up killers for life.¹²⁸ I coded articles for references to life without parole to see how many stories reported the alternative sentence. Dardis et al also demonstrated how the accentuation of errors in the criminal justice system caused people to re-evaluate their positions on capital punishment.¹²⁹ So I looked at how many articles used innocence frames through which to discuss and analyze capital punishment. Taking all these variables together, my research represents a comprehensive exploration of North Carolina's capital punishment coverage unlike any other.

My research also underscores the importance of fairness. Because media outlets serve as the primary source of information about capital punishment, it is important that reporters provide accurate, detailed and objective accounts. Reporters' sources affect the

¹²⁶ Fan et al, "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States," 439-452.

¹²⁷ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 115-140.

¹²⁸ Niven, Bolstering an Illusory Majority: The Effects of the Media's Portrayal of Death Penalty Support," 671-689.

¹²⁹ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 115-140.

angle – or trajectory – that a story takes.¹³⁰ My study examined which sources appear in capital punishment coverage and whether reporters practiced fairness, incorporating voices from all sides of the debate. Readers crave in-depth coverage and analysis.¹³¹ To achieve high quality reporting, journalists must draw from sources who add context and detail to stories. But providing exhaustive coverage has grown increasingly difficult as reporters grapple with dwindling resources and murky employment outlooks. In 2012, newspaper cutbacks pushed the industry below 40,000 full-time professional employees for the first time since 1978.¹³² Fewer resources means reporters have less time to vet information from sources. The consequences of this phenomenon have already come into view. A Pew Research Center analysis found reporters covering the 2012 presidential campaign acted “primarily as megaphones, rather than as investigators, of the assertions put forward by the candidates and other political partisans.”¹³³ One 2013 poll found that not only were Americans noticing declines in news quality, but nearly one-third also reported having abandoned media outlets because of it.¹³⁴ If newspapers are to thrive, quality must be upheld.

My study employed a content analysis to explore coverage before and after the 2006 moratorium. My results shine a light on whether coverage has grown more positive,

¹³⁰ See Walbert, Kathryn. “Reading newspapers: Factual reporting,” *Learn NC*, UNC School of Education: Accessed October 12, 2014, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4132>

¹³¹ “The State of the News Media 2013,” *The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism*: Accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2013/overview-5/>

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Enda, Jodi and Amy Mitchell, “Americans Show Signs of Leaving a News Outlet, Citing Less Information,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed March 29, 2015, <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2013/special-reports-landing-page/citing-reduced-quality-many-americans-abandon-news-outlets/>

negative or neutral over a 16-year period and whether newspapers present a fair representation of public opinion. I also scored for sources to find out whom reporters relied on most frequently for information. And finally, I analyzed whether news outlets employed innocence frames in their reporting. My findings provide reporters, editors and media managers with valuable insights on coverage practices and enable members of the public to become more critical news consumers. My study adds to a growing body of research on how media present an issue of significant public import and may help North Carolina's major newspapers increase news quality and retain readership. Given the media's power to effect policy changes, newspapers' treatment of capital punishment warrants steadfast scrutiny. In the end, I hope my analysis improves coverage so the public receives accurate and objective information about this important policy topic.

Research Questions

Empirical evidence suggests newspapers' capital punishment coverage changed over time in both frequency and approach.¹³⁵ Yet no previous research examined whether that trend holds true for major North Carolina newspapers. This study is the first to provide quantifiable data on longitudinal variations in North Carolina newspaper coverage using the 2006 moratorium as a critical juncture.

This study had four goals. First, I wanted to find out whether policy developments affected coverage, both in terms of the frequency with which articles appeared and also in their treatment. Given significant state policy developments, I theorized coverage

¹³⁵ See Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 115-140.

frequency increased and newspapers afforded articles more space and prominent page placement leading up to 2006. The content analysis answered the following question:

RQ1: Have newspapers articles about the death penalty grown more or less prominent since the start of the 2006 moratorium?

Second, I wanted to determine whether newspaper coverage grew more or less favorable toward capital punishment since the moratorium began and whether source choices affected valence. The content analysis answered the following questions:

RQ2: Has North Carolina newspaper coverage of capital punishment grown more positive, negative or neutral since the moratorium began in 2006?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between source choice and valence?

Third, I wanted to demonstrate how newspapers frame capital punishment and whether they address the existence of alternative punishments. Opinion polls show death penalty support drops when the public is reminded about the existence of life without parole and the possibility that innocent people could be executed. Therefore, the content analysis examined the following questions:

RQ4: Has there been an increase in references to life without parole since the moratorium began?

RQ5: Have newspapers increased their use of innocence frames in addressing capital punishment?

Chapter 2: Methodology

I conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles appearing between Jan. 1, 1998 and Dec. 31, 2014. I chose these dates based on North Carolina's last execution, which happened on Aug. 18, 2006.¹³⁶ Therefore, my content analysis spanned roughly eight years of newspaper coverage prior to the moratorium's beginning and eight years after the last execution.

I analyzed highest circulation newspapers from different regions to gain a sense for how publications across the state treated capital punishment.¹³⁷ I selected the following newspapers based on 2013 weekday circulation numbers, which are listed in parentheses: *The News & Observer* (123,101), which is based in Raleigh and focuses on the Piedmont-Triad region but is distributed statewide; *The Charlotte Observer* (128,505), which covers the greater Charlotte area; the *News & Record* (51,114), which serves North-Central North Carolina; and the *StarNews*, whose readership includes a large pocket of Southeastern North Carolina. (I initially planned on including *The Citizen-Times* (30,224), an Asheville-based newspaper spanning Western North Carolina, but copies were not available in the *NewsBank* database).¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Death Penalty Information Center. "Editorials: 'The Last Man to Die,'" (2014): Accessed October 17, 2014, <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/editorials-%E2%80%9C-last-man-die%E2%80%9D>

¹³⁷ For example of how death penalty coverage varies by region, see "Splashed the fluids into his flesh": News coverage of executions," 10.

¹³⁸ For circulation figures, see "Media Intelligence Center," Alliance for Audited Media, accessed November 11, 2014, <http://abcas3.auditedmedia.com/MICenter/Home/Index?s=5336a191-67f4-4a79-bbec-5edd73f79990&v=NO>

I used the *NewsBank* database to search for keywords in the lead or first paragraph. I did not conduct a full text search because my goal was to find articles in which the death penalty was the story's primary focus. Also, I needed to narrow my selection to a representative sample because of time constraints. The keywords were "death penalty," "capital punishment," "execution" and "death row." I excluded articles containing "Editorial" or "Opinion" in the text and section information, as opinion pieces fell outside the realm of this study. These search parameters produced a sample of 4,190 articles. I manually browsed the headlines to weed out articles not focused on North Carolina's capital punishment system. I removed all stories about federal trials or federal criminal justice policy. I also removed articles that referred to an "execution-style" murder but did not reference an actual death sentence in the first paragraph. I also removed letters to the editor, sports stories, columns and articles in which writers used the first-person point of view. I also removed articles about people condemned in other countries. I winnowed the sample down even further through a random selection process to produce a near-equal subsample of articles from each publication. If an article in the subsample was later found to be inappropriate, i.e., should have been eliminated during the winnowing process, I returned to the sample and replaced it with an article from close to the same date.

After gathering the sample, my advisor and I conducted a trial run to test the coding procedure, scoring a five-article subsample. The trial run resulted in some tweaks to the coding instrument, including the addition of a source category for "Elected officials who aren't judges or prosecutors" and a narrower definition for whom qualifies as a human source for the purposes of this study.

After the first trial run, we conducted a second trial run of 15 articles. The second run did not result in any major changes to the coding instrument. We decided then to proceed with intercoder reliability. To achieve intercoder reliability, we each coded 10 percent of the sample, or 61 articles. I used Holsti's method to calculate percent agreement. We agreed on five variables – coder name, article number, headline, date and media outlet – either 100 percent of the time or close to it. We achieved above 90 percent agreement on all the other variables. Agreement for word count was .98; page placement, .98; photograph or graphic inclusion, .98; sources, .93; stances, .92; life without parole references, .95; and innocence frames, .90.

After achieving intercoder reliability, I coded the remaining articles in the sample. The final coding instrument included 12 variables and was adapted to the online survey software Qualtrics to streamline the process. The first variable asked coders to identify their names and was developed only for intercoder reliability purposes. For the second variable, I entered the headline. Simply cutting and pasting the headline into the box accomplished this. I also entered each article's publication date into a textbox using the "Month, Day Year" format. For publication information, my instrument required me to select one of the four publications.

After collecting this basic information, I examined each article for three prominence indicators. This part of the analysis included three different variables. Pollock and Yulis indicated a fourth variable, headline size; however, I could not glean

headline sizes from the *NewsBank* database.¹³⁹ Therefore, I examined the three other prominence variables:

- 1) Length: Using Microsoft Word, I documented word counts for each story within a range of less than or equal to 200, between 201 and 300, 301-400, 501-600, 601-700, 701-800, 801-900, 901-1000, and more than 1,001.
- 2) Placement: I coded articles based on the page on which each appeared: A1, A section but not A1, B1, B section but not B1, C1, C section but not C1, and all other sections.
- 3) Photographs and graphics: Whether each article contained a photograph or graphic was a simple yes or no answer.

Next, I read each article and identified human sources attributed with some version of the word “said.” I chose the verb because it is a common attribution verb. Then I categorized each source into the following groups: “Law enforcement;” “Prosecutors;” “Defense attorneys;” “Judges;” “Elected officials who aren’t judges or prosecutors;” “Nonelected civil servants;” “Third-party sources, such as academics, researchers and activists;” “Defendant and/or defendant’s family and friends;” “Victim’s family and friends” (For this category, I assumed all victims would be dead. However, after seeing an article in which a victim was still alive, I changed this category to incorporate live victims as well); “Witnesses to either the crime or execution;” and “Other.” For each word that fell into the “Other” category, I included a brief description of that source. I entered a number into the text box below each source category to indicate how many sources from each category appeared in the story.

¹³⁹ Pollock and Yulis, "Nationwide Newspaper Coverage of Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Community Structure Approach," 281-307.

I counted each source the first time they were quoted or paraphrased and not on subsequent reference. In other words, I counted each source once. Numerous factors influence how frequently reporters attribute individual sources, including whether comments are articulate and on topic. My study was aimed at understanding source types in death penalty coverage, so there was no reason to count sources more than once.

Anonymous sources and what I call “groups” – the grouping of more than one individual into a category based on common descriptors, as indicated by phrases such as “prosecutors say” – were not counted. The purpose of this study was narrow, to examine human sources quoted or paraphrased in stories. It is difficult if not impossible to categorize anonymous sources. I disregarded groups because group descriptors are vague and not reflective of the group’s opinions. For example, if an article stated that death penalty opponents believe John Smith should not be executed because the death penalty is inhumane, that statement excludes opponents who disagree with capital punishment because of the likelihood that Smith is innocent or because he turned his life around behind bars, among other nuances.

For each source categorized, I determined whether each source’s comments were weighted pro- or anti-death penalty. I did not code sources who did not reflect a stance on capital punishment. I coded sources as having expressed an “Other” stance when they indicated a changed viewpoint or conflicting views, such as favoring the death penalty for some crimes but not for others. A weighted statement included those that conveyed opposition or support for the death penalty in individual cases, such as victims’ family members who expressed a desire to see defendants die for their crimes.

Next, I coded the text for references to life without the possibility of parole. Life without parole is the only punishment besides the death penalty that the state may impose on defendants over 18 years old and convicted of first-degree murder. In fact, first-degree murder is the only crime for which life is allowable under North Carolina law.¹⁴⁰ Second-degree murder, manslaughter, rape and all other violent felonies carry less severe punishments.¹⁴¹ To find such references, I searched each article for such words and phrases as “life sentence,” “received life,” “life without the possibility of parole,” and any other references to the alternative punishment. I only coded articles as using the citation if they made reference in relation to defendants or cases, and not pleas to spare defendants’ lives or judges or juries weighing defendants’ fates. Also, I did not code governors weighing commutations as referencing life because doing so would have assumed everyone understands what commuting death sentences means.

Finally, I examined articles for references to wrongful convictions, flaws in the criminal justice system, innocence and exonerations. To do this, I searched for the following words or phrases: “innocence,” “innocent,” “wrongful conviction,” “exoneration,” “exonerate,” “exoneree,” or any other word or phrase suggesting state courts wrongfully convicted individuals. As in Fan et al, I took care to ensure innocence references referred to the accused and not other topics like innocent victims or pleas of innocence.¹⁴² But articles were coded as raising innocence issues if the text referenced

¹⁴⁰ See North Carolina General Statute 14-17.

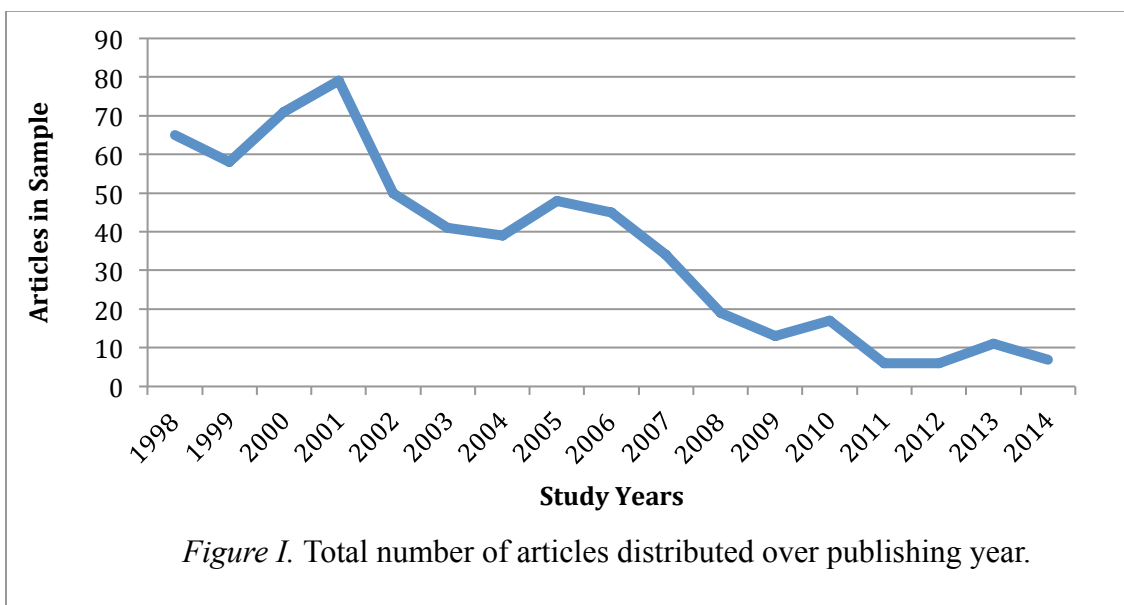
¹⁴¹ “Felony Punishment Chart,” *The North Carolina Court System*: Accessed October 17, 2014, <http://www.nccourts.org/Courts/CRS/Councils/spac/Sentencing/Punishment.asp>

¹⁴² Fan et al, “A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States,” 439-452.

defendants receiving new trials, as such developments imply an egregious error affected the trial's outcome.

