Tracing Law Enforcement in Lynching Coverage: A Computational Narrative Approach (1835–1950)

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals the representation of the role of law enforcement in connection with lynchings in American newspapers between 1835 and 1950 from special and rare archival collections in terms of a dual discourse outlined as "Police Success" and as "Police Failure." By using machine learning in combination with close textual analysis, the research introduces a Narrative Policing Analysis (NPA) framework for understanding how the press normalized or contested racialized state violence. By situating the research into the literature on both media history and race studies, the study advances a new and meaningful way to understand how journalism constructed—and unconstructed—consensus around the moral boundaries of justice in the racial order.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information systems → Data mining; • Information systems → Information retrieval.

• Computing methodologies → Machine learning → Topic modeling; • Computing methodologies → Natural language processing.

KEYWORDS

Computational Journalism, Law Enforcement, Lynching, Natural Language Processing, Topic Modeling, Historical Newspapers

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1 INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement in the United States did not develop as a neutral institution devoted to justice; it was built to control racially [1,2]. From the earliest slave patrols of the late 18th century created to watch and punish enslaved Black people, American policing was institutionally entrenched in supporting white supremacy. In Virginia and South Carolina, early patrols were composed of white citizens to police the boundaries of racial hierarchy and together formed the map for a logic of state violence that continues to exist within modern institutions [3]. After the Civil War, lynching became the primary form of racial terror, brutal acts which were public spectacles and framed by local communities and the press as extrajudicial justice [4, 5]. Law enforcement officials rarely stood by passively. Rather than actively policing the mob, the police and sheriffs often encouraged, enabled, or even participated in mob violence, depending on whether they were fueled by racial animus or bureaucratic laziness to protect [6,7,8]. These actions do not represent the exceptions to an otherwise honorable law enforcement response; it represents a deeply racialized state apparatus that prioritized a white social order over Black life. While authorities represented racial terror through violence in the reddish-brown color of bodily fluid, the press was responsible for how these acts would be remembered and what would be forgotten [9]. Press did not just serve as the record of lynchings, but they were meaning-making machines through their narratives. Through framing, language, and emphasis, the press served as storytelling machines, framing law enforcement's actions in ways that obscured their complicity. Some stories painted police as heroes of justice, some trivialized their failures and sanitized it altogether. Stories in both approaches were by no means a neutral reflection of reality; rather they were ideological texts that informed the public's understanding of justice, authority, and race [9]. This project analyzes how lynching was mediated via law enforcement narratives in American newspapers from 1835-1950. It identifies and analyzes two main narratives: "Police Success" where law enforcement is depicted as interfacing with law enforcement, and "Police Failure" where law enforcement is imposed by the mob, acting passively or directly involved. The project describes and applies an original methodological framework called Narrative Policing Analysis (NPA), a hybrid method, which contains a supervised and unsupervised topic modelling component interwoven with historical discourse analysis. By examining a historical dataset of press discourse in the context of a site where authority and legitimacy of race was publicly negotiated, this study reveals the ways boundaries of the law, the mob, and state power were being rewritten in print. The study contributes to interdisciplinary conversations in media history, critical race studies and digital humanities, providing both new evidence and a reproducible model for analyzing racially state violence in the historical press.

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2 PREVIOUS WORK

The academic scholarship on law enforcement and lynching has long identified two major themes that coincide with the focus of this study: law enforcement either serving as a third party to mob violence (success) or through inaction or quasiparticulate render mob violence as acceptable (failure). In their historical accounts, Brundage [10, 11], Pfeifer [12], Tolnay and Beck [4], and Wells-Barnett [13], demonstrate how sheriffs and police officers, either subjugated prisoners to mobs, did not interfere with mob actions, or participated in lynchings, and: (a) reinforced a racial order, and (b) a common community of White citizens. These stories not only show that police failings were associated with their powerlessness, but with the structures dismissive of mob violence and therefore morphing their role to be complicit with mob violence. Conversely, a smaller body of work points to acts of law enforcement resistance (i.e. what we are calling success), whereby police officers defended or protected prisoners, disbanded mobs, or upheld the law [14]. Newspapers were an instrumental piece to these narratives: White-owned papers framed law enforcement favorably, presenting police failings either as something beyond their control, or irrational mobs that could not be engaged as or a legitimate part of law enforcement, while Black-owned publications directly called out negligence and demanded responsibility [15, 16]. The goal of this study builds on these strands by examining how newspapers constructed law enforcement between 1835 and 1950 as either (success) or (failure), using the **Narrative Policing Analysis (NPA)** approach to trace how legitimacy, blame, and racial power discursively attached to lynching coverage. In other words, the study has two aims: **RQ1:** *What lexical or thematic patterns constructed how American newspapers constructed law enforcement's role in lynching in the scope between 1835 and 1950?* **RQ2:** *How did newspaper depictions of law enforcement, as it pertains to lynching, framed law enforcement as successful in preventing lynching or failure in allowing lynching, across historical epochs?*

