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# A comparison of media frames in print vs. television news: an examination of the Elijah Page death penalty case in South Dakota

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**A comparison of media frames in print vs. television news: an examination of the  
Elijah Page death penalty case in South Dakota**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims to determine the frames used during the South Dakota news media coverage of the Elijah Page death penalty case and detect patterns of frame usage, valence of news coverage and source usage. A content analysis of 163 South Dakota news reports from three years of news media coverage was conducted. The study found that the procedural frame was used most often in the South Dakota news media coverage of the Elijah Page death penalty case, followed by the morality frame and then the distributive justice frame. The media used, whether newspaper or television broadcast, did not significantly affect the frame usage. The frames used, however, did differ by year of coverage. The valence of coverage was found to be mostly neutral, with increases in positive and negative valence as the death penalty case entered its last year of coverage. Analysis of the source usage during the death penalty coverage of the Elijah Page case found that there was overreliance on official sources, such as state elected officials and law enforcement. Trends in source use also revealed that the frames shifted depending on the source cited in the news media coverage. This study concludes that while coverage was overall neutral and objective, the overreliance of one source over another may have affected the framing of the news media coverage of the Elijah Page case in South Dakota. Overall, the findings support claims that the sources cited in media coverage can affect the framing of the news report.

**Keywords:** death penalty, Elijah Page, framing theory, newspapers, sources

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In a seven-year span, South Dakota saw the heinous murder of 19-year-old Chester Allan Poage and then made national news as his murderer, 25-year-old Elijah Page, became the first person executed in the state in 60 years. Page, who hailed from Texas, and two other men were found guilty of beating, torturing and stabbing to death their friend, Poage of Spearfish, South Dakota (Associated Press, 2007). Page and his accomplices forced Poage to drink a concoction of acid and other drugs before they stabbed him multiple times and left his body in Spearfish's Higgins Gulch. One commentator called the three-hour long torture and murder of Poage the "most depraved crime in the state's history" (National Public Radio, 2007).

Most death row inmates in the United States spend anywhere from 10 to even 20 years awaiting their fate on death row (Death Penalty Information Center, 2010). Page's case did not fit the U.S. average, with Page sitting on death row for just short of six years and four months. Page was sentenced to die on February 16, 2001, and in mid-2006 gave up his right to the appeals' process and began waiting to die in the South Dakota State Penitentiary. South Dakota Governor Michael Rounds abruptly stopped his execution, originally set for August 2006, because of some confusion about what constitutes the proper "recipe" of chemicals to be used in Page's lethal injection. As soon as the legislative session resumed in January 2007, the statute was fixed, and Page was executed on the evening of July 11, 2007.

The news media coverage of Page's case was plentiful. During the seven-year span of the case, the news media covered many aspects of this capital punishment case. The study of framing is an important piece of scholarly research in news media. Previous studies have



found that the framing of news can have profound effects on attitudes and understandings of issues, including capital punishment. Journalists and news media decide what aspects of a story to highlight, while excluding other aspects – a process known as framing. A frame consists of concepts and keywords that reinforce one idea, but not others. Frames enable certain elements of a story to stand out; all while making other elements fade into the background. While there is a large body of research on crime and punishment in the news media, this historical South Dakota case provides a unique study opportunity. Since the execution of Page was the first in the state in six decades, this case allows for close examination of a grave issue that was covered intensely by both newspapers and television stations in the state.

This comparison study adds to framing literature and how frames can change throughout the coverage of one case that spans a substantial period of time. This study also highlights the importance of source usage in news reports and the consequences of using certain sources can have on the entire news report. This study will give South Dakota journalists insight on how they cover the social issue of the death penalty. The news media are primary sources of information for the public, so it is essential to understand what items are shaping opinions and influencing decisions on significant issues such as the death penalty.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Media Framing

Each news item has a theme that structures it (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Pan and Kosicki, 1993). This theme connects different semantic components of a story into a coherent whole (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). Pan and Kosicki (1993) call these themes “frames” due to their structuring function. In functional terms, Dunwoody and Peters (1992) define a frame as “a knowledge structure that is activated by some stimulus and then employed by a journalist throughout story construction” (p. 213).

“Framing refers to the methods by which the mass media organize and present issues and events” (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2005, p. 404). Scheufele (1999) defines a frame as “an idea that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (p. 523). Framing goes beyond *what* issues the audiences think about to guiding them *how* they should think about these issues (Craft and Wanta, 2004).

As in the coverage of other issues, the media use certain frames in their portrayal of death penalty cases and the punishment itself. Entman (1993) comments that “communicators make conscious or unconscious framing judgments in deciding what to say, guided by frames (often called schemata) that organize their belief systems” (p. 52). These framing choices, whether conscious or unconscious, can and do have an effect on what consumers believe is most important or salient about a person, issue, object or event.

According to Entman (1993), framing is a process. To him,

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).

Friedland and Zhong (1996) saw framing as “the bridge between...larger social and cultural realms and everyday understanding of social interaction” (p. 13). Researchers have also observed that the way the media framed events affected how recipients of the news came to understand those events (Price, Tewksbury & Powers, 1995).

In framing research, it is important to examine what was said and what was omitted. Entman (1993) states that “most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience” (p. 54). Such is the case in death penalty coverage, which may contain or ignore such aspects as the innocence of the accused, legal representation of the defendant, and the bigger social issue of capital punishment. Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) explain that journalists “give the story a ‘spin,’ ...taking into account their organizational and modality constraints, professional judgments, and certain judgments about the audience” (p. 120).

Frames, according to Entman (1993), can reside in many places. The news media certainly develop their own frames to report on issues (the media frames). News frames are composed of and are imbedded in the metaphors, concepts, keywords, symbols, and images that may reinforce some ideas but not others. Frames work to enable some ideas to stand out in texts, others less so, or others even entirely invisible (Entman, 1991). Because media frames encourage those who perceive and think about events to elaborate particular understandings of them, audience members also develop their own frames (the audience

frames). Audience or individual frames are mentally-stored principles audience members use for information processing - the mass media interpret and frame information within a cultural context (Arno, 1984; Lee, Maslog, and Kim, 2006). Thus, frames can also be located within the broader cultural context in which an event or issue is being discussed (the cultural frames).

Scheufele (1999) writes that individual frames are cognitive devices that serve as “folders of major subjects” into which future media content can be filed. According to Entman (1991), the mental representations resulting from exposure to a news frame can be conceived as an “event-specific schema,” an understanding of what is in the news coverage that guides an audience member’s interpretation of initial information. “There is a reciprocal relationship between frames in the text and the event schema and frames in the audience’s thinking” (Entman, 1991, p. 7).