Chapter 3: Results

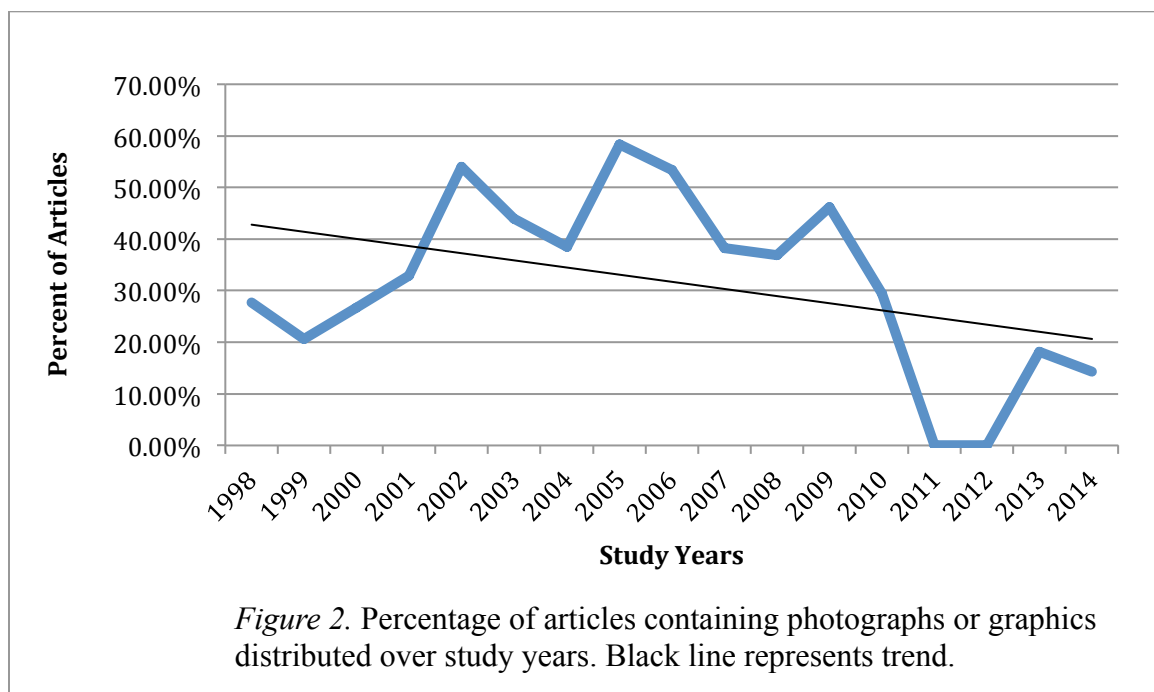
My sample included 609 articles. Distributed over study years, my results show coverage plummeted from 79 articles in 2001 to seven in 2014, a 91 percent decrease. In 2014, the sampling method did not capture any articles from the *StarNews*. It captured one from *The Charlotte Observer*, four from *The News & Observer*, and two from the *News & Record* in that year. Therefore, the number of articles coded for the eight years before the moratorium and the eight years after the moratorium differed markedly. The sampling method captured 451 articles between 1998 and 2005, but captured 158 articles between 2006 and 2014. The sampling method captured a near-equal number of articles from each publication: 147 from *The Charlotte Observer*, 149 from *The News & Observer*, 174 from the *News & Record*, and 139 from the *StarNews*. The disparity between years made it prudent to analyze elements of variables 7, 8, 11 and 12 in percentage terms for yearly comparisons. I also used percentages to analyze “prominence scores” (discussed later) for an apples-to-apples comparison of annual distribution.



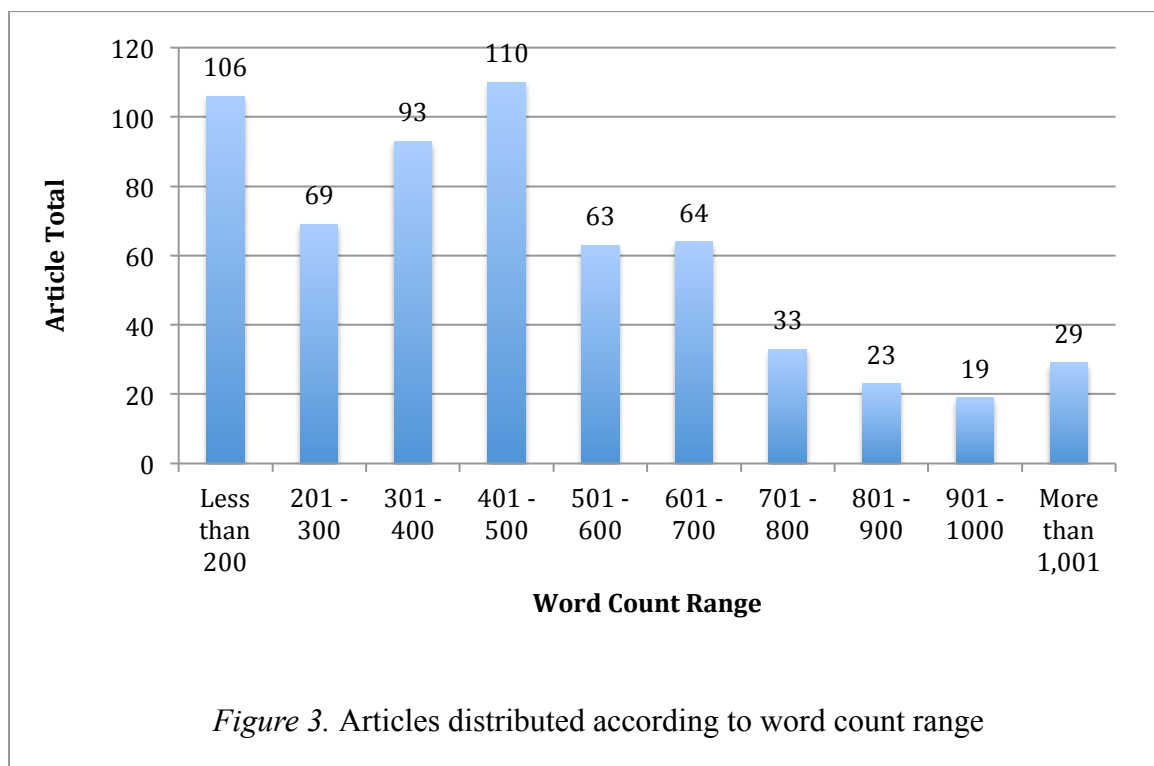
RQ1: Have newspapers articles grown more or less prominent since the start of the 2006 moratorium?

To answer this question, I analyzed three measures of prominence: photograph and graphic inclusion, article length as indicated via word count, and page placement.

More than 36 percent of articles in the sample carried photographs or graphics. The percentage of articles including photographs or graphics trended down over the study period. The share of stories containing art peaked at slightly more than 58 percent in 2005, plummeted to 0 percent in 2011 and 2012, and then notched up to 18 percent and 14 percent in 2013 and 2014, respectively. It was impossible using the *NewsBank* system to tell whether images were photographs or graphics, nor could I code image sizes. Therefore, I coded mug shots that could have run 1 inch by 1 inch the same as photographs that could have run whole page lengths.



I coded word counts within ranges. Articles most frequently ran between 401 and 500 words and showed no appreciable decline over time. The second largest range included articles that ran less than two hundred words. Articles between 301 and 400 words came in third, followed by 201-300 in fourth and 601-700 in fifth. Overall, death penalty stories fell on the lower side of the ranges I established, with more articles running between 0 and 600 words than articles running between 601 and more than 1,001 words.



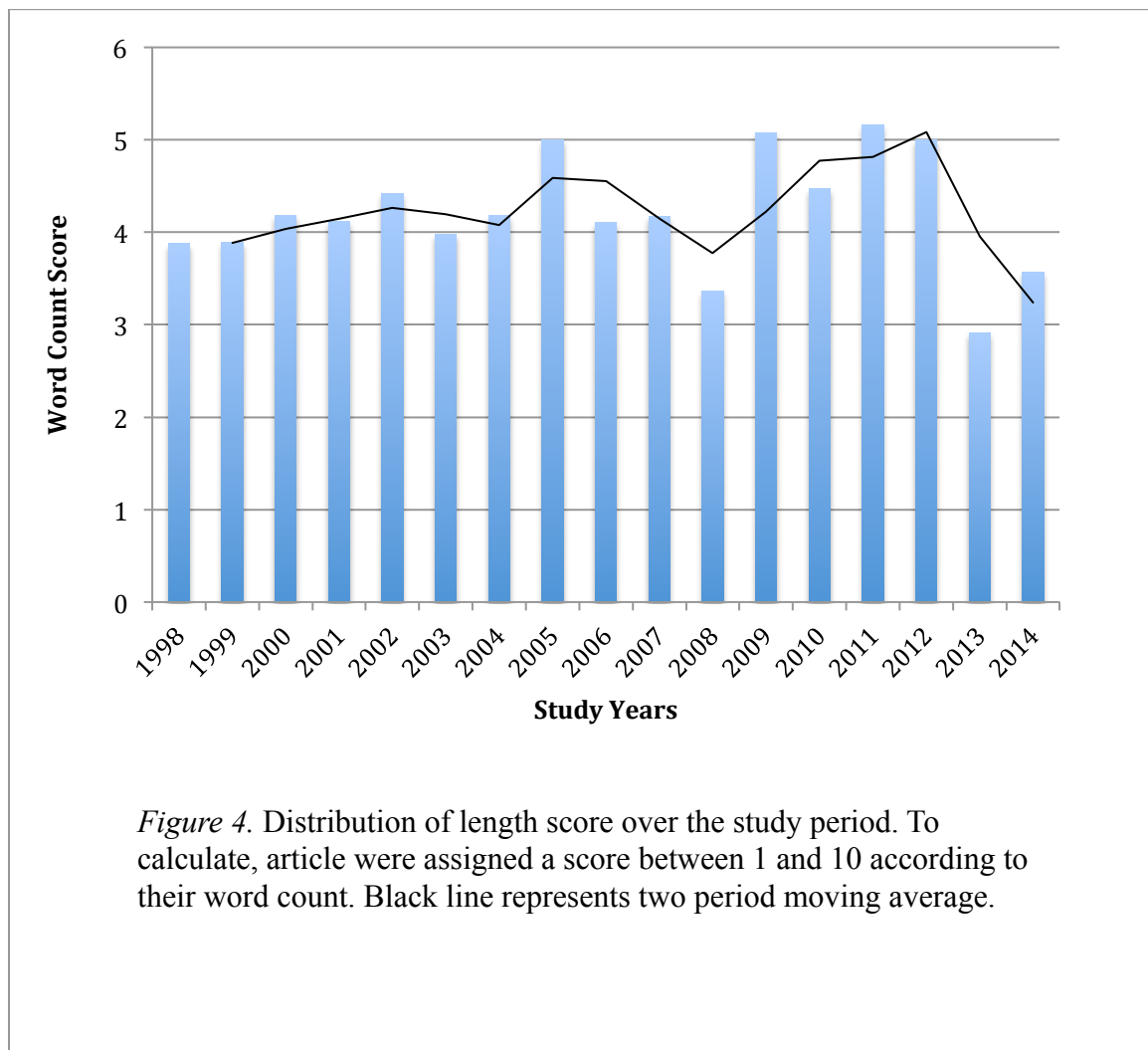
Because I coded articles in ranges, it was impossible to determine precise average word counts for each year. To explore whether word counts increased or decreased from one year to the next, I assigned scores to each article related to the word count range in which each fell. I assigned articles that ran less than 200 words scores of 1; articles that ran between 201 and 300 words scores of 2; 301-400, 3; 401-500, 4; 501-600, 5; 601-

700, 6; 701-800, 7; 801-900, 8; 901-1000, 9; more than 1001, 10. By assigning scores, I developed an “average length score” for each year to facilitate longitudinal comparisons. For example, the average length score for 2005 was 5, meaning average word count for articles sampled in that year ranged between 500 and 600 words. The distribution indicated average length score peaked in 2005, 2009, 2011 and 2012, and reached lows in 2008 and 2013. Average length scores ticked up in 2014, but did not reach pre-2012 levels. According to Pollock and Yulis, article length is one indicator with which to measure how much importance newspapers consider a topic.¹⁴³ Therefore, years in which the average length score was lowest were also years in which newspapers saw death penalty stories as less newsworthy. The scores are also a measurement of how much death penalty information was available to North Carolina newspaper readers. Low scores indicate less information was available to readers compared to other years, and high scores indicate more information was available. Analyzed this way, newspapers considered death penalty topics less important after the moratorium and more important before it. The average annual length score between 1998 and 2005 was 4.18, whereas the average annual length score between 2006 and 2014 was 4.12, a difference of .06 percentage points.

