

COVERAGE OF HIGH-PROFILE CRIMINAL TRIALS:  
A COMPARISON OF NEWS COVERAGE BY THE TAMPA TRIBUNE AND  
THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

BY

ROBERT L. DORIAN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts  
School of Mass Communications  
University of South Florida

May 1998

Major Professor: Larry Z. Leslie, Ph.D.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Purpose	1
Justification	4
Research Questions	6
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	8
Comparing the Tampa Tribune and St. Petersburg Times	8
Review of Criminal Trials	12
Case Studies	14
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	19
Position Definitions	20
Photographic Definitions	23
Editorial Definitions	24
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS	26
Smith Results	26
Tyson Results	28
Chandler Results	30
Simpson Results	31
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS & DISCUSSIONS	36
ENDNOTES	41
LIST OF REFERENCES	42
APPENDICES	44
APPENDIX 1. Coding Sheet for William Kennedy Smith Trial	45

APPENDIX 2. Coding Sheet for Mike Tyson Trial	51
APPENDIX 3. Coding Sheet for Oba Chandler Trial	56
APPENDIX 4. Coding Sheet for O. J. Simpson Trial	60

COVERAGE OF HIGH-PROFILE CRIMINAL TRIALS:  
A COMPARISON OF NEWS COVERAGE BY THE *TAMPA TRIBUNE* AND  
*THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES*

by

ROBERT L. DORIAN

An Abstract

Of a thesis Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
School of Mass Communications  
University of South Florida

May 1998

Major Professor: Larry Z. Leslie, Ph.D.

If in a democracy the people make their own decisions, then such a democracy must contain methods for citizens to make intelligent decisions based on accurate information. Where and how the information is obtained has become a key to successful democracies, with the media assuming an important role in the delivery of such information. It is also the media who may, under varying circumstances, alter the way in which the information is either delivered or portrayed.

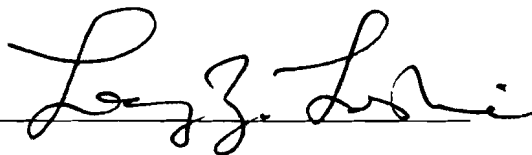
In Tampa Bay, Florida, two daily newspapers assume the role of delivering information to the community. All too often, the information delivered appears quite different between these two newspapers, which creates questions as to which is more accurate, or perhaps more important. Could any of these newspapers lead the public to conclusions based on someone else's agenda, be it the publisher, editor, or someone else? Several high-profile, celebrity criminal trials have concluded with the differences between the newspapers accounts of such trials seemingly quite different. This study is designed to analyze the coverage of such high-profile trials using content analysis to see if there is any evidence to suggest a leaning toward the guilt or innocence of the defendants, as well as determining differences in the patterns these newspapers take in criminal trial coverage.

The coverage looked at several indicators but concentrated on those elements which a reader may use to determine quick opinions. With the decline in newspaper readership and time spent with the newspaper well documented, are items such as headlines, photos, placement, and editorials influencing the readers?

Coverage from four trials were used from the *St. Petersburg Times* and the *Tampa Tribune*, including the widely popular murder trial of O.J. Simpson. Story headlines, photographs, size and amount of content, use of color, and sources of the information were all coded and considered in determining what impact these elements had in leading the readers to certain opinions.

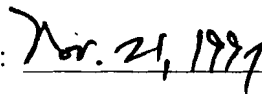
Results of the study show quite a number of differences in the patterns of trial coverage, including a great deal of variance in dominating headlines and use of photographs; however, no evidence was found to suggest the stories tend to lead the reader into forming an impression of guilt or innocence to the defendants. The *Times* was found to provide more overall coverage, while the *Tribune* was found to provide more consistent coverage.

Abstract Approved:



Major Professor: Larry Z. Leslie, Ph.D  
Associate Professor, School of Mass Communications

Date Approved:



## LIST OF TABLES

- Table 1.0 Selected Demographic Comparison: Pinellas and Hillsborough County.
- Table 2.0 Selected Topical comparison: *Tampa Tribune* and *the St. Petersburg Times*.
- Table 3.0 Similarities Among Four Trials Analyzed.
- Table 4.0 Results Comparison for the William Kennedy Smith Trial.
- Table 5.0 Results Comparison for the Mike Tyson Trial.
- Table 6.0 Results Comparison for the Oba Chandler Trial.
- Table 7.0 Results Comparison for the O.J. Simpson Trial.