Dunwoody and Peters (1992) posit that media frames seem to activate knowledge structures about physical things and events in the environment. In this cognitive process, individuals activate parts of prior knowledge that assist them to form interpretations; therefore, perception occurs at the point of contact of frames and individuals’ prior knowledge (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; D’Angelo, 2002). “Prior knowledge is believed to mediate the power of frames in an evaluative context” because the schemata, activated by frames, function to direct how an individual recognizes and uses framed information (D’Angelo, 2002, p. 875; McLeod and Detenber, 1999; Rhee, 1997; Wyer and Srull, 1981).

Media frames can be analyzed as a dependent or an independent variable (Scheufele, 1999). As a dependent variable, they are said to result from, among others, journalistic

practices, routines, ideologies, and the pressures exerted on news organizations by other sectors of society.

This study examines media frames as the independent variable. It conceives that media frames about the death penalty may differ depending on the medium in which they are found. The goal of this study is to see what frames are used around the death penalty issue and if they differ by the media outlet in which they are produced.

In research, framing has been divided into generic and issue-specific framing. Generic refers to more of the “catch-all” categories of framing that can be applied to a wide range of topics and even be studied across cultural boundaries (de Vreese, 2002, 2005). On the other hand, issue-specific frames are those media frames that only pertain to specific topics, such as the death penalty or crime (de Vreese, 2005). Issue-specific (or emphasis) frames are powerful media devices that occur when journalists or news anchors focus or emphasize on a particular aspect of a given story, while downplaying other aspects of the story. By focusing on certain aspects, yet not focusing on others, researchers have found that these aspects and frames will be seen by audiences as more important than others (Iyengar, 1991; Nelson, Oxley, et al., 1997; Nelson & Oxley, 1999). The framing analysis used in this study focuses on the issue-specific frames.

When choosing frames to be examined, it is important to be sure that one is studying frames and not just themes. Frames have four criteria that they must meet. According to Capella and Jamieson (1997), frames must have “identifiable conceptual and linguistic characteristics,” frames must be “commonly observed in journalistic practice,” “it must be possible to distinguish the frame from other frames,” and “a frame must have

representational validity and not be a figment of the researcher's imagination," (as cited in de Vreese, 2005).

The frames to be examined in this study are "procedural justice," "distributive justice," and "morality." These frames have been used in previous studies of the death penalty and have shown to be successful in their reliability measurement. In a study examining the execution of Saddam Hussein (2009), the justice frame was used in the examination of the news coverage. Justice frames have been divided into two types – distributive and procedural (Besley and McComas, 2005; Dimitrova and Lee, 2009). Distributive justice refers to the ultimate outcome, while procedural refers to the process used to arrive at that outcome. In this study, distributive justice will refer to the actual execution of Elijah Page, while the procedural justice will refer to the process, such as Page's arrest, court dealings and sentencing. Dimitrova and Lee (2009) found the recommendation of Besley and McComas (2005) to be successful, so this same technique will be applied to the death penalty media coverage of Elijah Page.

The morality frame has also been shown to be a successful measuring tool of media frames. In an experiment conducted to determine the effect of media frames on audiences, researchers found that individuals were more likely to respond to the "innocence" frame rather than the "morality" frame (Dardis et al., 2008). They concluded that:

If media attention continues to focus on the innocence frame, public opinion will continue to shift away from support of it—quite substantial considering the long-standing stability of pro-death-penalty sentiment in the United States...The result could provide a feedback system that may well lead to the end of capital punishment in the United States, or at least a great reduction in it (p. 134).

In the Elijah Page case, the morality frame was studied, while the innocence frame was not. In this case, the innocence frame was not applicable because the defendants admitted their guilt.

As mentioned earlier, the frames to be examined should have “representational validity,” which means that it should be recognized by others as a viable and reliable method. The frames chosen – procedural justice, distributive justice, and morality – were chosen in this manner and will be used to discuss the media framing surrounding the 2007 execution of Elijah Page in South Dakota.

### **Appeal of Crime News**

In local news, the coverage of crime has become an everyday staple of journalistic practice, and while murders are not the most common crime, they are the most covered (Lipschultz and Hilt, 2002). Jamieson and Campbell (2001) explain that violent crimes are appealing because they showcase conflicts between individuals, are dramatic, threaten a sense of community, are short and simple stories, and are visual and easily videotaped (p. 41).

News organizations make the decision about what stories to use every day in their newsrooms. They choose stories by what footage they have to use with the story, whether that be a photograph or video spot to run with the story, and stories are also chosen by what the news organization thinks their audience would want to see (Jewkes, 2004). Chermak (1994) found in his study that different stories worked better for certain mediums. The more complex cases were better suited for print, because the newspaper could go into greater detail because of their abundance of news writing space, but a television news clip may only get 30 seconds to tell the same story that took up six columns in the newspaper (Chermak, 1994).

When deciding to run a story on a television station, Chermak explains that some stories were not presented because of the lack of video to run with the story (1994).

Another interesting finding from Chermak's study was that different stories ran due to the location of the medium. The stories ran were dependent on the size of the city. In some small towns, vandalism made the front page, while in the large cities, only the most gruesome and sensationalistic murders would make the front page or first newscast spot on television (Chermak, 1994). Whether you read a newspaper or watch the nightly news could determine how you understand a crime story and the opinion you form. This fact alone could have detrimental implications.

The coverage of crimes affects how we all think and talk about crime, so the framing of these events can have major implications. Whether the media focus is on the justice system or the morality of crime, each frame can have different effects on audiences' attitudes. Crime is a newsworthy subject that keeps audiences buying newspaper subscriptions and watching the nightly news.

### **Source Usage**

Accompanying routine crime coverage is the customary use of sources by the news media. Most sources seen in crime coverage are those of police officers and government officials (Gans, 1979). Sanford Sherizen (1978) also found in his study of crime news that the police were by far the most cited source in crime coverage. As he explained, "police have a vested interest in crime news appearing in newspapers and other media" (p. 212). Sherizen further explained that police want crimes to become known, not only to bolster the police view of the crime problem, but also because attention to the police force could help when asking for increases in budgets (p. 212).



Sources are not created equal. Sources with economic or political power are more likely to be contacted than those who do not have power (Gans, 1979). Reporters often prefer official sources because they are easier to contact for an interview and they are usually seen as having important comments on issues (Paletz & Entman, 1981; Gandy, 1982). The use of official sources also makes the journalist's job easier by eliminating the need to go back and double-check facts (Hackett, 1985). Official sources have been found to be cited more when an article deals with an issue, such as the death penalty, while unofficial sources were cited when the story was about an event (Shoemaker, P.J. & Reese, S.D., 1991). Studies have even found that a source's personality may affect the coverage he or she receives (Streitmatter, 1985).