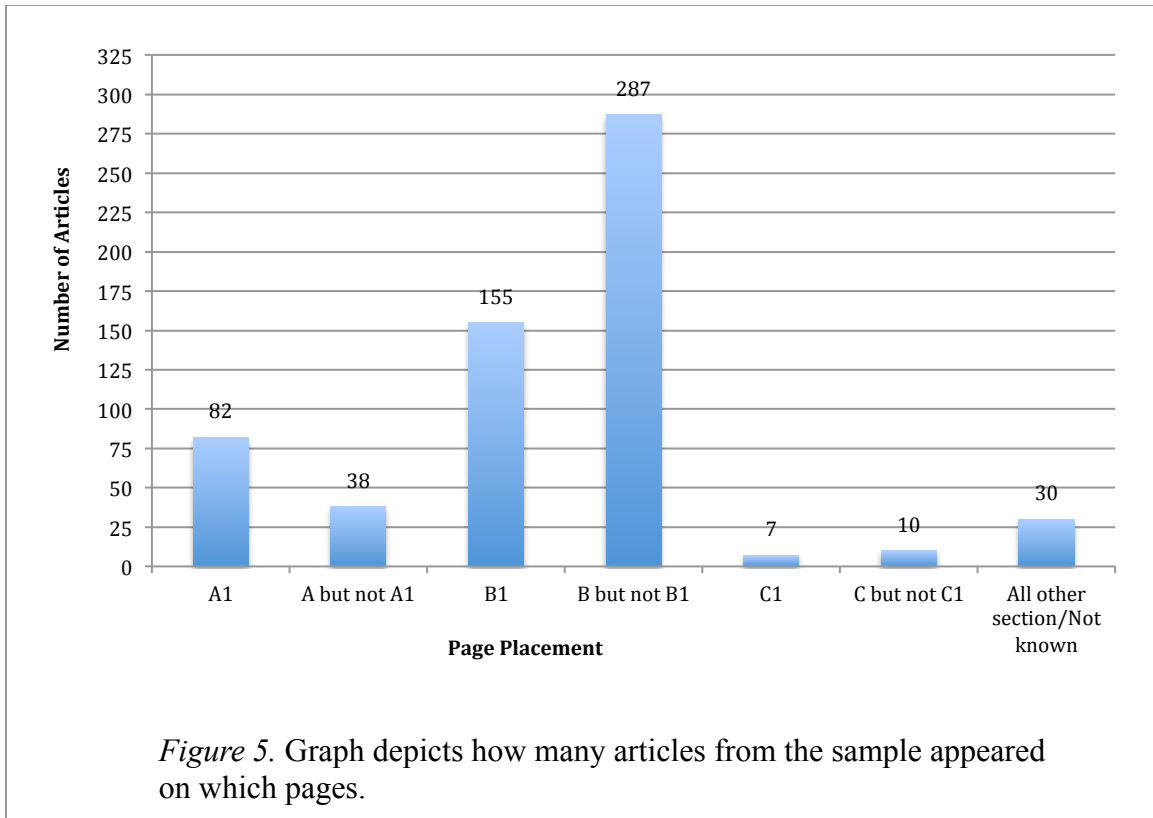
When the scores are examined from their raw numbers, the differences are much more startling and paint a picture of how newspaper readers received much less information after the moratorium. There was nearly three times more death penalty information available to newspaper readers between 1998 and 2005, when the total length score was 1887, than after it took effect, when the total length score was 651. The

¹⁴³ Pollock and Yulis, "Nationwide Newspaper Coverage of Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Community Structure Approach," 281-307.

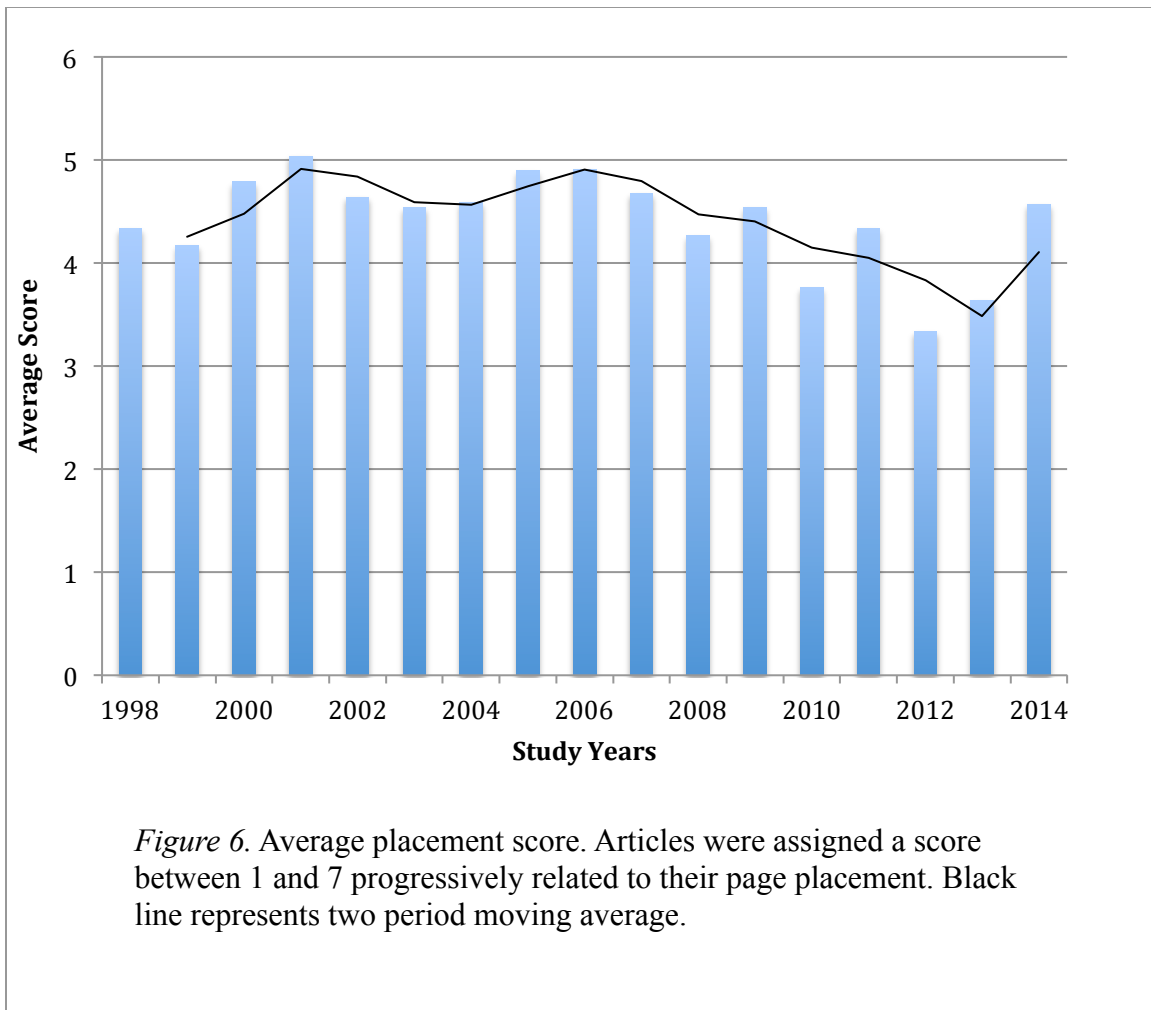
differences are largely the result of sharp declines in length scores in the years 2008 and 2013, the latter clocking the lowest length score out of any year in the study period.



After word count, I coded for article placement using a similar scoring procedure. The largest proportion appeared inside the B section (287) and lowest proportion appeared on the C section front (7). In between those two extremes, from lowest to highest, were articles inside the C section (10), all other sections or articles did not indicate a section (30), inside the A section (38), the front page (82), and on the B section front (155).



A placement scoring mechanism allowed me to analyze average article placements in each year. To make this work, I assigned each article a number related to its page placement, with articles on the front page receiving higher scores and articles that appeared on inside sections receiving progressively lower scores. Articles appearing on A1 received scores of 7; articles inside the A section received scores of 6; B1, 5; inside B, 4; C1, 3; inside C, 2; all other section or did not indicate a section, 1. I added together total scores from each year and averaged the sum against the total number of articles from each respective year. This calculation of “average placement score” showed articles grew less conspicuous after the moratorium. Average placement score fell from 4.9 in 2006 to 3.3 in 2012. The score ticked up to 3.6 in 2013 and 4.6 in 2014, but remained below the peak of 5.0 reached in 2001.

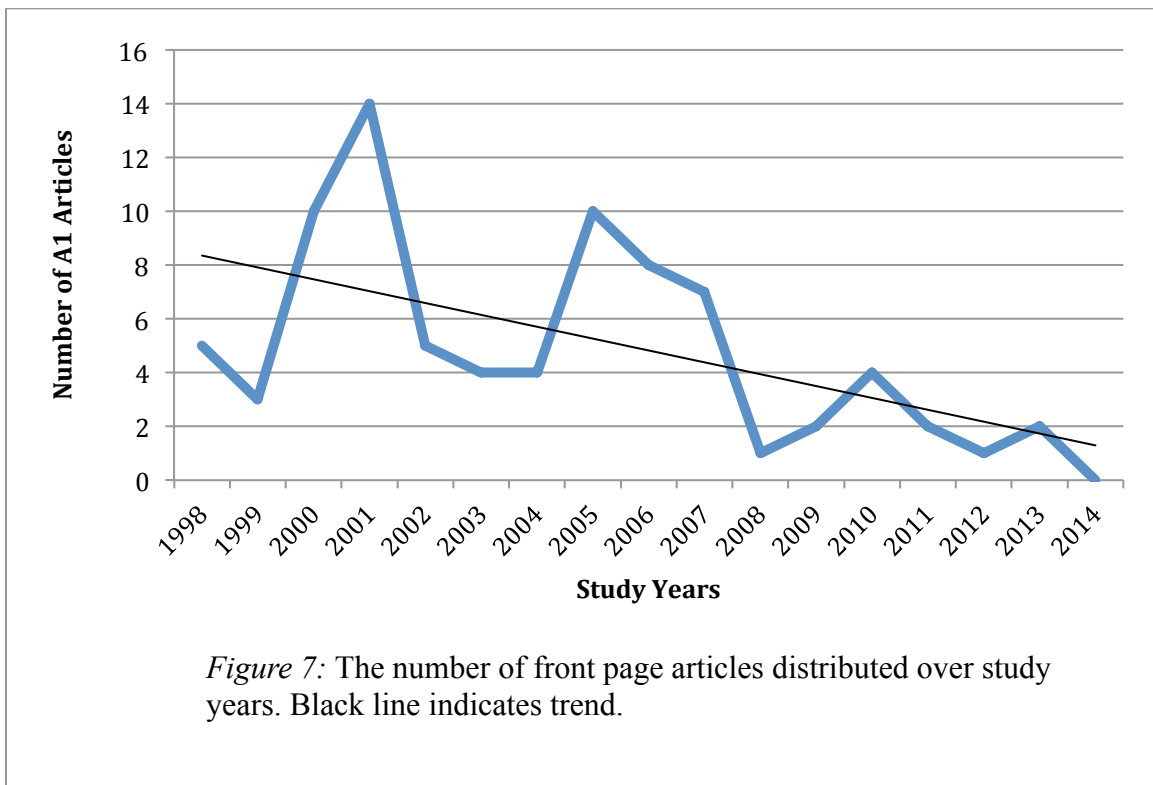


I paid particular attention to the number of front-page articles from each year. The number of front-page articles from each year trended downward over the study period. Front-page articles started at a low of 5 in 1998, trended upward, peaked at 14 in 2001 and then plummeted, dropping to 0 in 2014.

Page placement was one of four prominence indicators observed by Pollock and Yulis.¹⁴⁴ Less prominent articles – i.e., articles on B and C sections instead of A sections

¹⁴⁴ Pollock and Yulis, "Nationwide Newspaper Coverage of Physician-Assisted Suicide: A Community Structure Approach," 281-307.

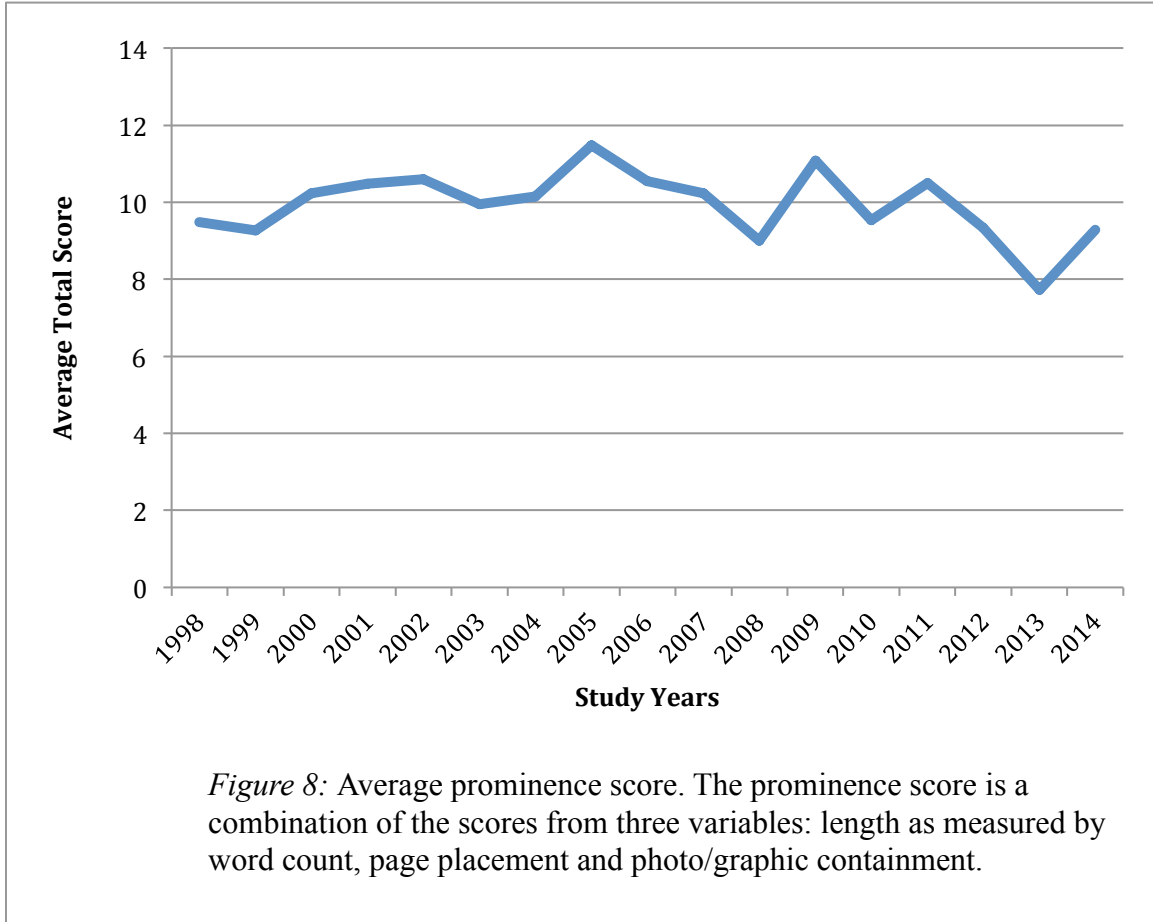
– are less likely to attract reader attention.¹⁴⁵ When I analyzed my placement findings through this lens, it was clear articles had the potential to grab more attention before the moratorium, when the annual average placement score was 4.64, than in the eight years after executions stopped, when the average annual placement score was 4.44, a difference of 0.2 percentage points. Overall, readers were exposed to much less death penalty information after the moratorium. The total page placement score between 1998 and 2005 was 2094, meaning articles during those years appeared more frequently and in much more conspicuous places compared to the period between 2006 and 2014, when total placement score was only 702.



¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

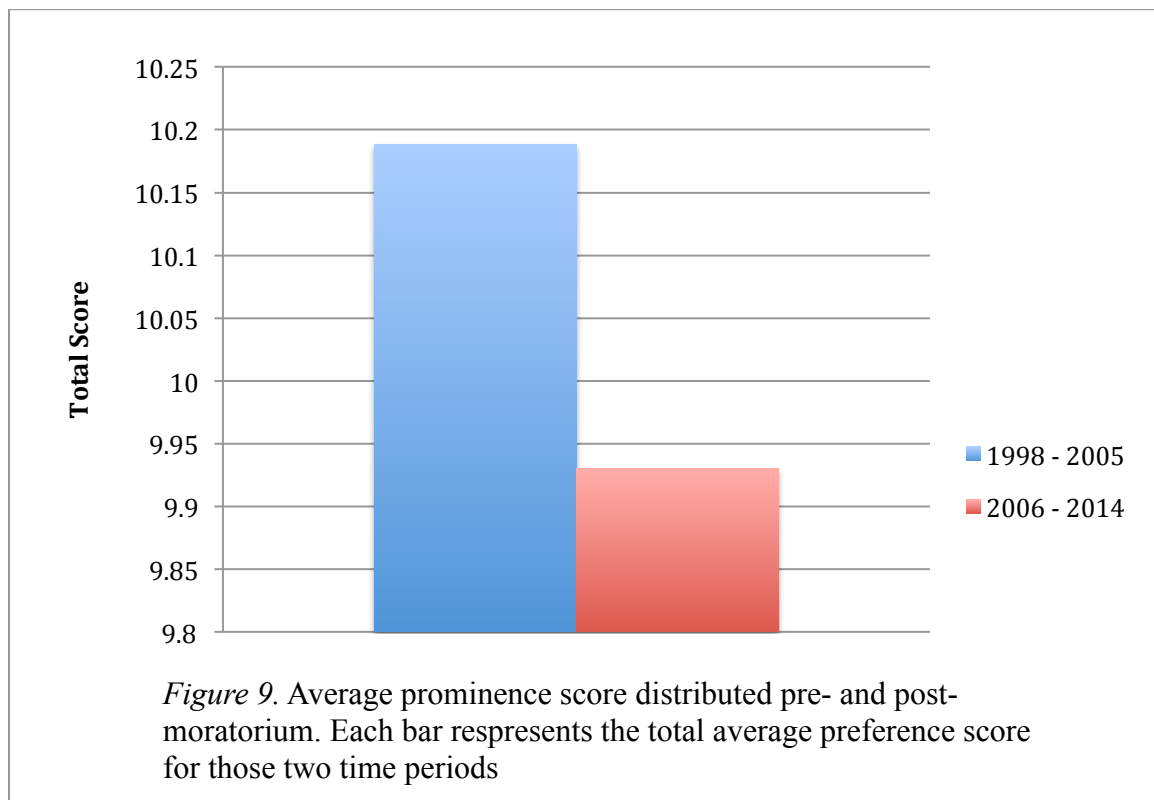
Factoring these three variables together – photograph/graphic inclusion, word count and page placement – provided a glimpse into how much news outlets favored death penalty articles and how much information was available to readers over the last 16 years. In addition to length and placement scores, I assigned scores based on whether articles contained photographs or graphics. Articles containing photographs or graphics received scores of 2, whereas those without any art received scores of 1. I added these three scores – length scores, placement scores, and photograph/graphic scores – together and then averaged the sum against the total articles from each study year. This calculation produced an “average prominence score,” which represents how much favorability news outlets paid to death penalty stories.

The higher the score, the more likely that articles from that year appeared on the front page, included a photograph or graphic and ran longer than years with lower scores; in other words, the higher the score, the more likely that readers paid attention to coverage during year. Overall, prominence scores trended downward over the study period, further corroborating that newspapers considered death penalty coverage less important. Average scores ranged from 7.28 in 2013 to 11.48 in 2005. In 1998, death penalty stories scored a 9.49. That figure ticked up to 10.48 in 2001 and peaked at 11.48 in 2005. Prominence scores dropped to their lowest point in 2013, but picked up again, hitting 9.28 in 2014.



The scores told a similar story when I analyzed them from a pre- and post-moratorium standpoint. I added up scores from the years between 1998 and 2005, and 2006 and 2014, respectively, then averaged those sums against the total number of articles from each of those periods. The average prominence score for 1998-2005 was 10.19, whereas the average prominence score for 2006-2014 was 9.93, a difference of 0.26. My analysis indicates news outlets before the moratorium published longer articles, assigned stories more prominent page placements and included more photographs and

graphics than they did after the moratorium began. In sum, death penalty coverage has grown less prominent since the moratorium's start.



Average prominence scores varied widely by publication. To calculate prominence scores for each newspaper, I added prominence scores from each article from each publication. My calculation found that the *News & Record* came in first with an overall prominence score of 1803. *The News & Observer* followed at 1625. *The Charlotte Observer* came in third at 1541. The *StarNews*, meanwhile, came in last at 1195. The scores are an indicator of how much favorability publications showed toward death penalty articles. With its high score, the *News & Record* ran longer articles, was more likely to place articles on prominent pages such as the front page or inside the A section, and included accompanying photographs. The *StarNews*, on the other hand, scored

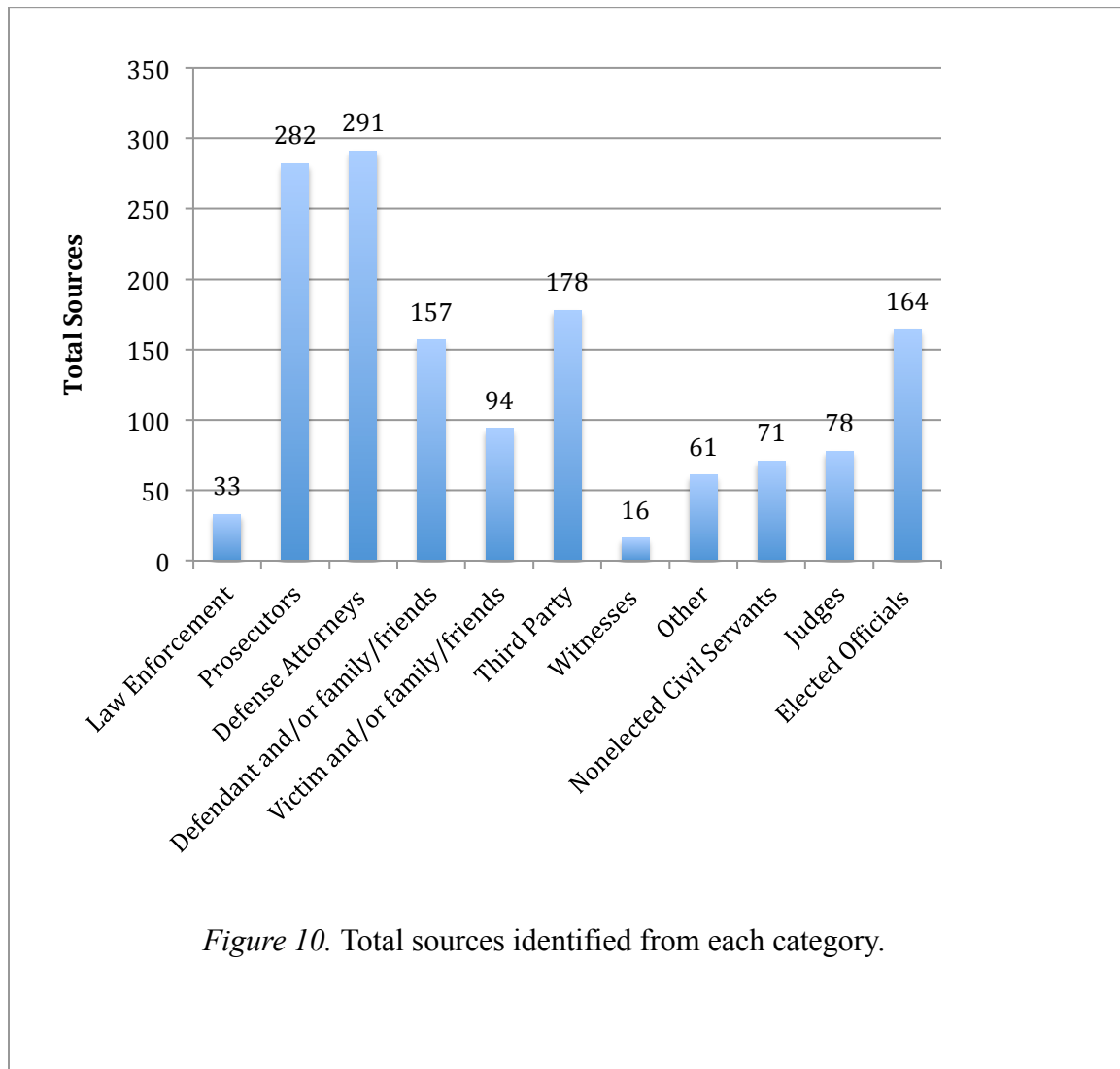
lowest, meaning the newspaper ran short articles and briefs, relegated stories to the B and C sections and omitted photographs and graphics. Therefore, the *News & Record* considered death penalty topics more newsworthy than publications in other parts of North Carolina. As a result, readers in the Greensboro area encountered more information about capital punishment.

RQ2: Has North Carolina newspaper coverage of capital punishment grown more positive, negative or neutral since the moratorium began in 2006?

To answer this question, I examined which sources newspapers use to report on capital punishment and whether those sources expressed stances weighted anti- or pro-death penalty.

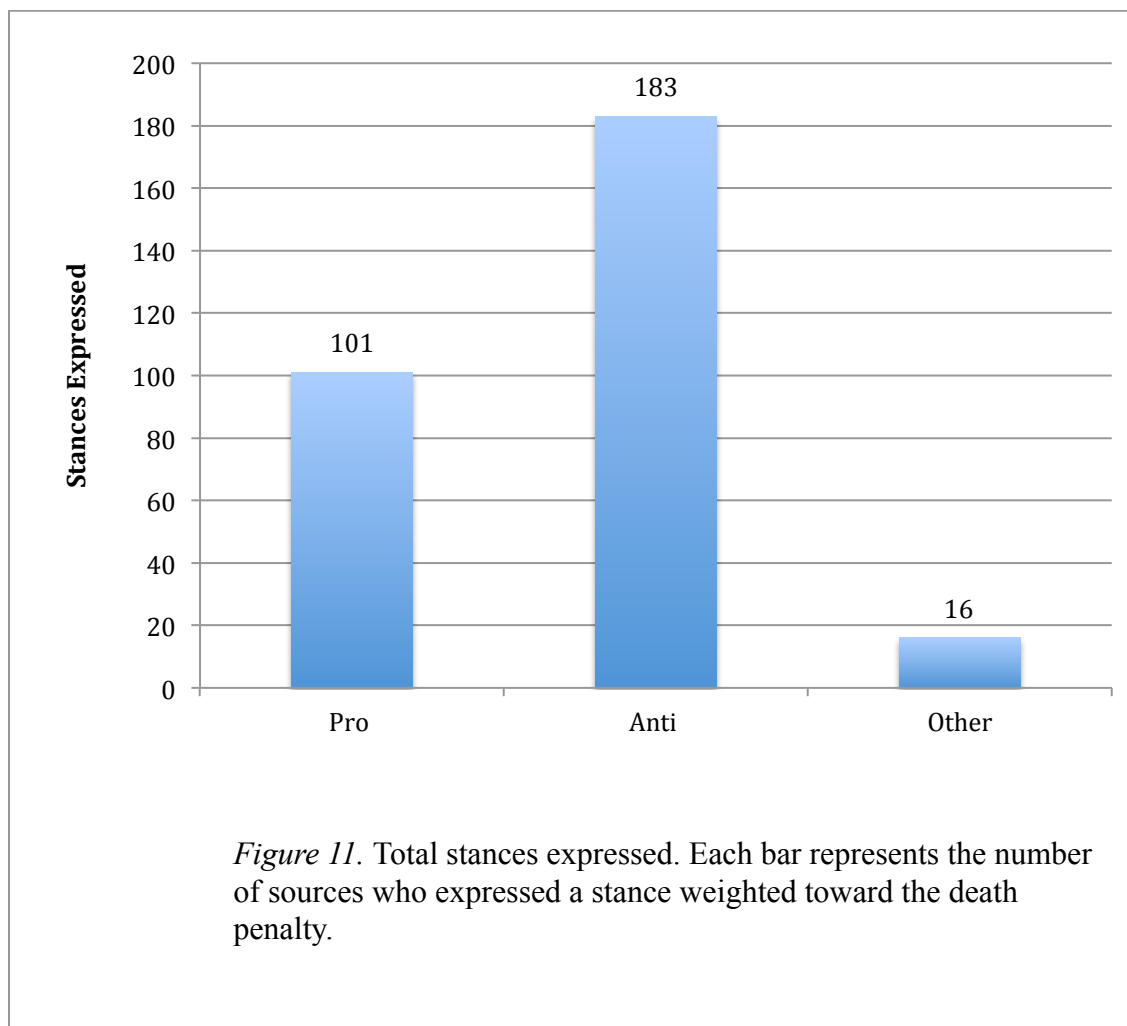
I identified 1425 sources in the sample. Defense attorneys were most frequently cited, composing 20.42 percent of the total. Prosecutors followed them at 19.79 percent. Third-party sources – which included academics, activists, nongovernmental organization directors and spokespersons, researchers and reverends – composed the third largest category at 12.49 percent. In fourth came elected officials who aren't judges or prosecutors – a category including state lawmakers and governors – at 11.51 percent. Defendants and their family members and friends made up the fifth largest source category at 11.02 percent. Victims' family members and friends were quoted or paraphrased nearly half as often, making up 6.60 percent of the total. The judges, nonelected civil servants and "Other" source categories composed 5.47 percent, 4.98

percent and 4.28 percent, respectively. Law enforcement sources composed 2.32 percent of the total, following by witnesses to the crime or execution at 1.12 percent.

