

Media Portrayals of Prison Privatization—A Research Note

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MOST PENOLOGISTS are aware of the debilitating effects of prison crowding. Creative solutions to ease crowding dominate contemporary correctional debate. One solution that has gained considerable attention is the use of privately operated prisons. These prisons are often used to supplement existing government units. The private sector's promise to provide rapidly built and efficiently operated facilities is appealing to many jurisdictions. Despite their popularity, oftentimes the only information that the average citizen gets about these facilities is through local media coverage. To date, no previous study has considered media portrayals of this phenomena. Such a consideration provides added insight into media presentations as well as the manner by which citizens come to support or oppose such initiatives.

This research project was designed to be undertaken in two distinct stages. The first stage considers portrayals of prison privatization by the print media. The second, yet to be completed, considers similar portrayals by the broadcast media. To complete the first stage, it was necessary to locate appropriate newspaper articles. ProQuest, a computerized information retrieval service used by academic and research institutions worldwide, was employed. A search revealed that 2,654 articles about prison privatization were published between January 1, 1986 and April 18, 2002. From this pool, 151 articles were randomly selected for analysis, of which 129 proved suitable. Newspaper articles from nearly half the states as well as the District of Columbia and the United Kingdom are represented. A consideration of the language appearing in both the title and body of each article was undertaken. Titles and article content were determined to be either favorable, neutral, or unfavorable. A favorable presentation denoted language or imagery that was complimentary to privatization. Favorable presentations often included words such as "effective, cost efficient, or safe." A neutral presentation denoted language or imagery that was neither favorable or unfavorable but was generally balanced in presentation. An unfavorable presentation denoted language or imagery that featured a negative aspect of privatization or that presented privatization as a negative phenomenon. Unfavorable depictions often included words such as "unsafe, corrupt, or violent."

A pattern emerged with regard to the overall nature of article titles. During the 1980s, titles were unfavorable in a third of the articles, neutral in half, and favorable in approximately seventeen percent. During the 1990s, about a third of the titles were unfavorable, with 64 percent being neutral and the remainder favorable. During the early 2000s, a third of the titles were unfavorable, while 62 percent were neutral and the remainder favorable (see [Table 1](#)). Thus, titles have become less favorable and more neutral since 1986, with the percentage of unfavorable titles remaining relatively unchanged. Overall, unfavorable titles used language that portrayed privatization as an unregulated practice that jeopardizes the rights and safety of inmate populations. Favorable titles tended to focus upon the financial benefits of privatization.

When considering article content a similar pattern emerged. During the 1980s, a quarter of it was unfavorable to privatization, with 58 percent being neutral and the remainder favorable. During the 1990s, approximately a third was unfavorable, 56 percent neutral and the remainder favorable. During the early 2000s, 46 percent of the content was unfavorable, 46 percent neutral and approximately 8 percent favorable. Thus, article content has become more unfavorable with corresponding decreases in the neutral and favorable categories (see [Table 1](#)). A majority of the unfavorable content referenced staff misconduct and even inmate abuse. Much of the favorable content focused upon the benefits of privatization upon local economies as well as its ability to help alleviate crowding.

Furthermore, in about a third of the articles, comparisons were made between the private and public sectors. A quarter of these comparisons pertained to financial matters, where it was suggested that the private sector could operate more efficiently than the public sector. Another frequent area of comparison included institutional violence, where depictions tended to portray private prisons as less safe than their public counterparts. Overall, newspaper depictions do reveal a good deal about how privatization is portrayed to the public. A greater understanding of these portrayals is beneficial since it is the media that creates, perpetuates, and presents this topic to a majority of the citizenry. While the initial stage of this study is enlightening, the second phase will make it possible to answer questions relating to the media in general. For example, by collectively considering findings derived from both stages of this project, a better understanding of how the media presents privatization will result.

By identifying trends related to the levels of support given privatization by the media, it becomes possible to better predict the role that privatization may play in future correctional processes.

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Table 1 Article Titles & Content: January 1, 1986-April 18, 2002

Percent and number of articles by category

Decade		Unfavorable	Neutral	Favorable
1980's				
	Title	33.3 (4)	50 (6)	16.7 (2)
	Content	25 (3)	58.3 (7)	16.7 (2)
1990's				
	Title	30.8 (28)	63.7 (58)	5.5 (5)
	Content	37.4 (34)	56 (51)	6.6 (6)
2000's				
	Title	34.6 (9)	61.6 (16)	3.8 (1)
	Content	46.2 (12)	46.2 (12)	7.7 (2)