And in the odd circumstance that the sources are not public officials, the media will often turn to the victim (Lipshultz & Hilt, 2002). In an interview, Nick Lamberto, reporter for the *Des Moines Register*, explained that victims are used as sources because "in times of grief people may find it helpful, almost therapeutic, to talk. Many even feel a sense of support in that the local newspaper or broadcast station cares enough to seek information" (Strentz, 1989). No matter the reason for choosing one source over another, the choice adds to the journalistic practice of what frames are found in the news report. The sources used could even be a determinant of the frames applied to the news report.

### **Previous Media Coverage of the Death Penalty**

Studies of television and newspaper coverage of the death penalty have concluded that the news does not delve into the bigger issue of capital punishment; they simply focus on a case at hand, with a slant toward the usual angle that "crime does not pay." Yanich's study (1997) is a case in point. He examined the television coverage of the trial and execution of

Andes Deputy in the state of Delaware. On February 9, 1979, Deputy and his friend, William Flamer, stabbed Flamer's aunt and uncle to death when the couple refused to give them money so they could continue their drinking binge. Deputy and Flamer were convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death in 1980. Deputy was executed by lethal injection on June 23, 1994, after exhausting all appeals 14 years following his sentence (Yanich, 1997).

Yanich found that the three television stations that covered the case did so very differently. Two of the stations gave a fairly comprehensive coverage of the case, but:

The consumers of Channel 6's newscasts on both days learned relatively little about capital punishment and the issues that surround its imposition. All they knew is that Deputy killed two people and society made him pay for it with his life (p. 320).

Yanich criticized Channel 6 for its shallow coverage, especially because its audience was "over 20 times larger than the audiences of Channels 2 and 12 combined" (p. 321).

Lipschultz and Hilt (1999) compared TV news coverage of three executions in Nebraska and what these conveyed to audiences. They found that:

Television coverage of the three executions did not attempt to bridge the gap between proponents and opponents of the death penalty. Even in-studio experts focused on events at the prison scene, rather than the larger social issue of capital punishment. The coverage emphasized the state's role in carrying out the law (p. 250).

The authors recommended that, "it would be better if local television stations could bring themselves to analyze complex social issues outside the heat of an event" (p. 251).

Fan, Keltner and Wyatt (2001) found that press coverage led to changes in death penalty support. Comparing poll data with the newspaper coverage of the death penalty in the Washington Post and Associated Press (AP) stories, they concluded that "support for the death penalty could be predicted with good accuracy from press coverage of the death

penalty” (p. 446). They also found that information about the innocence of defendants was three times as powerful in moving support against the measure. They suggest that future studies should explore if death penalty support has changed significantly since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

In another study, Niven (2002) observed that respondents who read about an alternative to the death penalty demonstrated less support for it. He found that “unrealistic media portrayal of public opinion on the death penalty bolstered a sense of inevitability about the issue” (p. 671). The author also sensed a spiral of silence phenomenon when it comes to capital punishment: “Not only are opinions at stake, but also the willingness to express them” (p. 678) because people did not feel the need to express their opinion in the belief that everyone felt the same way about the issue. This was so because:

Most people want to appear socially acceptable to their peers and will avoid expressing ideas that will place them outside the mainstream. Importantly, when an idea gains a reputation for being outside the mainstream, fewer and fewer people will discuss it, and in the process, the apparent size of the minority shrinks to nothing (p. 681).

As a consequence,

By showing almost no interest in support for life without parole plus restitution, in what is in point of fact the plurality of opinions of Americans, the media are continually reinforcing the notion that the public demands the death penalty. The findings here suggest that this skewed coverage increases support for the death penalty, reduces discussions about the issue, and sends a message to Americans that the death penalty is inevitable and irreplaceable (p. 683).

### **Current Study**

The South Dakota death penalty case of Elijah Page gives researchers a unique opportunity to examine the news coverage from murder to execution – all in a timely manner.

South Dakota saw six decades without the implementation of a death penalty execution and

because of this, the news coverage surrounding Page's case was abundant and provides a great research opportunity of how the different news media cover a social issue like the death penalty.

Considering the foregoing literature review and the tenets of framing theory, this study asks:

**Research Question 1:** What news media frames did the South Dakota television station and newspapers use to report on the Elijah Page case? Did the frames used differ between media? Did the frames used change or shift throughout the years of coverage?

**Research Question 2:** What was the tone (valence) of the news media coverage? Did this valence change over time?

**Research Question 3:** What or who are the sources cited in the media coverage? Is there a pattern of source use over time? Did the source used affect the overall frame used in the news coverage?

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This study examines the frames used in different news media outlets specifically surrounding the execution of Elijah Page in South Dakota in 2007. A content analysis of television news video archives and newspaper articles was conducted to determine the media frames used in the different media outlets.

#### **Determining Media Frames through Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a popular and efficient research method used to examine the content of media (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Kerlinger's (2000) defines it as "a method of studying and analyzing communication in a *systematic, objective, and quantitative* manner for the purpose of measuring variables" (as cited in Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p. 150).

Content analysis is *systematic* in that every step of the data collection process must follow a set of explicit rules. The method is *objective* because the researcher's and the coders' biases must not influence the interpretation of data. Even when dealing with a controversial issue such as the death penalty, one must not let personal feelings influence data analysis. Content analysis is *quantitative* in nature, meaning that measurements should be exact.

#### **The Sample and Unit of Analysis**

This study analyzed three South Dakota newspapers and one South Dakota television news station. The newspapers were chosen based on their high circulation rates, ratings and location. The *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* has a daily circulation of 47,207 while the *Rapid City Journal* has a daily circulation of 31,514 (South Dakota Newspaper Association, 2009). The *Black Hills Pioneer*, located in Spearfish, South Dakota, was chosen to examine due to its

close proximity to the murder of Chester Allen Poage. Each newspaper is published daily. The television station, Keloland, was chosen based on its statewide coverage and viewership. According to Keloland News Director, Beth Jensen, “Keloland television is the most watched station in our coverage area. We broadcast to all of South Dakota, southwestern Minnesota and northwest Iowa. That’s the largest geographic coverage area of any station in the country” (personal communication, March 10, 2010).

In the newspapers, only straight news reports and feature articles were analyzed. Accompanying visuals (such as photographs, illustrations and charts) were not included. Editorials, commentaries and letters to the editor/publication were also excluded in this study to minimize framing bias inherent in these highly opinionated pieces. In the television programs, only the straight news reports and feature spots were analyzed.