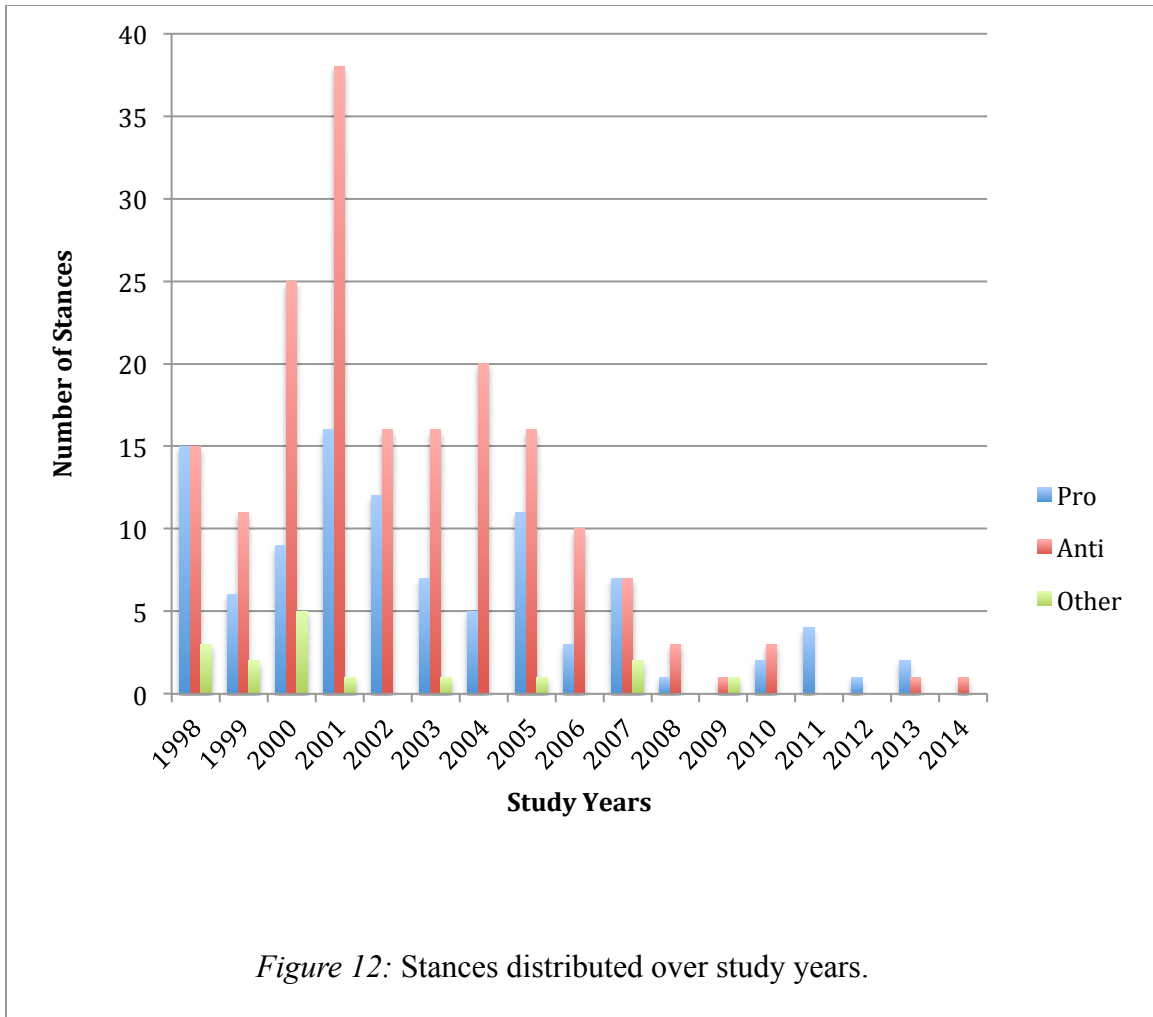


I examined statements included from those sources in stories and determined whether they expressed a stance on capital punishment. If sources did express stances, I then determined whether those stances weighted for or against capital punishment. This analysis included not only whether sources expressed stances on capital punishment in general, but also whether they indicated support or opposition for death sentences in

individual cases. I identified 300 stances in the sample. I found nearly two-thirds, or 61 percent, of those stances weighted against capital punishment. Another 33.66 percent of those stances weighted in support of capital punishment. A much smaller number, 5.33 percent, I coded as “Other,” meaning sources either expressed opinion changes or mixed feelings such as favoring capital punishment for some crimes but not others. The 300 total means more than half the articles in the sample contained no stances at all. When sources expressed stances, they were nearly twice as likely to express stances weighted against the death penalty than in support of it.

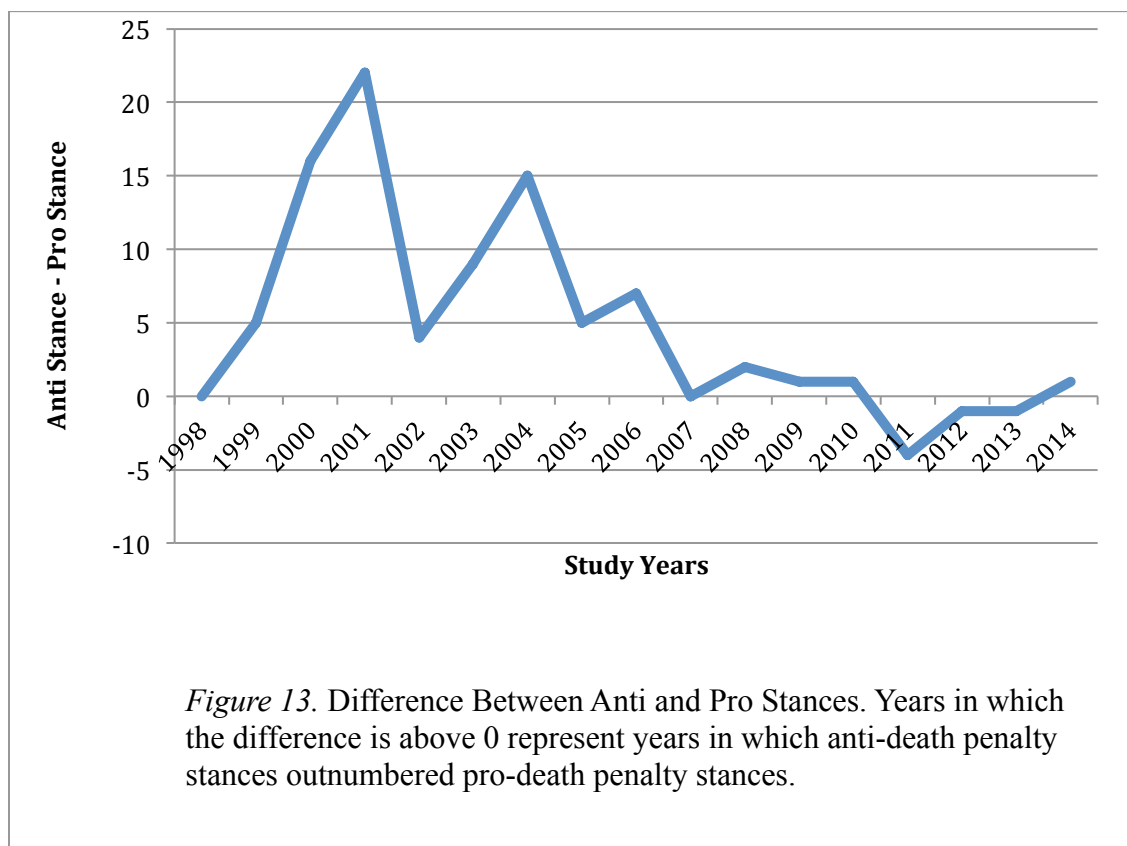


I distributed stances according to years and subtracted the number of pro-death penalty stances from the number of anti-death penalty stances to see if there was a trend toward support or opposition for capital punishment reflected in newspaper articles. A positive result indicates anti-death penalty stances outnumbered pro-death penalty stances, whereas a negative number indicates pro-death penalty stances outnumbered anti-death penalty stances. A 0 means sources expressed an equal number of anti- and pro-death penalty stances. When viewed this way, I saw anti-death penalty stances outnumber pro-death penalty stances in 13 of the 16 years studied. The largest differences occurred in the years 2000, 2001 and 2004. In 2000, I counted 25 anti-death penalty stances but only 9 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 16. That gap widened in 2001, when there were 38 anti-death penalty stances but only 16 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 22. In 2004, I counted 20 anti-death penalty stances and 5 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 15. Pro-death penalty stances outnumbered anti-death penalty stances only in three years: 2011, 2012 and 2013. In 1998 and 2007, reporters included an equal number of stances.



When examined longitudinally, differences between anti- and pro-death penalty stances gradually declined, with stories growing more neutral. Differences between stances decreased from a peak of 22 in 2001, reaching 0 in 2007. In 2011, 2012 and 2013, stances grew slightly more pro-death penalty, but never strayed far from neutral. Examined over 8-year periods, the results showed more stances prior to the moratorium than after it. I counted a total 251 stances in articles appearing between 1998 and 2005, compared to only 49 stances between 2006 and 2014. I added anti- and pro-death penalty stances in each 8-year period and then subtracted the sum of the pro-death penalty stances

from the sum of the anti-death penalty stances. My calculation indicated that anti-death penalty stances exceeded pro-death penalty stances in each period. Between 1998 and 2005, I coded 157 anti-death penalty stances, 81 pro-death penalty stances and 13 stances classified as “Other.” Between 2006 and 2014, I coded 26 anti-death penalty stances, 17 pro-death penalty stances and 3 classified as “Other.” My findings indicate that articles overall weighted more anti-death penalty than pro-death penalty, but they grew increasingly fair over time.

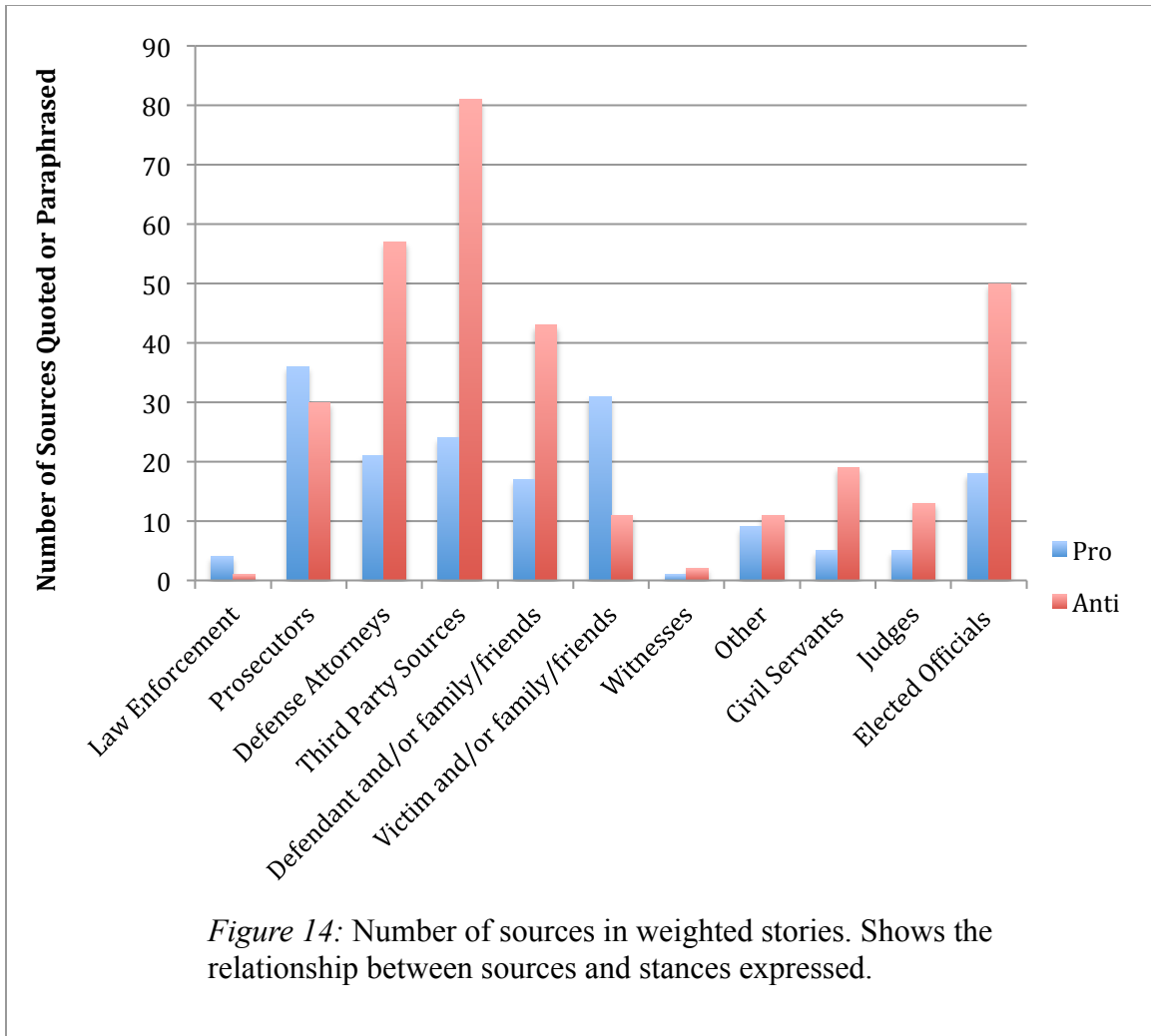


Each publication I examined carried more anti-death penalty stances than pro-death penalty stances. *The Charlotte Observer* articles contained 56 anti-death penalty stances and 31 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 25. *The News & Observer*

carried 37 anti-death penalty stances and 20 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 17. The *News & Record* exhibited the biggest discrepancy, with 65 anti-death penalty stances and 30 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 35. Finally, the *StarNews* had the smallest, with 25 anti-death penalty stances and 20 pro-death penalty stances, a difference of 5.

RQ3: Is there a relationship between source choice and valence?

