

Portraying Product Counterfeiting in the News

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Product counterfeiting has received increasing attention in recent years, but there has been little attention to how it is portrayed. We analyzed samples of stories from the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal on product counterfeiting and other white-collar crimes. Product-counterfeiting stories are more likely than those on other crimes to be descriptive and rely on industry sources and less likely to discuss specific incidents. Hence, product-counterfeiting stories must rely on a wider array of sources than street crime stories do to convey significance to the reader.

Product counterfeiting has received increased attention in recent years from law-enforcement officials, politicians, and news reporters. Yet there has been little attention to how news media portray this crime. This is a substantial oversight, given the portrayal of crime by the media helps determine how it is understood.

White-collar crimes such as product counterfeiting are treated differently by the media than street crimes. Such crimes are uniquely complex. This can give the media, particularly print sources that offer greater space and depth, a vital role in determining how they are perceived.

To assess how product counterfeiting in particular is portrayed, we analyzed a random sample of articles on U.S. cases involving a commercial product and published from 2000 to 2009. We drew our sample from the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. We chose these papers because of their prestige and reputation for covering national news, including financial and business news. As a comparison, we also analyzed samples of articles featuring corporate fraud and tax fraud.

Stories by Type

Nearly half the stories on product counterfeiting were descriptive. Such stories discuss product counterfeiting in a general sense. Their topics range from a certain type of counterfeiting to impacts on industries, companies, and consumers, to potential solutions. They do not focus on a specific policy issue or criminal incident.

The lack of incident stories is surprising given this is the focus of many traditional crime stories. Indeed, incident stories accounted for two-fifths of stories on corporate fraud and nearly two-thirds of stories on tax fraud.

Story Sources

Industry sources are the most frequently cited sources for product-counterfeiting stories. For descriptive stories, such sources were often used to comment on the impact of product counterfeiting, methods used by counterfeiters, how counterfeit products are identified, actions taken by industry to address product counterfeiting, and cooperative efforts between companies and other organizations and agencies. For legal and policy stories, such sources are used to comment on the legal culpability of companies and actions taken by industry.

By contrast, criminal-justice sources are the most frequently cited for stories on corporate fraud and tax fraud. Criminal-justice sources are the second-most frequently cited for counterfeiting stories, and the most frequently cited source for counterfeiting incident stories.

Yet other sources are more frequently cited for counterfeiting stories than other financial crime stories. These include other government (including foreign) sources and non-government and expert sources. Not surprisingly, legal and financial sources are more often cited in stories of corporate and tax fraud than in stories of product counterfeiting.

Implications

Overall, product-counterfeiting stories rely on industry and official sources describing how product counterfeiting affects industry, while tax and corporate-fraud stories center on specific incidents and official responses by the government.

The use of official sources is consistent with earlier studies on how crime is reported. Official sources are the initial lens through which crime events are constructed. Government officials use their position as authorities to offer their insight on emerging social problems.

Yet product-counterfeiting stories are unique in their reliance on private industry sources. Such reliance makes sense, as companies making tangible products are clear victims of product counterfeiting and have a great stake in identifying counterfeit products and spreading awareness of them.

Product-counterfeiting stories are also unique in offering multiple perspectives. We attribute this to the involvement of consumers, companies, and government officials, as well as the different perspectives of companies involved in different aspects of the distribution chain may have on the

problem. As a result, there lacks a single type of source in many product-counterfeiting stories.

Product-counterfeiting stories thus differ from other crime news stories where criminal justice sources tend to dominate. Product counterfeiting lacks an established public discourse such as exists for street crimes. Accounts of street crime more clearly point to the harm done to individuals and society. For product-counterfeiting stories, sources and reporters bear the burden of conveying the significance of the crime to the reader.

Limitations

Our analysis has several limitations. These include the use of just two sources, the *Times* and the *Journal*, the relatively small number of stories in our sample, and the exclusive use of print-media sources. While our methods are valid, particularly for an initial study examining these issues, the limitations remain. Future research may find that electronic and “new media” articles on this topic are qualitatively different from those in print media. They may also find such sources differ from print media in how they shape perceptions of and response to crime problems such as product counterfeiting.

This A-CAPPP Backgrounder summarizes research fully documented in Sullivan, Brandon A. & Chermak, Steven M. (2012). “The Media’s Representation of Product Counterfeiting and Financial Crimes,” International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice, Vol. 36(4): 305-326.; and Sullivan, Brandon A. & Chermak, Steven, M. (in press). “Product Counterfeiting and the Media: Examining News Sources Used in the Construction of Product Counterfeiting as a Social Problem,” International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice. The full articles can be accessed here: <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rcac20/36/4>.



The Michigan State University Center for Anti-Counterfeiting and Product Protection (A-CAPPP) is the first and preeminent academic body focusing on the complex global issues of anti-counterfeiting and protection of all products, across all industries, and in all markets, and on strategies to effectively detect, deter, and respond to the crime. Linking industry, government, academic, and other stakeholders through interdisciplinary and translational research, education, and outreach, the A-CAPPP serves as an international hub for evidence-based anti-counterfeit strategy. For more information and opportunities to partner, contact Dr. Jeremy Wilson, Director of the A-CAPPP, at (517)353-9474 or jwilson@msu.edu. Additional information can also be found at <http://www.a-cappp.msu.edu/index.html>.