The actual newspaper articles were gathered using microfilm, while televised video reports were viewed through the station’s website video archives. The timeline of articles and news video examined focused on three dates. Using a technique referred to as “purposive sampling,” a range of 21 days surrounding the specific date was used (Riffe, D., Lacy, S., & Fico, F.G., 1998). Riffe, et al. (1998) recommend that at least two weeks be analyzed, but due the fact that it had been 60 years since this type of news coverage was needed in the South Dakota press, a three-week range of data was chosen to be examined in order to capture as many pertinent news reports as possible. The specific date ranges examined are:

1. Chester Allan Poage’s body found by police – April 22, 2000. Coverage examined: Saturday, April 22, 2000 – Saturday, May 11, 2000.
2. First set execution date – August 30, 2006. Coverage examined: Sunday, August 20, 2006 – Sunday, September 10, 2006.

3. Elijah Page executed – Wednesday, July 11, 2007. Coverage examined: Sunday, July 1, 2007 – Sunday, July 22, 2007.

This six and half-year period allowed for the detection of changes in media framing over time. The unit of analysis was the complete article or television report. Using this design, a total of 163 news reports were analyzed.

### **Conceptual and Operational Definitions of Variables**

The headline of the news report was coded, along with the number of articles published in the newspapers and TV reports aired were tabulated to determine patterns of coverage over time.

Coders were told to look for the structures used in each news report guided by the following potential framing categories culled from previous studies:

1. The **procedural justice** frame focused on the process leading up to Page’s execution.

This included news reports discussing whether Page’s court proceedings were just and fair and the news media’s evaluation of the process. This frame included news reports about the stopping of Page’s execution by the South Dakota Governor. (E.g., *Rapid City Journal* - 05/04/00: Headline – “Murder suspects to remain jailed: Paperwork starts effort to return third suspect from Alaska.” Keywords/phrases – “...will remain jailed until hearing to decide whether they will stand trial...” “They face charges of kidnapping and first-degree murder...” and “...will be officially charged May 23 in arraignment...”)

2. The **distributive justice** frame included discussions of the fairness of the outcome of Page’s case and whether using the death penalty was just and fair. This frame included news reports focusing on the fact that Page deserved to die and that the use

of capital punishment was appropriate in this case. (E.g., *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 07/12/07: Headline – “Elijah Page Dead: S.D. carries out first death sentence in 60 years: Dottie Poage: ‘Ultimate penalty for the ultimate crime’” Keywords/phrases in article – “His debt to the state of South Dakota is now paid in full,” “the death penalty was the appropriate penalty for what he called ‘a brutal torturous murder’,” and “But I can assure you he will never be able to do this again.”)

3. The **morality** frame focused on society’s moral balance – specifically that the death penalty is morally wrong or morally right. Such news reports were framed in a way that either said, “the death penalty is killing and killing is a sin” or in the more positive light of “it is/was morally right to execute Elijah Page because he committed murder without mercy and therefore deserves to die.” (E.g. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 08/20/06: Headline – “A just punishment?: A murderer who says he wants to die has S.D. taking sides about his execution.” Keywords/phrases in article – “...the question divides those who worship the same God, read the same Scripture and share the same view of human dignity,” “human decency forbids an execution, others who say human decency demands death as a response to murder,” and “One side says it fears crossing a line that belongs to God. The other says it fears the God that makes such punishment necessary.”)
4. Frames that did not neatly fit into any of the above four categories fell under the **other** frames. Coders were asked to specify “other” frames observed.

Along with coding for frames, coders were also trained to find the tone or valence of the article or television airing. **Valence** refers to the overall tone of the news report toward



the death penalty. In this study, it referred to whether the news report depicted the death penalty as positive, negative or neutral:

1. **Positive** valence was seen in news reports that depicted the death penalty in a good light, such as that it is a “deterrent against crime” or that it “will rid society of criminals.” Such news reports saw the death penalty as an appropriate way of punishing those who commit heinous crimes.
2. News reports with a **negative** valence portrayed the death penalty in a bad light. Negative portrayals included such notions as “the death penalty cannot bring back the victim” or “the death penalty will not deter others from committing crimes.” These news reports saw the death penalty as an extreme measure to punish crimes. News reports with a negative valence sometimes alluded to or explicitly stated that life in prison is a better alternative punishment.
3. **Neutral** valence was assigned to news reports that demonstrated both positive and negative stances toward the death penalty. A news reports whose valence could not be deciphered as positive or negative also fell under this category.

Coders were then asked to specify what sources were cited in the news coverage of the Elijah Page case. Sources are persons, agencies or institutions that were cited in the news reports for facts, data and interpretations. The first two sources cited in the news report were coded to determine what individuals, organizations or groups were influencing and shaping the news media frames. The names of these persons and organizations were coded. In the case of an individual, the person’s title and organizational affiliation were also recorded.

The variables that were coded in the content analysis, the coding instructions and the potential values are listed in Appendix A and Appendix B.

### Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability refers to the level of agreement between coders who use the same instrument to code the same content (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Two graduate students were trained on the coding protocols on a randomly selected 20 percent of the television videos and newspaper articles. In this study, intercoder reliability was determined using Holsti's (1969) formula:

$$\text{Reliability} = 2M/(N1+N2),$$

where M is the number of coding decisions that the two coders agreed on; and N1 represents the first coder's decisions and N2 represents the second coder's decisions. The intercoder reliability across all categories was .96. Table 1 provides a summary of the inter-coder reliability test.

**Table 1. Summary of intercoder reliability**

Variables	Intercoder reliability
Newspaper	1.00
TV	1.00
Procedural Justice	0.80
Distributive Justice	0.89
Morality	0.97
Other	1.00
Valence	0.97
Source 1	1.00
Source 2	0.97

The coders discussed variables that were in need of further clarification and discrepancies were fixed before the coding was completed in its entirety.

### Data Analysis

This study used descriptive statistics to answer each of the four research questions. To respond to Research Question 1, frequency distributions were analyzed and cross tabulation

tests were run to determine the relationship between frames used and media type and to determine if year of publication affected the frame used in the news media coverage. In response to Research Question 2, frequency distributions were examined to determine the overall valence of the news coverage. Cross tabulation tests were then conducted to determine if the valence changed over time. Research Question 3 was answered using frequency distributions and cross tabulation tests to determine if source use changed over time and if there was an association between source use and frames used in news coverage.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This study examined the South Dakota newspaper and television news coverage of the Elijah Page capital punishment case over a seven-year period. It aimed to determine 1) what frames were used in the news coverage, 2) if the frames used differed between media, 3) if the frames shifted or changed over time, 4) what the valence was on the news media coverage, 5) if the valence changed over time, 6) who or what were the sources used in the news media coverage, and 7) if the source use changed over time. The sample population for this study was 163 South Dakota news reports of the Elijah Page death penalty case.