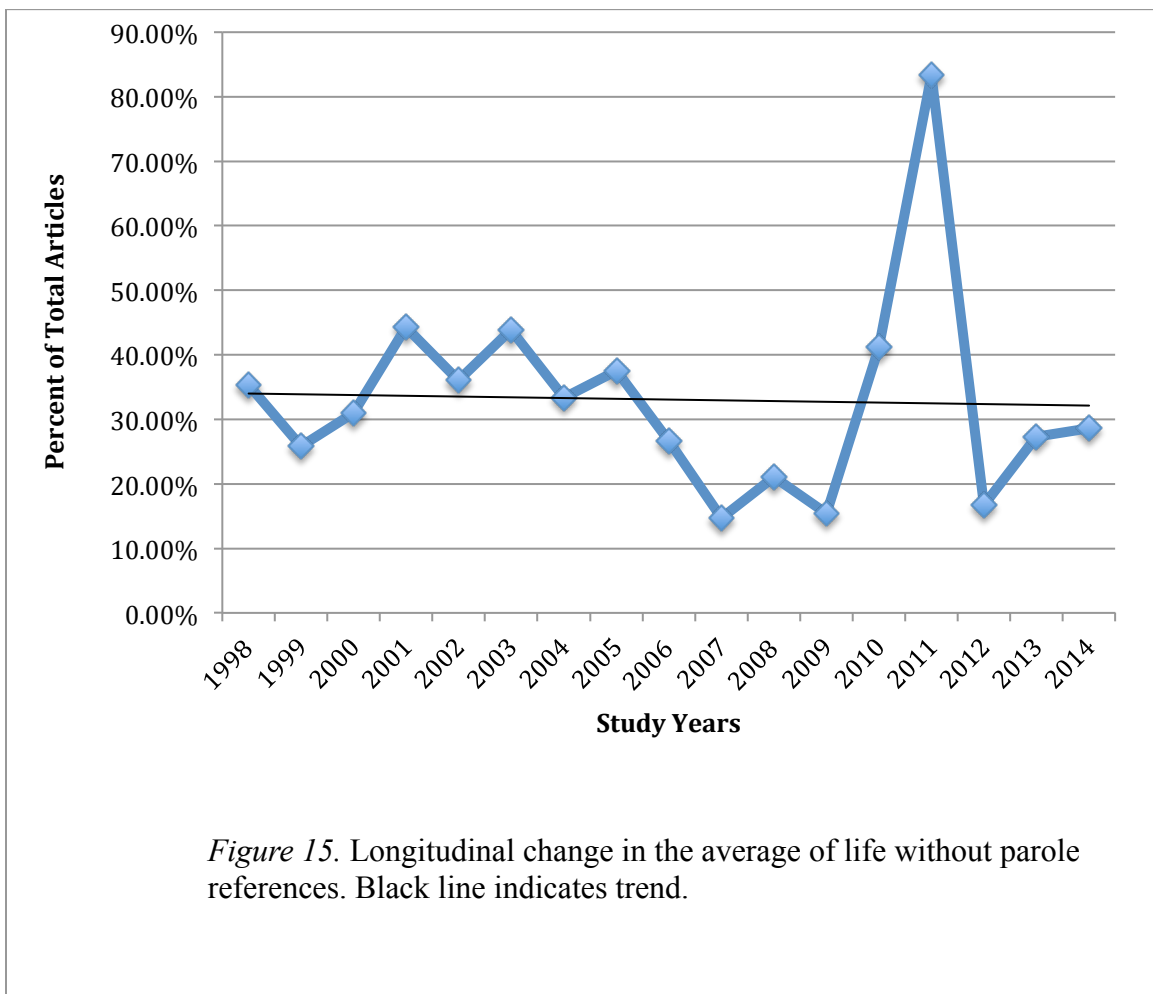
In examining whether a relationship existed between source choice and valence, I took stories containing stances and examined them for source type. This examination showed a clear relationship between whether stories were more positive, negative or neutral and the types of sources whom reporters quoted or paraphrased in the story. Stories containing greater numbers of anti-death penalty stances relied on sources categorized as third-party sources, defense attorneys and elected officials who aren't judges or prosecutors. Whereas, stories containing greater numbers of pro-death penalty stances relied on sources categorized as prosecutors, law enforcement and victims' family members and friends. Stories with equal numbers of anti- and pro-death penalty stances quoted or paraphrased almost equal numbers of prosecutors and defense attorneys. These figures clearly show that including voices on both sides of the death penalty debate results in fairer coverage.



RQ4: Has there been an increase in references to life without parole since the moratorium began?

For my fourth research question, I coded for references to the death penalty’s alternative punishment: life without the possibility of parole. About one-third of the sample – 33.33 percent – contained such a reference. To determine longitudinal differences, I averaged the number of articles containing life without parole references against total articles from each year. My calculation showed average life references

stayed relatively constant between 1998 and 2005. The average dipped to 26.67 percent in 2006 and reached a low of 14.71 percent in 2007. The average went up again three years later, climbing from 15.38 percent in 2009 to 41.18 percent in 2010, an increase of 25.8 percentage points. The average more than doubled in 2011, reaching a peak of 83.33 percent. The average plummeted in 2012 before picking back up in 2013 and 2014. A trend line indicates life without parole references have not increased. In fact, they trended slightly downward over the 16 years.

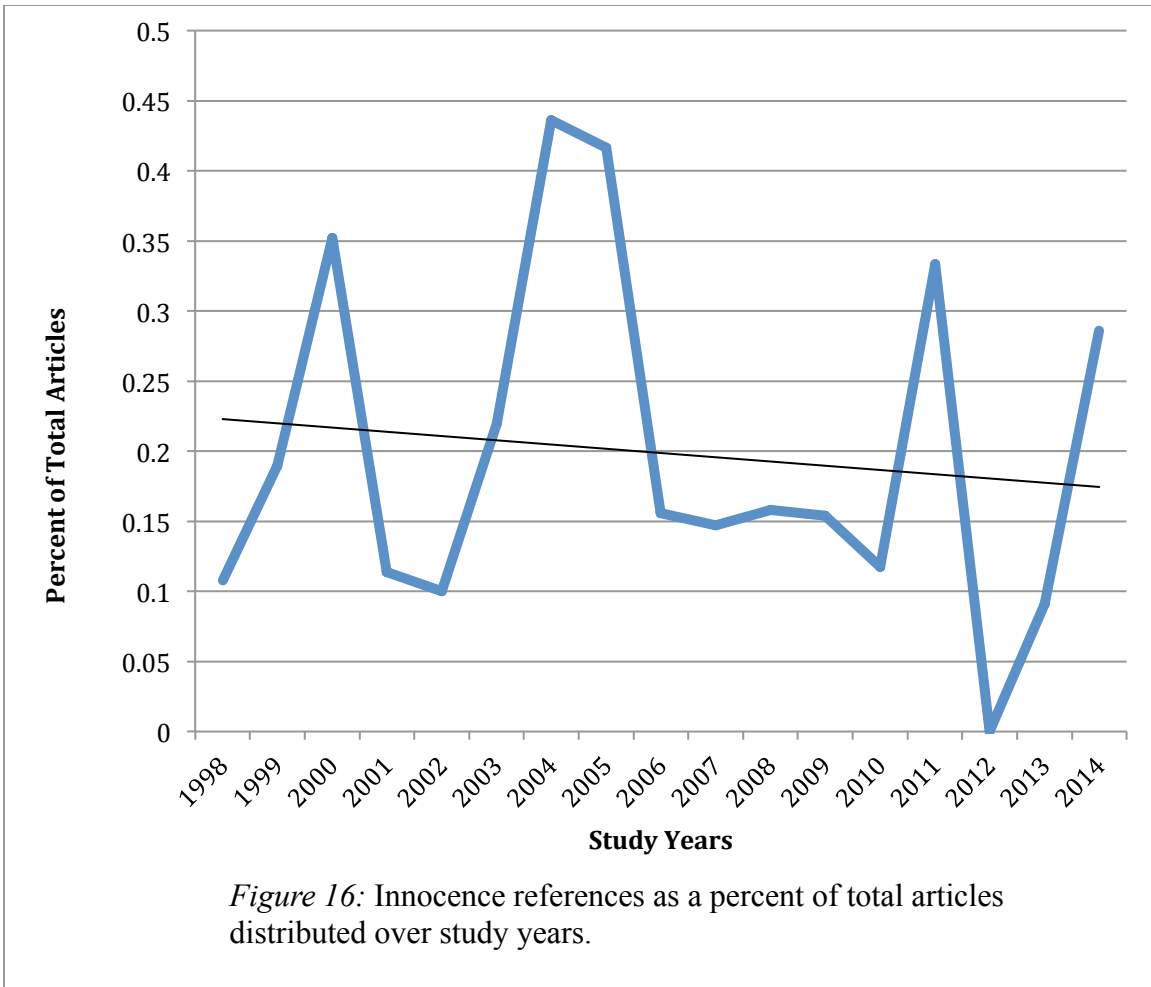


RQ5: Have newspapers increased their use of innocence frames in addressing capital punishment?

Finally, I examined articles for innocence frames by searching for references to innocence, wrongful convictions or exonerations. I also counted innocence frames as articles including text about defendants receiving new trials. That development implies defendants could have been wrongfully convicted the first time around. My results indicate 20.85 percent of articles contained innocence references or addressed the concept.

I added innocence references from each year and averaged the annual sums against total articles from each year to produce comparable averages. My calculation indicates that innocence references varied widely from one year to the next, but overall trended slightly downward. In 1998, 10.77 percent of articles contained innocence references. That figure shot up to 35.21 percent in 2000 before plummeting to 10.00 percent in 2002. Innocence references ranged from a peak of 43.59 percent in 2004 and a low of 0 percent in 2012. Innocence references ticked up in the final two years, climbing to 9.09 percent in 2013 and 28.57 percent in 2014.

An examination of innocence references pre- and post-moratorium showed similarly wide discrepancies from one period to the next. Nearly 23 percent of articles between 1998 and 2005 included innocence references, while 15 percent of articles between 2006 and 2014 contained such references. That is a difference of 8 percentage points.



Chapter 4: Discussion

Death penalty coverage plummeted at a surprisingly quick rate between 2001 and 2014. The largest proportion of articles in the sample appeared in 2001. After that year, numbers dropped rapidly, reaching a mere handful in 2011. Before completing this study, I expected coverage to increase up until 2006 as the movement to impose a moratorium gained steam and climaxed with the last execution in August of that year. My findings conflict with Dardis et al, who demonstrated that nationally, death penalty coverage trended upward between 1960 and 2003.¹⁴⁶ My results show that North Carolina newspaper coverage followed the national trend between 1998 and 2001 but then reversed course, falling at a dramatically fast clip. There was a bump in state coverage in 2006, but death penalty articles never regained their pre-2002 prevalence.

The sharp spike in death penalty coverage leading into the new millennium corroborates a key finding from Dardis et al: That public death penalty policy debates drive newspaper coverage.¹⁴⁷ In 2001, state legislators were mulling landmark changes to death penalty laws. In one instance, they passed a contentious measure outlawing executions of mentally retarded individuals. The law forbade courts from imposing death sentences on defendants with IQs of 70 or below and allowed mentally retarded inmates already on death row to pursue sentence commutations.¹⁴⁸ Reporters covered the arguments for months before and after lawmakers passed the bill in August 2001. In fact, the following December saw the first sentence reduction under the newly established

¹⁴⁶ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 121-122.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Weigl, "State drops death row appeal," B5.

standards, spurring additional coverage.¹⁴⁹ Also in 2001, lawmakers implemented a policy allowing DNA testing for death row inmates if none had been done at their original trials.¹⁵⁰ The policy resulted in new trials for some defendants and the acquittal of at least one. I saw evidence suggesting coverage increased during times when lawmakers were debating the new IQ and DNA measures, and coverage continued afterward as the effects of those laws came into focus. The way these developments sparked coverage affirms Dardis et al's conclusion that major legal and policy events draw media attention toward capital punishment.¹⁵¹

It is difficult to explain why coverage dropped so dramatically after 2001. It may be that death penalty coverage in 2001 was unusually high, and the drop reflected coverage returning to traditional levels. But my study did not look back far enough to ascertain what traditional levels are. The reasons behind the near-disappearance of death penalty coverage between 2006 and 2014 are easier to pinpoint. One explanation may lie in my examination of the differences between pre- and post-moratorium coverage. Coverage between 1998 and 2005 focused on trials and impending executions, including defense attorneys' last-ditch attempts to save their clients' lives, protests outside the execution chamber in Raleigh and governors' clemency decisions. Without that play-by-play countdown, there were fewer events for journalists to write about.

With no impending executions to cover, reporters turned to writing about policy and legal developments, of which there were fewer. Also, what developments did happen

¹⁴⁹ The Associated Press. 2001. "Inmate freed of death penalty." *News & Observer*. December 15: A3. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹⁵⁰ Weigl, "DNA tests earn convict new trial," A1.

¹⁵¹ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 121-122.

may have seemed less impactful and, thus, less newsworthy. Reporters may not see reason to make a big deal out of inmates getting taken off death row when the chances of their imminent executions are almost zero. Another possibility is that death penalty coverage took a backseat in policy circles as attention turned toward other concerns. Two years after the moratorium began, the nation experienced an economic slump worse than any recession since the 1930s. The recession forced North Carolina lawmakers to concern themselves more with creating jobs and closing budget gaps than with death penalty policy. State capitol correspondents, then, had less incentive to write about capital punishment. While I cannot draw proof for this explanation from my results, it seems plausible given how lawmakers began trying to revive capital punishment in earnest as the economy started showing signs of improvement.

Another possible reason for the coverage decline is the dire financial situation in which many newspapers find themselves. Cutbacks have taken a heavy toll, eliminating many specialized beats and reducing resources to the bone.¹⁵² As a result, stories are becoming less in-depth and news content quality is suffering.¹⁵³ With fewer events to cover, reporters hoping to write about capital punishment must dig deeper to find new angles. But with shrinking staffs, newspapers lack the resources to conduct exhaustive reporting on the scale once possible.¹⁵⁴ Newspapers may never cover the death penalty to the extent they once did because they don't have the manpower.

¹⁵² “The State of the News Media 2013,” *The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism*: Accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2013/overview-5/>

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

The financial state of today's newspapers could also be responsible for recent dips in article length. Article word count remained relatively constant over the study period except for declines in 2013 and 2014. Those two outlying years may be the result of undermanned newsrooms struggling to churn out content and compete on the Internet. Rising pressure and shrinking resources have resulted in an industry without the wherewithal to produce long, comprehensive pieces.¹⁵⁵ But the decline in article length could also reflect a conscious choice among newspapers to give readers the bite-sized bits of information they prefer. There has been a lot of talk about the digital age destroying people's attention spans, and newspapers may be trying to keep from overloading their audiences.¹⁵⁶ Future research should examine whether article lengths have declined across all coverage areas and survey news outlets about possible causes. Whatever the case, it is clear newspaper audiences in North Carolina are receiving less information about capital punishment than before 2006.

Budget cuts may also be affecting where newspapers place death penalty articles. The largest segment of articles in my sample appeared in the B section, either on the front page of that section or inside. This finding makes sense when one considers how newspapers reserve the B section for state and local news. Because my selection method winnowed the sample to articles about North Carolina's capital punishment system, not included were articles about federal death penalty trials and capital punishment in other states and countries. Those latter stories are more suitable for the A section, which is

¹⁵⁵ For evidence of the decline in news quality, see Enda and Mitchell, "Americans Show Signs of Leaving a News Outlet, Citing Less Information."