#### Frames Used

An analysis of the frames used in the newspaper and television reports revealed that 86 of the 163 news reports examined (52.8 percent) used the procedural justice frame. An example of a news report with the procedural frame came from the *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* (May 4, 2000). The news report entitled “Spearfish man tortured then killed, says accused” explained how Poage’s body was found, Page was arrested and when the arraignment of the accused would be scheduled.

Fourteen of the 163 news reports examined (8.6 percent) followed the distributive justice frame. A July 12, 2007 news report in the *Rapid City Journal* used the distributive justice frame. The headline read “Poage: ‘A job well done’: Victim’s mother says death was right penalty for crime,” and the news report contained statements that Page had paid his debt to the state of South Dakota for the heinous crime he committed.

The morality frame was found in 23 of the 163 news reports examined (14.1 percent). Most news reports with the morality frame focused on protests to stop the execution of Page.

One such news report aired on Keloland television on July 11, 2007. The news report entitled “Bishop Urges Prayer Against the Death Penalty” focused on the Sioux Falls Catholic Diocese and their view that the death penalty is an “act of violence that goes against the teachings of the church.” The television broadcast also asked South Dakotans to pray for Page as the eve of his execution quickly approached.

Analysis of the procedural justice frame by media used revealed no significant differences ( $\chi^2 = 2.002$ ,  $p = .572$ ,  $df = 3$ ). The use of the distributive justice frame by media was also found to not be statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 1.801$ ,  $p = .615$ ,  $df = 3$ ). As with the previous two frames, the morality frame also did not vary significantly by media used ( $\chi^2 = 2.543$ ,  $p = .468$ ,  $df = 3$ ). Newspapers were just as likely to use the procedural justice, distributive justice and morality frames as the television news station in their coverage of this case (see Table 2 and Table 3).

**Table 2. Frame usage in South Dakota news coverage of the Elijah Page case (%)**

	Sioux Falls Argus Leader (n=51)	Rapid City Journal (n=56)	Black Hills Pioneer (n=20)	Keloland TV (n=36)
Procedural Justice	47.10%	51.80%	65.00%	55.60%
Distributive Justice	7.80%	7.10%	5.00%	13.90%
Morality	19.60%	14.30%	10.00%	8.30%

**Table 3. Frame usage in South Dakota newspapers vs. television broadcasts (%)**

	Newspapers (n=127)	Television (n=36)
Procedural Justice	52.00%	55.60%
Distributive Justice	7.10%	13.90%
Morality	15.70%	8.30%

Further analysis of the frames used revealed that the frames did change or shift throughout the years of coverage. The year 2000 was eliminated from the statistical analysis due to the low amount of reports during that period; the years 2006 and 2007 were then analyzed to detect changes (see Table 4). The procedural justice frame did significantly change between the two years of coverage ( $\chi^2 = 5.703$ ,  $p = .017$ ,  $df = 1$ ), as did the distributive justice frame ( $\chi^2 = 10.638$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $df = 1$ ). The procedural justice frame was found in 56.8 percent of the news reports in 2006, and then decreased to 36.9 percent of the news reports in 2007. However, the distributive justice frame was found in only 2.5 percent of the news reports in 2006, but then increased in 2007 to 18.5 percent of the news reports. The morality frame did not differ statistically between years; 2006 had 14.8 percent of the news reports with the morality frame and 2007 had 16.9 percent of the news reports with the morality frame.

**Table 4. Frame changes from 2006 to 2007 (%)**

	2006	2007
Procedural Justice	56.8%	36.9%
Distributive Justice	2.5%	18.5%
Morality	14.8%	16.9%

### Valence of Coverage

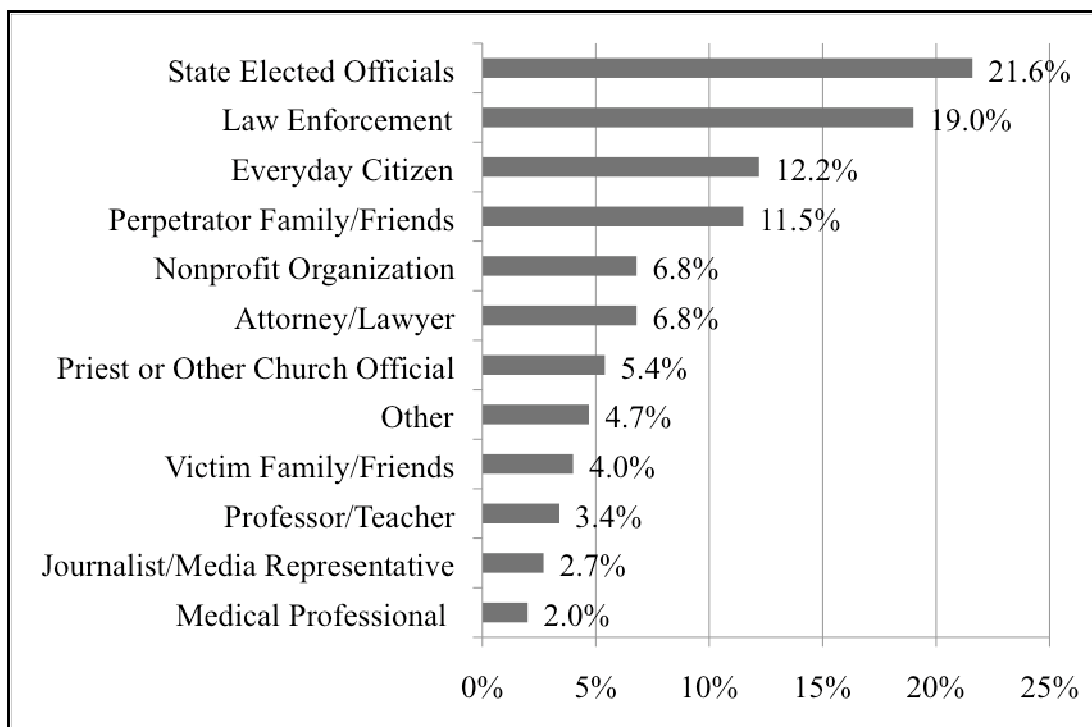
The valence of the South Dakota news reports was mostly neutral (88.3 percent), with 8 of the 163 news reports (4.9 percent) favoring the death penalty and 11 of the 163 news reports (6.7 percent) opposing the use of the death penalty. Over time, the valence of the coverage did not significantly change (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Valence of coverage by year (%)**

	2000	2006	2007
Positive	0%	3.7%	7.7%
Negative	0%	4.9%	10.8%
Neutral	100.0%	91.4%	81.5%

### Sources Cited

The top four sources cited in the media coverage of the Elijah Page case were state elected officials (21.6 percent), law enforcement (19.0 percent), everyday citizens (12.2 percent) and the perpetrator's family or friends (11.5 percent). A total of 148 of the 163 news reports cited at least one source. Sources were coded as string variables, such as "Governor Michael Rounds" and after coding was completed, categories were created to group the individual sources, such as "state elected officials". Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the categories of sources cited, adjusting percentages to include only those stories with at least one source cited.

**Figure 1. Types of sources cited in newspaper and television coverage (%)**

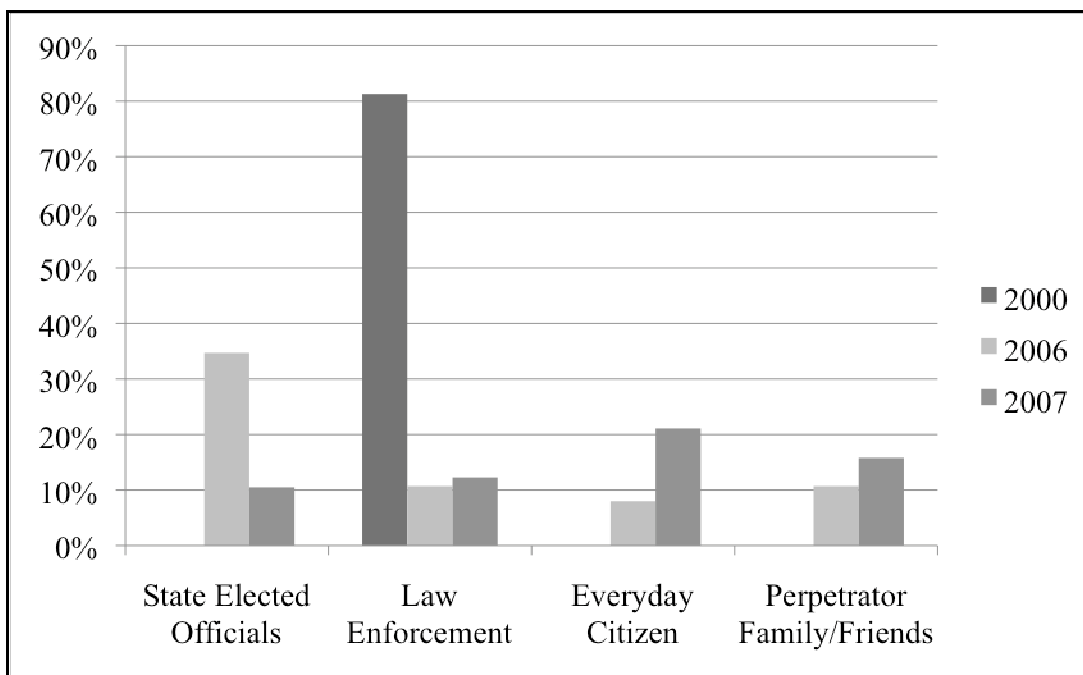
State elected officials and law enforcement were cited in 40.6 percent of the news reports that cited at least one source in their news coverage. State elected officials included South Dakota Governor Michael Rounds, South Dakota State Legislators and South Dakota Attorney General Larry Long. Law enforcement included Lawrence County Sheriff Rick Mowell, state prison officials and county sheriffs.

Everyday citizens were cited most in news reports where the journalist went around the community and asked for opinions, either on the execution of Elijah Page or the death penalty in general. The perpetrator's family and friends were cited often in news reports where the family of Elijah Page was interviewed, whether they were talking about Page's bad past or how they wished he wouldn't go through with the execution.



Because of such small values, it could not be statistically determined if there was a pattern of source use over time. However, trends could be seen in source use (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Top four sources cited by year (%)**



As Figure 2 illustrates, while the second most cited source, law enforcement officials were the only source of the top four to be cited in the year 2000. State elected officials, the most cited source, were only cited in two of the three years examined – 2006 and 2007. Everyday citizens and the Page’s family and friends were not cited in 2000, but through the years their coverage increased, peaking in 2007.

There seems to be a pattern of source usage and the frame found in the news coverage. The most cited sources in news reports with the procedural justice frame were attorney/lawyer (90.0 percent), state elected officials (84.4 percent), law enforcement (82.1 percent), and professor or teacher (80.0 percent). The most cited sources in news reports with the distributive justice frame were the victim’s family or friends (66.7 percent), journalists or

media representatives (50 percent), everyday citizens (11.1 percent) and law enforcement officials (10.7 percent). The most cited sources in news reports with the morality frame were priests or other church officials (87.5 percent), nonprofit organizations (50.0 percent), everyday citizens (38.9 percent) and journalists or media representatives (25.0 percent).

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This current study set out to discover patterns and changes of media coverage when comparing print and television news reports about the Elijah Page death penalty case in South Dakota. Frames, the tone of coverage and the sources cited were analyzed to determine how the news media portrayed the event.

The study found that the news media frames used did not differ significantly between print and television. The procedural frame was used most often by both platforms, suggesting that most news reports focused on the legal or policy aspect of the death penalty case at hand, without delving into the issue of whether the death penalty should be used at all as a state punishment.

A significant finding in this study was that the procedural and distributive frames did change throughout the years of coverage. In 2006, the procedural justice frame was favored, while in 2007, the distributive justice frame was favored. This finding suggests that the procedural frame was used while South Dakota was deciding how to change their death penalty statute, all before Page was executed. The distributive frame came into light after Page was executed, suggesting that the South Dakota media felt that the right choice had been made in putting Page to death for his crime. The morality frame did not change by year; rather, it was found almost equally in 2006 and 2007. This finding suggests that perhaps South Dakota had a hard time determining if putting Page to death was the morally right or wrong decision for the state to make.

This study showed that the South Dakota newspapers and television station examined remained neutral in their coverage of the death penalty. While not statistically significant, the

valence (tone) did shift between 2000 and 2007. In 2000, 100 percent of the news reports were neutral, but in 2006 it dropped to 91.4 percent neutral and in 2007 it dropped yet again to 81.5 percent neutral. While neutrality diminished throughout the years of coverage, the positive and negative valences increased, with positive gaining from 3.7 percent in 2006 to 7.7 percent in 2007 and negative increasing from 4.9 percent in 2006 and 10.8 percent in 2007. This finding suggests that news coverage became more opinionated.