¹⁵⁶ See Kiisel, Ty, "Is Social Media Shortening Our Attention Span," *Forbes*, last updated January 25, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tykiisel/2012/01/25/is-social-media-shortening-our-attention-span/>

reserved for national, world and highly impactful state and local news. Articles that made the front page, A1, were usually longer, included more sources and often contained a photograph. For example, an article that appeared in *The News & Observer* on Jan. 5, 2012, “GOP plans payback in veto fight,” ran at 1,051 words and included eight sources, mostly lawmakers.¹⁵⁷ Another front-page article, “Cheating prosecutors ruin lives, go unpunished,” in *The News & Observer* on Nov. 2, 2003, ran at 1,766 words and was part of a series exploring prosecutorial misconduct.¹⁵⁸ In sum, articles on front pages tended to be special reports requiring vaster newsroom resources than general day-to-day trial and execution coverage. That kind of thorough reporting is becoming increasingly rare as newspapers struggle to stay financially afloat.¹⁵⁹

Photography is another area in which harsh fiscal realities are making an impact. The percentage of my sample that contained photographs rose in the late-1990s and shifted erratically during the new millennium’s first decade before plummeting to zero in 2011. The trend may represent the presence of fewer photogenic events. Newspapers enjoy running photographs of demonstrations, but with executions on hold, protesters kept their signs at home. The decline in photographs may also speak to the state of modern news photography staffs. All the newspapers studied have experienced layoffs since the 2008 recession started. The jobs cuts slammed nearly every department,

¹⁵⁷ Binker, Mark. 2012. “GOP plans payback in veto fight.” *News & Observer*. January 5: A1. America’s News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹⁵⁸ Neff, Joseph. 2003. “Cheating prosecutors ruin lives, go unpunished – Part 1.” *News & Observer*. November 2: A1. America’s News, News Bank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹⁵⁹ Enda and Mitchell, “Americans Show Signs of Leaving a News Outlet, Citing Less Information.”

including photography.¹⁶⁰ In fact, newsroom photography staffs nationally have been cut in half since 2000.¹⁶¹ Dwindling photography resources bodes ill for death penalty coverage. Photographs increase readership.¹⁶² So without them, fewer eyes will gravitate toward death penalty stories, and over time, capital punishment could become less salient as a public policy debate. Previous research found that the less content people receive, the less salient the topic becomes.¹⁶³ In essence, decreasing death penalty coverage is a self-fulfilling prophecy compounded by several contemporaneous factors.

The decline in photographs and graphic material over the 16-year study period drove huge differences in average prominence scores pre- and post-moratorium. Images and front-page articles were two elements in my average prominence score equation that showed dramatic decreases from 1998 to 2014. But declining front-page articles would not have affected scores much because there were fewer of them. There were also huge differences in what photographs contained. Many captions indicated the use of mug shots, which is typical in crime stories. Other photographs contained more contextual

¹⁶⁰ For information about layoffs, see the following sources: Morgan, Fiona, “Bon voyage, News & Observer staffers,” *Indy Week*, last modified on April 22, 2009, <http://www.indyweek.com/triangulator/archives/2009/04/22/bon-voyage-news-and-observer-staffers>; “Charlotte Observer to lay off 60 full-time employees, 22 part-time employees,” *McClatchy Watch*, last modified on March 23, 2009, <http://cancelthebee.blogspot.com/2009/03/charlotte-observer-to-lay-off-60-full.html>; and Sutter, Mark, “News & Record cuts more jobs,” *Triad Business Journal*, last modified on July 10, 2013, <http://www.bizjournals.com/triad/blog/2013/07/new-record-cuts-14-more-jobs.html>.

¹⁶¹ Anderson, Monica, “At newspapers, photographers feel the brunt of job cuts,” *Pew Research Center*, last modified on November 11, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/11/at-newspapers-photographers-feel-the-brunt-of-job-cuts/>

¹⁶² Bullas, Jeff, “6 Powerful Reasons Why you Should include Images in your Marketing – Infographic,” *jeffbullas.com*, <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2012/05/28/6-powerful-reasons-why-you-should-include-images-in-your-marketing-infographic/>

¹⁶³ Lee et al, “The Agenda-Setting Power of Stakeholder Media,” 24-49. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 6, 2015).

elements, adding depth to stories. For example, one reported to show exoneree Alan Gell at home with his mother, who was taking one of the many calls that the family received after Gell's acquittal. The image appeared alongside a story about Gell's release.¹⁶⁴ Another photograph, showing a death row inmate writing a letter in a common area, accompanied information about men who were condemned for crimes they committed while 17 years old.¹⁶⁵ However, many photographs lacked captions, so I could not ascertain what every one showed. Future research should examine differences in photograph sizes and placement over time and whether those differences affect readership. My results indicate photography is a dwindling factor in death penalty coverage. Less photography could drive declines in readership and the public's understanding of capital punishment policy.

Beyond hampering public knowledge, less death penalty coverage could have major implications for public policy. Under agenda-setting theory, audiences perceive issues as more important when media cover them.¹⁶⁶ Thus, sharp downturns in death penalty coverage raise the likelihood that capital punishment will matter increasingly less as an issue among readers. With fewer stories appearing in newspapers and no forthcoming execution dates, the public has less incentive to worry about capital punishment policy. Even people who vehemently opposed or supported capital punishment at the millennium's start may not think about it much today. On one hand, why should people care when no one has been strapped to a gurney and injected with a

¹⁶⁴ Neff, Joseph. 2004. "Gell found not guilty." *News & Observer*. February 19: A1. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹⁶⁵ Gardner, Amy. 2004. "Life halts at death row's door." December 1: B1. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹⁶⁶ Lee Hunter et al, "The Agenda-Setting Power of Stakeholder Media," 24-49.

lethal concoction of drugs in nearly a decade? On the other hand, lawmakers could revive capital punishment almost any day and have pushed bills to that effect. In theory, capital punishment's decreasing salience should make restarting executions an easier political sell as lawmakers can expect less of a public backlash than before 2006. So, too, is the death penalty less likely to crop up as a big political campaign issue like it did in the early 2000s, when advocates were pushing several controversial proposals in the legislature and candidates were divided on whether to support a moratorium.

Diminishing death penalty coverage also highlights the new environment in which reporters operate. With no looming executions and fewer capital trials, death penalty coverage has fallen by the wayside. Today's journalists must wait for lawmakers to engage in capital punishment policy discussions or dig deeper to uncover newsworthy angles. One great example for how reporters can get creative appeared in *The News & Observer* on Aug. 31, 2014. The article, "McCollum, on death row, tormented by executions 'Nobody understands what I'm going through,'" summarized inmate Henry McCollum's 30 years on death row using an alternative story format.¹⁶⁷ Another article, "Fewer get death sentences across U.S. In N.C., juries issued three such sentences in 2014, report finds," took a national report and localized it for the newspaper's largely North Carolina audience.¹⁶⁸ The remaining articles from 2014 reported on capital trials, which is standard news fare. To keep capital punishment in the state press, reporters must go beyond low-hanging fruit and search for new ways to cover the issue.

¹⁶⁷ Neff, Joseph. 2014. "McCollum, on death row, tormented by executions 'Nobody understands what I'm going through.'" *News & Observer*. August 31: 10A. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

¹⁶⁸ Blythe, Anne. 2014. "Fewer get death sentences across U.S. In N.C., juries issued three such sentences in 2014, report finds." December 19: 2A. America's News, NewsBank (accessed March 11, 2015).

My source analysis indicates reporters overall are doing a good job balancing death penalty stories with quotes from people with opposing opinions. Previous research findings suggest reporters more often used prosecutors and law enforcement sources to tell stories about criminal justice, a habit that created lopsided portrayals of defendants as evildoers and bad seeds.¹⁶⁹ But my research showed reporters rely almost equally on prosecutors and defense attorneys when reporting capital punishment stories. Including voices from both sides suggests reporters have been upholding what Juyan and Cameron (2003) called values of journalistic fairness.¹⁷⁰ But future research should examine source choice in greater depth. Trial stories often contained statements from both prosecutors and defense attorneys, but stories about capital punishment as a policy debate seemed more tilted to one side. Future researchers should separate trial and policy stories and examine source differences in each. The findings would have major implications for activists and lawmakers on opposing sides of the debate.

Reporters face a major challenge in trying to balance stories with equal statements from defendants and victims. Stories quoted defendants and their families and friends more often than victims' families and friends, but not for lack of effort on reporters' part. Reporters cited several instances where victims' families and friends declined to comment. This focus on the accused's point of view provided readers with a better understanding of defendants and placed their crimes in context, but it also meant victims got lost in the mix. While soliciting comments from defendants is important in a society where the accused are innocent until proven guilty, the reluctance among victims to speak

¹⁶⁹ Haney and Greene, "Capital Constructions: Newspaper Reporting in Death Penalty Cases," 129.

¹⁷⁰ Juyan and Cameron, "Study Finds Sourcing Patterns in Wen Ho Lee Coverage," 97.

with reporters should raise concerns with the victims' rights movement. Victims' rights advocates want victims' voices aired in the media. By refusing comment, family and friends miss opportunities to tell stories about their loved ones. Their refusals come as no shock, however, given all that researchers know about crime's ripple effect, how unexpected deaths severely traumatize family and friends around the deceased. But members of the victims' rights movement might want to inject themselves more forcefully lest their opinions fade from public view.

In addition to reeling from the trauma of losing a loved one, victim sources might distrust reporters to tell their stories with care and accuracy. Sometimes reporters draw criticism for being "parachute journalists" who plunge into situations without preparation or foreknowledge.¹⁷¹ But parachute journalists are what many newspaper reporters have become, adapting to survive in an increasingly high-pressure field. Moreover, turnover and beat divisions keep reporters who cover murders as crimes, known as cops reporters, from covering murders once they reach trial stages, a task that falls on court reporters. Victim sources may be less comfortable airing details about their family to strangers who approach them pen and pad in hand. News organizations would do better, perhaps, to keep one reporter on cases from beginning to end to the degree turnover allows.

Differences between defendant and victim sources might be explained yet another way. While victims may feel uncomfortable speaking to reporters, defendants' family and friends may feel compelled to talk because they want to protect their reputation and that of their loved ones in the face of serious charges. Murder charges bring humiliation to

¹⁷¹ See Martin, Justin D., "What's So Wrong With 'Parachute Journalism'?", *Columbia Journalism Review*, last updated May 26, 2011, http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/whats_so_wrong_with_parachute.php

entire families, exposing them to ostracism even if their loved one is later exonerated. Families hoping to blunt any disgrace find in reporters an opportunity to tell their stories and influence public opinion.

The growing equalization among pro- and anti-death penalty stances could be linked to legal and policy developments. Overall, I found negative stances appeared twice as often as positive stances. But when I distributed my findings over the 16-year study period, I found annual differences grew exceedingly smaller and eventually flipped, with pro stances outnumbering anti ones by 2011. An examination of articles in the sample sheds light on why that switch occurred. Anti-death penalty activists were either much more active or garnered more media attention in the years preceding the moratorium. Once they won, they either backed down or received less media coverage. Perhaps because the state was not executing inmates after 2006, would-be death penalty opponents saw no need to rise up. Whatever the case, my analysis found evidence that opponents hogged the spotlight in the early 2000s as they advocated several landmark measures. Anti and pro stances struck their greatest imbalance in 2001, when opponents fought hard to ban executions of mentally retarded individuals and to pass the DNA law. Another large difference occurred in 2004, when the moratorium movement gained steam on the heels of several high-profile exonerations. The exoneration that drew the most attention was Alan Gell, who won acquittal after nine years in prison, half of them on death row.¹⁷² Gell's case underscored the criminal justice system's fallibility, fueling anti-death penalty fervor statewide. Gell's case also rekindled concerns about prosecutorial misconduct and lent moratorium supporters ammunition for their cause.

¹⁷² See Neff, "Gell found not guilty," A1.

The Gell case resulted in a series of articles. Reporters kept covering it years after Gell's acquittal, as the former inmate turned into an activist and was later sent back to prison for having sex with an underage girl.¹⁷³ In a way, stances measured whether one side of the debate was more active or more effective at attracting media coverage, whether opponents captured more spotlight than proponents, and vice versa.

Source choice had a demonstrable effect on whether stories weighted anti-death penalty or pro-death penalty, highlighting how important it is for reporters to seek out voices with different opinions. Not surprisingly, stories weighted anti-death penalty sourced from more defense attorneys than prosecutors. This finding reflects a few realities about modern criminal justice and the press's power to affect public opinion. Defense attorneys gain publicity and free marketing by getting their names in the paper. From a more altruistic standpoint, defense attorneys also want to bolster their clients' image and influence potential jury pools. District attorneys, on the other hand, want to increase their re-election chances. By publicizing their efforts to punish violent offenders, district attorneys curry favor with voters. Both defense attorneys and prosecutors can use newspapers to achieve those ends.

More unexpected than attorney and prosecutorial influence was the effect of third-party sources in driving anti-death penalty stories, which suggests that death penalty opponents were either more active or more effective in garnering coverage. For my study, third-party sources included academics, activists, researchers and nongovernmental organizations. My results positively associated third-party sources with stories containing more anti-death penalty stances than pro-death penalty stances.

¹⁷³ 2007. "Gell sentenced on sex charges." *Star-News*. November 28. America's News, News Bank (accessed March 11, 2015).

The relationship between third-party sources and anti-death penalty stances raises several questions. First, it suggests anti-death penalty groups are larger or more attractive to newspapers than pro-death penalty groups. There were two or three anti-death penalty groups from which reporters quoted most often. Their use of similar sources suggests officials from those groups were available, articulate and/or proactively engaged newspapers. Also, these sources staged highly visible demonstrations outside the execution chamber in Raleigh, possibly increasing the chances of media interaction. Even though these demonstrations continued for years and lost their timeliness value, they offered reporters a pool of readily accessible sources from which to pluck. In other words, the demonstrations were an easy, obvious choice for reporters facing deadline.

A second possible explanation that warrants further consideration is whether death penalty opponents enjoy greater resources than pro-death penalty groups. Funding allows organizations to hire and train media professionals, increasing their effectiveness to disseminate messages in the popular press. One reason third-party sources on the anti-death penalty side may have been so effective at airing their opinions is they had the skills to more effectively communicate with reporters, increasing their chances of being included in stories.

Lastly, my finding raises questions about whether reporters' individual views influence source choices. Reporters who oppose capital punishment may feel more comfortable speaking to activists who agree with their stance. On the other hand, previous research suggests reporters are so cautious about undermining their credibility that they go to great lengths to avoid exhibiting personal views, resulting in implicit

expressions of opinions that run counter to their own.¹⁷⁴ Under this theory, reporters covering North Carolina's capital punishment system would generally support the death penalty but take pains to conceal personal feelings in their stories. Future research should survey reporters about their views on capital punishment and examine stories to determine if relationships exist between opinions and valence. Knowing how individual views influence coverage would make reporters more effective at checking their biases.

My findings in regard to alternative punishment references show reporters fail to mention life without parole with any regularity. A third of my articles contained references to life without parole. Similar to Niven, my articles rarely discussed popular support for life without parole but mentioned it as an aside.¹⁷⁵ Stories about juries weighing sentencing options and governors deciding commutations often mentioned life without parole. But not all trial and commutation articles mentioned the sentence, meaning journalists missed easy opportunities present more balanced portrayals of the issue. Many articles discussed commutation proceedings, but many did not define "commute." Instead, reporters implicitly expected readers to understand that "commuting a death sentence" does not mean the offender will be let out of prison. On the contrary, commutations convert death sentences into life without parole sentences, meaning the offender's life is spared but he or she will never walk free. Future research should examine public understanding of "commutation." Assuming readers understand that term risks unfairly undermining public support for commutations by engendering the false belief that commuting death sentences means offenders will get out.