The most important and possibly the most surprising finding of this study was that of source use. Overreliance on state elected officials, attorneys and law enforcement contributed to predominantly procedural framing. The use of priests or church officials and non-profit organizations led to the use of the morality frame. Finally, the use of the victim's family or friends or opinions from everyday citizens led to the use of the distributive justice frame.

This finding suggests that while sources are an everyday practice in journalism, journalists and reporters should pay close attention to the sources they use, because those cited in the news report are affecting the framing of the news reports and how that report is understood and processed by the audience. The continued reliance of one source over another suggests that the media representatives, while being objective in their coverage, are relying too heavily on state elected officials and law enforcement. While these sources are easily accessible, it may be pertinent for journalists to seek out other sources to keep their coverage from weighing on one frame, such as the procedural justice frame.

The sources cited in the news reports analyzed did support previous literature that official sources were cited when the report was more about an issue, while unofficial sources, such as everyday citizens, were cited when a report was more about an event. All of these findings suggest that while sources are reliable and valuable entities to journalists, they must

be used while keeping in mind how they are affecting the framing of the news report. The sources used may just be dictating the frame of the news report, not the journalist writing it.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has a number of limitations. First, the newspapers and television station chosen to study and the arbitrary date range chosen calls into question the generalizability of the findings. This limitation also implies that the journalistic practices that these articles and broadcasts were derived from may be limited to South Dakota or rural, small-circulation newspapers and television broadcasts. How larger city newspapers and television news stations would report on the social issue of the death penalty is an area that needs further exploration.

Second, only one South Dakota television station was analyzed. While this station is reportedly the most prominent in the state of South Dakota, other news stations from the state could be examined in future research for their coverage of this death penalty case.

Third, the date range chosen to examine would need to be expanded for future research. During analysis of this study, it became apparent that more articles and broadcasts would need to be examined in order for results to become statistically significant. While strong trends were detected in this study, future studies should focus on a greater date range to increase the study population.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Several trends were discovered throughout this death penalty research. One such trend suggests that perhaps the geographic location of the news medium is also affecting the news media frames used. As Table 6 illustrates, the procedural frame was used in newspapers that were geographically located closer to the murder site. However, the distributive justice

and morality frames were favored by those newspapers that were located near the execution site. While a small finding in this study, this should be explored further to see if trends exist between frame usage and location of the news medium.

**Table 6. Newspaper by geographic location**

	<i>Sioux Falls Argus Leader</i> (n=51)	<i>Rapid City Journal</i> (n=56)	<i>Black Hills Pioneer</i> (n=20)
Procedural Justice	47.1%	51.8%	65.0%
Distributive Justice	7.8%	7.1%	5.0%
Morality	19.6%	14.3%	10.0%
	<i>Closest to execution site</i>		<i>Closest to murder site</i>

This study has also shown that there is a relationship between sources cited and the framing of news reports. But the question remains, how does the framing of the death penalty impact its audience? If the procedural frame is focused on most, does that create a feeling of inevitability about capital punishment? If the sources cited don't explicitly state that the death penalty should or should not be used as a state sanctioned punishment, does that mean readers and television viewers don't think about the death penalty on a higher level than the case at hand? Future studies should delve into these ideas to discover the bigger impacts the news media coverage of the death penalty could be having on its audience.

Currently there are 3,279 inmates in the United States on death row (Death Row USA, 2009). Of those inmates, three are in South Dakota, including Briley Piper, Page's accomplice in the murder of Chester Allan Poage. At any point in time, any of these three men could end their appeals, just as Page did, and South Dakota would find itself again in the controversy of the death penalty. The current research findings suggest that journalists and reporters need to take great care when covering such a controversial social issue like the

death penalty. News media must be aware of what sources are cited and if those sources are determining the entire framing and meaning of the news report.

While there are many ideas for future research, most immediate is that of in-depth interviews of the news directors or editors of the news mediums studied. We know what was done during the coverage of the Elijah Page case, but now the question is why? Why were the sources cited even chosen? Is there a protocol to get quotations for news reports? What are the journalistic practices in the individual news mediums? This subsequent research could give us a better understanding of framing the death penalty and South Dakota journalistic practices.

This current study not only has theoretical implications for framing, but it also has practical implications for journalists and news agencies that are reporting on social issues such as the death penalty. Journalists should strive for balanced reporting that does not rely too heavily on one frame over another. This study suggests that if news reporting is balanced in its use of sources, it will also be balanced in the frames used. Journalism sets out to be objective and having balanced coverage adds to the ideal coverage all news agencies strive to achieve.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**CONTENT ANALYSIS CODING SHEET**

	<b>Variable Name</b>	<b>Variable Label</b>	<b>Coding Values</b>	<b>Code</b>
1.	Article ID	Article ID number	Number each news article consecutively	
2.	Coder ID	Coder's initials	Enter as string variable	
3.	Date	Date of publication or airing	Enter as mm/dd/yy.	
4.	Newspaper	Name of newspaper	1= <i>Sioux Falls Argus Leader</i> 2= <i>Rapid City Journal</i> 3= <i>Black Hills Pioneer</i>	
5.	TV	Name of television station	1=Keloland	
6.	Headline	Story headline	Enter as string variable	
7.	Procedural Justice	Presence or absence of	1= present 0= absent	
8.	Distributive Justice	Presence of absence of	1=present 0=absent	
9.	Morality	Presence or absence of	1= present 0= absent	

<b>10.</b>	Other	Specify frame identified as "other"	Enter as string variable	
<b>11.</b>	Valence	Orientation of the story toward the death penalty	1=Positive 2=Negative 3=Neutral	
<b>12.</b>	Source 1	First source cited	Enter name of person or group. If person, enter position or title and agency affiliation	
<b>13.</b>	Source 2	Second source cited	Enter name of person or group. If person, enter position or title and agency affiliation	

## APPENDIX B

## CONTENT ANALYSIS CODEBOOK

**Unit of Analysis:** Each individual, straight news report or feature article, excluding visuals (such as photographs, illustrations or charts), editorials, commentaries or letters to the editor.

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1. **Article ID:** Each newspaper has its own identifier – BH, SF, RC. Number each article in numerical order with the appropriate identifier listed first (e.g., BH1, BH2, BH3 or SF1, SF2, SF3). For the television videos, identify them as K1, K2, K3, etc.
  2. **Coder ID:** Indicate the name of the individual who coded the news report according to their initials (e.g., HH or MR)
  3. **Date:** Enter the date of the newspaper or television airing as mm/dd/yy (e.g., 08/22/06)
  4. **Newspaper:** Indicate which newspaper the article was printed with 1=*Sioux Falls Argus Leader*; 2=*Rapid City Journal*; 3=*Black Hills Pioneer*. If not coding a newspaper article, leave blank.
  5. **TV:** Indicate the television news station that aired the video with 1=Keloland. If not coding a television video, leave blank.
  6. **Headline:** Enter the headline exactly as it appears. If the headline consists of a lead headline, followed by a sub-headline, enter them both, separated with a colon. (E.g., One last chance to live: A change of heart by Page would set appeal in motion) *Rapid City Journal*, 08/21/06.
- 

**FRAMES:** After reading each article or viewing the news video, choose if the following frames are present or absent. Look for the keywords/phrases listed under each frame. Refer to the examples given here to decide what frame(s) is present.

7. **Procedural Justice:** focuses on the process leading up to Page's execution. This frame will also include news reports focusing on laws and policies.
  - a. Keywords: "charged with," "was arrested," "court hearings," "arraignment," "laws," and "procedure."
  - b. Examples:
    - i. *Rapid City Journal* – 05/04/00: Headline – "Murder suspects to remain jailed: Paperwork starts effort to return third suspect from Alaska." Keywords/phrases in article – "...will remain jailed until hearings to decide whether they will stand trial..." "They face charges of kidnapping and first-degree murder..." and "...will be officially charged May 23 in arraignment..."
    - ii. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 08/31/06: Headline – "Stay timeline still unclear – Rounds sought opinion a week ago; Page waived appeal on drug issue." Keywords/phrases in article – "...at the last minute Rounds called it off after deciding that it conflicted with state law..." "The mix-up between state law and the department of corrections' plan



for putting Page to death was serious enough, in the governor's view, to halt the execution," and "...would conflict with South Dakota's 1984 law on lethal injections.... The law calls for using two drugs, and it hasn't been changed in 22 years."

- iii. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 08/30/06: Headline – “New debate brewing, some legislators say.” Keywords/phrases in article – “...several lawmakers say that Tuesday's shelved execution of Elijah Page has the potential of reigniting the death penalty issue...” and “The legislature will need to address a technicality in state law about what drugs are used in lethal injected before Page can be put to death.”

**8. Distributive Justice:** focuses on discussions of the fairness of the outcome of Page's case and if using the death penalty was just and fair.

- a. Keywords: “debt paid to society,” “death penalty was appropriate,” “ultimate penalty for an ultimate crime,” and “he will never be able to do this again.”

b. Examples:

- i. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 07/12/07: Headline – “Elijah Page Dead: S.D. carries out first death sentence in 60 years: Dottie Poage: ‘Ultimate penalty for the ultimate crime.’” Keywords/phrases in article – “His debt to the state of South Dakota is now paid in full,” “the death penalty was the appropriate penalty for what he called ‘a brutal torturous murder’,” and “But I can assure you he will never be able to do this again.”
- ii. *Rapid City Journal* – 07/12/07: Headline – “Choice in friends led to tragedy: Chester Poage placed trust in eventual killers.” Keywords/phrases in article – “...and said that the system had provided a measure of justice for the death of her son,” “Elijah Page had the ultimate penalty for the ultimate crime,” and “...she praised the entire system for producing the punishment she said Page deserved.”
- iii. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 07/13/07: Headline – “Execution: Seeing Page die doesn't alter witnesses' death penalty stance.” Keywords/phrases in article – “...witnessing the execution has not moved him to reconsider his support of the process” and “...it reaffirms to me that executions can be done in a humane manner.”

**9. Morality:** focuses on society's moral balance – if the death penalty is morally the right or wrong choice.

- a. Keywords: “morally right,” “morally wrong,” “sin,” “faith,” and “mercy.”

b. Examples:

- i. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 08/20/06: Headline – “A just punishment?: A murderer who says he wants to die has S.D. taking sides about his execution.” Keywords/phrases in article – “...the question divides those who worship the same God, read the same Scripture and share the same view of human dignity,” “human decency forbids an execution, others who say human decency demands death as a response to murder,” and “One side says it fears crossing a line that

belongs to God. The other says it fears the God that makes such punishment necessary.”

- ii. *Sioux Falls Argus Leader* – 07/12/07: Headline – “Demonstrators on both sides invoke the Bible: Small group grew as day progressed.” Keywords/phrases in article – “Demonstrators on both sides of the debate shouted Bible passages across a barricade...” “...pamphlets with Bible verses he said support the death penalty and began arguing with death penalty opponents,” and “we should be praying for that man’s soul. We do not have the right to take somebody’s life.”
- iii. *Rapid City Journal* – 08/23/06: Headline – “Death row a church divider: Broad public support of capital punishment isn’t always in sync with church leaders.” Keywords/phrases in article – “there is no religious consensus on the death penalty in America...” “The largest protestant denomination in the U.S. officially supports the use of the death penalty...” and “we believe that all people are redeemable, and the death penalty – capital punishment – takes away the possibility of transformation, repentance and turning one’s life around.”

**10. Other:** If an article or television news story does not fit into one of the above four categories, mark “other” on the code sheet and then write, in five words or less, what frame you believe would fit best (e.g., historical, political, unsure, etc.).

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**11. Valence:** Indicate the overall tone of the news report toward the death penalty.

Choose 1, 2 or 3.

- a. 1=Positive: news reports will depict the death penalty in a good light, such as “the death penalty is a good deterrent against crime” or “it will rid society of criminals.” News reports with positive valence will see the death penalty as an appropriate way of punishing those who commit heinous crimes.
- b. 2=Negative: news reports will depict the death penalty in a bad light, such as “the death penalty cannot bring back the victim” or “the death penalty will not deter others from committing the same crimes.” These news reports see the death penalty as an extreme measure to punish crimes. News reports with negative valence may explicitly state that life in prison is a better alternative punishment and should be used instead of capital punishment.
- c. 3=Neutral: news reports that demonstrate both positive and negative stance toward the death penalty will be characterized as neutral. A news report whose valence cannot be deciphered as positive or negative will also fall under this category.

**12. Source 1:** Indicate the name of the person or group that is cited or quoted first in the article or news video. (E.g. Dottie Poage, Governor Michael Rounds, and Deb McIntyre – director of the South Dakota Peace and Justice)

**13. Source 2:** Indicate the name of the person or group that is cited or quoted second in the article of news video.