¹⁷⁴ Niven, "Objective Evidence On Media Bias: Newspaper Coverage Of Congressional Party Switchers," 311-326.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

The low percentage of life without parole references may also be attributable to my sampling method, however. By capturing articles with death penalty references in the first paragraph, I likely missed a lot of articles that mentioned both sentences. My method also may have failed to capture first-degree murder trials in which prosecutors forewent seeking capital punishment in favor of life without parole. Prosecutors have opted to try fewer capital cases in recent years as public opinion turns against the death penalty, suggesting cases that would have been capital a few years ago were instead tried as something else.

My findings in regard to innocence frames not only conflict with previous research but also portend potential changes to public opinion and the increased feasibility of restarting executions with less political blowback. About one-fifth of my sample referenced innocence and wrongful conviction issues. The innocence frame appeared often in years during which exonerations occurred, affirming Dardis et al's finding that major legal developments drive death penalty coverage.¹⁷⁶ But my findings are at odds with Dardis et al on another element. Dardis et al showed innocence was an increasingly common topic through which reporters framed stories.¹⁷⁷ In my sample, innocence frames appeared increasingly less often, trending downward between 1998 and 2014. Dardis et al also showed how innocence frames caused people to consider new dimensions and re-evaluate their positions and drove down public support for capital punishment.¹⁷⁸ Taking their findings into account, the decline in innocence references

¹⁷⁶ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 128-133.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. See also, Fan et al, "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States," 439-452.

observed in my sample opens the door for public capital punishment support to grow as people forget about possibly executing innocent people and view the death penalty through a moral lens of whether it is right or wrong to kill someone for committing murder.¹⁷⁹ It is worth pointing out that innocence references peaked in 2004 and 2005, one year before the moratorium started. The timing suggests concerns about executing innocent people drove support for halting executions. Indeed, several articles reported on moratorium supporters using wrongful conviction cases to persuade lawmakers to stop executions until the state could study the penalty's fairness and efficacy. Clearly, wrongful convictions have a powerful, indirect influence on public policy and possibly precipitated the moratorium. While I am not suggesting that reporters should reference innocence in every story, I expected such references to increase because of the rise in exonerations. Future research should explore how reporters cover innocence issues.

There are many additional opportunities for future research. For starters, researchers can replicate my coding procedure in any state or region in the country. In addition, there are other ways to quantify valence. Different methods may produce different findings. Fan et al, for example, used a scheme to code text as containing one of four ideas.¹⁸⁰ Researchers may also explore links between valence and sources in more detail, adjusting my coding procedure to be less rigid in regards to source categorization. In addition, case analysis and in-depth interviews with reporters and news managers would shed light on source choices, reporting procedures, reporters' knowledge of scholarly death penalty literature, and whether news outlets know about how coverage

¹⁷⁹ Dardis et al, "Media Framing of Capital Punishment and Its Impact on Individuals' Cognitive Responses," 128-133.

¹⁸⁰ Fan et al, "A Matter Of Guilt Or Innocence. How News Reports Affect Support For The Death Penalty In The United States," 439-452.

influences public opinion. Also, given the growing variety of news sources available today, researchers could examine from where audiences receive death penalty information and how different news sources affect public attitudes toward capital punishment. Finally, researchers should examine the role race plays in North Carolina capital punishment coverage. While I did not look at defendants' races as part of my content analysis, there were clearly differences in how much attention news organizations paid to individual cases, and race may have played a role in those editorial decisions.

My study had several limitations. First, my sample represented a small share of the many thousands of death penalty articles that ran in the four newspapers between 1998 and 2014. While my sample was representative, no one should consider it an end-all, be-all survey of North Carolina's death penalty coverage. Also, the coding procedure failed to capture every source. I coded sources quoted or paraphrased and attributed with some version of the word "said." I wanted to ensure sources were people with whom reporters interviewed or saw speak. In crime stories, it is not uncommon for reporters to attribute statements from public court records, such as law enforcement interrogation summaries. Limiting attribution to the verb "said" meant I missed sources attributed with verbs such as "told." Finally, my coding procedure did not capture source groups. Often reporters attributed whole groups with catchall terms, such as "police say" or "prosecutors say." Future research should account for these groups. Disregarding groups affected stance results as well. I coded only stances expressed from people who met my source definition. Therefore, my coding procedure excluded stances expressed by source groups.

Conclusion

My results conflicted with a lot of previous research, underscoring North Carolina's unique position as a state that sentences defendants to death but doesn't carry the penalty out. The moratorium did not result from a single bill passed in the General Assembly. Instead, it emerged organically as a series of developments chipped away at the state's capacity to kill the condemned. While those developments initially spurred coverage, the moratorium ultimately placed capital punishment on the backburner. Lacking conflict and timeliness values, capital punishment has lost much of its newsworthiness. The startling drop in coverage speaks to reporters' – and, perhaps, the public's – dwindling interest in capital punishment. With fewer events to cover, journalists must search harder and deeper to develop death penalty stories, a charge made increasingly difficult in this age of shrinking staffs and tight newsroom budgets. Even with fewer resources at their disposal, news organizations need not forget capital punishment is an important policy issue that could come roaring back with the swipe of the governor's pen.

Appendix A: Coding Procedure and Coding Sheet for Reliability

V1: Name

1=Rhonda Gibson

2= Brian Freskos

V2: Please indicate the article number here.

(Text Box)

V3: Headline of the article:

(Text Box)

V4: Date on the article (Format: Monday Day, Year. For example: January, 2015)

(Text Box)

V5: Media Outlet

1=Charlotte Observer

2=Raleigh News & Observer

3=Greensboro News & Record

4=StarNews (or Morning Star)

V6: How many words appear in the body of the article? For briefs, count only the briefs that include the words "death penalty," "capital punishment," "death row," or "execution" in the lead or first paragraph.

1=Less than or equal to 200

2=201 to 300

3=301 to 400

4=401 to 500

5=501 to 600

6=601 to 700

7=701 to 800

8=801 to 900

9=901 to 1,000

10=more than 1,0001

V7: Indicate the page on which the article appeared. If the article appeared on two pages, i.e. jumped from one page to another, indicate only the page on which the article began.

1=A1

2=A but not A1

3=B1

4=B but not B1

5=C1

6=C but not C1

7=All other sections

V8: Did the article include a photograph or graphic?

1=No

2=Yes

V9: For each article, identify the human sources quoted or paraphrased in the article and determine how many fall into each of the following categories. DO NOT count groups or anonymous sources in this category. Count only those sources identified by name and attributed with a version of the verb "said."

Each source may only be placed into one category. If a source could conceivably fall into two categories, place him or her in the first category cited in the article. For example, if a source was identified as Joe Smith, a defense attorney who is also a friend of the defendant, that source should be placed into the defense attorney category.

Place a numerical value into the box below each source unless the source is classified in the "Other" category. If the source is classified as "Other," please include a short description of that source.

1=Law Enforcement

(Text Box)

2=Prosecutors

(Text Box)

3=Defense attorneys

(Text Box)

4=Judges

(Text Box)

5=Elected officials who aren't judges or prosecutors

(Text Box)

6=Nonelected civil servants

(Text Box)

7=Third-party sources, such as academics, researchers and activists

(Text Box)

8=Defendant and/or defendant's family and friends

(Text Box)

9=Victim's family and friends

(Text Box)

10=Witnesses to either the crime or execution

(Text Box)

11=Other (If other, please describe the source in one or two words)

(Text Box)

V10: Each time a source expresses a stance on the death penalty, determine whether that stance is weighted for or against the death penalty. Sources are only those counted in the previous question.

Include stances expressed on individual cases, such as when a source says that he or she does not favor the death penalty for a particular defendant.

Choose "Other" if the source expresses a change of opinion or has mixed feelings such as favoring it for some crimes but not for others.

If there are no stances expressed, skip this question.

(Coders for this section checked a box for each instance to indicate whether the stance was Pro, Anti or Other)

V11: For each article, determine whether the author included a reference to the death penalty's alternative punishment by searching for the words and/or phrases "life sentence," "received life," "life without the possibility of parole," "life without parole,"

“life in prison without parole” or “life in prison without the possibility of parole” or another reference to a life sentence in the body of the story.

Include references to any defendant.

Make sure the "life" reference refers to the alternative sentence and not to life insurance, pleas to spare a person's life or judges or juries weighing the fate of the defendant's life.

No=1

Yes=2

V12: For each article, determine whether the story references the possibility of wrongful convictions by searching for the following words or phrases: ‘innocence,’ ‘innocent,’ ‘wrongful conviction,’ ‘exoneration,’ ‘exonerate’ or ‘exoneree,’ or any other word or phrase suggesting convicted individuals have been wrongfully convicted.

If an article references the need for a new trial, indicate that here as referencing the possibility of a wrongful conviction.

Make sure the reference of innocence is to the accused and not other topics like innocent victims or pleas of innocence.

1=No

2=Yes

Appendix B: Tables

Table 1: Percentage of total articles that contained at least one photo.

Year	Total Articles	Contained photo	Percentage
1998	65	18	27.69%
1999	58	12	20.69%
2000	71	19	26.76%
2001	79	26	32.91%
2002	50	27	54.00%
2003	41	18	43.90%
2004	39	15	38.46%
2005	48	28	58.33%
2006	45	24	53.33%
2007	34	13	38.24%
2008	19	7	36.84%
2009	13	6	46.15%
2010	17	5	29.41%
2011	6	0	0.00%
2012	6	0	0.00%
2013	11	2	18.18%
2014	7	1	14.29%

Table 2: Total and average word count score

Years	Word Count Score	Number of Articles	Average Word Count Score
1998	252	65	3.876923077
1999	226	58	3.896551724
2000	297	71	4.183098592
2001	325	79	4.113924051
2002	221	50	4.42
2003	163	41	3.975609756
2004	163	39	4.179487179
2005	240	48	5
2006	185	45	4.111111111
2007	142	34	4.176470588
2008	64	19	3.368421053
2009	66	13	5.076923077
2010	76	17	4.470588235
2011	31	6	5.166666667
2012	30	6	5
2013	32	11	2.909090909
2014	25	7	3.571428571

Note: The word count score indicates article length. Scores ranged from 1 to 10, with shorter articles receiving lower scores than longer articles.

Table 3: Total and average placement score

Years	Total Placement Score	Number of Articles	Average Placement Score
1998	282	65	4.338461538
1999	242	58	4.172413793
2000	340	71	4.788732394
2001	398	79	5.037974684
2002	232	50	4.64
2003	186	41	4.536585366
2004	179	39	4.58974359
2005	235	48	4.895833333
2006	221	45	4.911111111
2007	159	34	4.676470588
2008	81	19	4.263157895
2009	59	13	4.538461538
2010	64	17	3.764705882
2011	26	6	4.333333333
2012	20	6	3.333333333
2013	40	11	3.636363636
2014	32	7	4.571428571

Note: Placement score indicates on which page articles appeared. Scores ranged from 1 to 7, with less conspicuous placements receiving lower scores.

Table 4: Overall and average prominence score

Year	Total Prominence Score	Total Articles	Average Prominence Score
1998	617	65	9.492307692
1999	538	58	9.275862069
2000	727	71	10.23943662
2001	828	79	10.48101266
2002	530	50	10.6
2003	408	41	9.951219512
2004	396	39	10.15384615
2005	551	48	11.47916667
2006	475	45	10.55555556
2007	348	34	10.23529412
2008	171	19	9
2009	144	13	11.07692308
2010	162	17	9.529411765
2011	63	6	10.5
2012	56	6	9.333333333
2013	85	11	7.727272727
2014	65	7	9.285714286

Note: Prominence score measures how much reader attention articles could potentially attract. It factors in word count, page placement and whether articles contained a photograph or graphic.

Table 5: Sources categorization and average of total

Sources	Total Number	Average of Total
Law Enforcement	33	2.32%
Prosecutors	282	19.79%
Defense Attorneys	291	20.42%
Defendant and/or family/friends	157	11.02%
Victim and/or family/friends	94	6.60%
Third Party	178	12.49%
Witnesses	16	1.12%
Other	61	4.28%
Nonelected Civil Servants	71	4.98%
Judges	78	5.47%
Elected Officials	164	11.51%

Table 6: Stances expressed by sources and distributed by year and according to weight.

Years	Pro	Anti	Other
1998	15	15	3
1999	6	11	2
2000	9	25	5
2001	16	38	1
2002	12	16	0
2003	7	16	1
2004	5	20	0
2005	11	16	1
2006	3	10	0
2007	7	7	2
2008	1	3	0
2009	0	1	1
2010	2	3	0
2011	4	0	0
2012	1	0	0
2013	2	1	0
2014	0	1	0

Table 7: Categorized sources in articles containing stances

Sources Categories	Anti	Even	Pro
Law Enforcement	1	28	4
Prosecutors	30	216	36
Defense Attorneys	57	213	21
Third Party Sources	81	73	24
Defendant and/or family/friends	43	97	17
Victim and/or family/friends	11	52	31
Witnesses	2	13	1
Other	11	41	9
Civil Servants	19	47	5
Judges	13	60	5
Elected Officials	50	96	18

Table 8: Total life references and percent of articles containing life references

Years	Life Ref	Total Articles	Percent
1998	23	65	35.38%
1999	15	58	25.86%
2000	22	71	30.99%
2001	35	79	44.30%
2002	18	50	36.00%
2003	18	41	43.90%
2004	13	39	33.33%
2005	18	48	37.50%
2006	12	45	26.67%
2007	5	34	14.71%
2008	4	19	21.05%
2009	2	13	15.38%
2010	7	17	41.18%
2011	5	6	83.33%
2012	1	6	16.67%
2013	3	11	27.27%
2014	2	7	28.57%

Figure 9: Innocence references and percent of articles containing innocence references

References by Year	Innocence Ref	Total articles	Percent
1998	7	65	10.77%
1999	11	58	18.97%
2000	25	71	35.21%
2001	9	79	11.39%
2002	5	50	10.00%
2003	9	41	21.95%
2004	17	39	43.59%
2005	20	48	41.67%
2006	7	45	15.56%
2007	5	34	14.71%
2008	3	19	15.79%
2009	2	13	15.38%
2010	2	17	11.76%
2011	2	6	33.33%
2012	0	6	0.00%
2013	1	11	9.09%
2014	2	7	28.57%

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