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Mixed-Method Approach to Historical Narrative Excavation

The present study employs an interdisciplinary mixed-method approach to examine the narrative construction that American newspapers employed related to law enforcement's association with lynching coverage from 1835 to 1950. The research utilizes a combination of computational topic modeling, and close textual analysis for selected articles, as a methodological bridge between the digital humanities, media historiography, and racial studies. Our methodology is centered on the Narrative Policing Analysis (NPA) framework, and we obtain our analysis of newspapers not as neutral archives of record but as discursive spaces where institutions are either represented, legitimized, or contested through narrative architecture. In the context of this research, we narrowed the coverage of the press to specific elements of lynching that articulated law enforcement involvement and association to the incident. More specifically, we scoured through the corpus to find relevant news stories that mentioned law enforcement using a list of keywords generated from an extensive review of archives and observations; the terms we used included "Sheriff," "Officer", "Police," and others. This analysis began with a complete corpus of 7,000 news stories, and through a defined focused approach, generated a subset of 1,767 news stories related to law enforcement that presented coverage on lynching.

Our methodological structure included three main steps: (a) corpus construction and text normalization, (b) machine-assisted topic modeling, and (c) close textual analysis in the service of historical periodization.

a. Corpus Construction and Data Preparation

The database utilized for the analysis came from Chronicling America, a historical newspaper database developed by the Library of Congress and including over 60,000 digitized newspaper pages. The database was also used in a similar study [17]. This dataset was analyzed using a stratified random sample (2%), which included roughly 1,390 articles from 336 different newspapers across 47 states. Articles were searched from the database using historically grounded search terms, including police, sheriff, officer, mob, and lynch. Standard cleaning tools were insufficient for processing the OCR text in historic documents, due to the degraded text of the OCR. Therefore, I wrote a custom preprocessing script that could handle the 19th and early 20th century practice of orthographic variation. Specific alterations included probabilistic correction of OCR, spelling normalization and syntactic smoothing, while keeping racially charged or historical language intact and in context for narrative analysis.

b. Topic Modeling and Narrative Frame Identification

The topic modeling process involved two phases completed on a cleaned, standardized corpus. The first phase was unsupervised topic modeling that employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) to surface the dominant lexical patterns and themes in the full corpus. LDA identified law enforcement figures (for example, "sheriff," "officer"), important locations and actions (for example, "jail," "mob," "taken"), and racialized identifiers like Negro as the most frequently occurring topics. These patterns helped to shape the thematic structure of the study and the sampling of texts for analysis in close reading.

In the second phase of topic modeling, a supervised approach explored two main narrative frames in the literature:

Police Success: law enforcement are represented as preventing or resisting lynching.

Police Failure: law enforcement are represented as passive, overwhelmed, or colluding in lynching.

Seed terms for each narrative frame were selected by hand, based on the literature and this corpus, and included terms or phrases like "protected by police," "removed to safety," "overpowered," "taken without resistance." The objective of supervised frame modeling was to analyze interpretive nuance instead of strict classification, which allowed for some ambiguity in interpreting frames across the decades.

c. Historical Periodization and Textual Analysis

To contextualize the computational results, the articles were divided into five analytically grounded historical periods:

1. ***Antebellum Period (1835–1860)***
2. ***Reconstruction & Post–Civil War Era (1865–1890)***

3. ***Turn of the Century & Peak of Lynching (1890–1910)***
4. ***Progressive Era & Moral Framing (1910–1930)***
5. ***Decline & Discursive Fatigue (1930–1950)***

The aforementioned periods are significant not only because they relate to the discrete historical moments previously suggested, but they also represent identifiable shifts in the structure of the press narratives and law enforcement framing, stipulations that arise from both the topic modeling and the textual analyses. For each period, a proportionally representative sampling of articles was taken for close textual analysis - not a formal critical discourse analysis but rather a more structured interpretive reading. This reading will inquire into how law enforcement was described (i.e., the commander of an action versus an uninvolved spectator), how events were narrated (as neutral reporting or as ideological framing), and how the language influenced public perception, either as one of legitimacy or failure. Particular attention was dedicated to the verbs and modifiers associated with action, inaction, or the mention of race, and the narrative's tone (e.g., sympathetic, critical, celebratory, etc.). This methodology afforded the study the opportunity to triangulate computations with qualitative interpretation, whereby the linguistics disclose not only what was said, but in a sense, systematically framed, law enforcement's role in the event over time. It should be noted, because this research draws extensively from a theoretical sensibility of discourse analysis, including specifically the understanding of the press as a site for ideological production, the research does not claim a full Critical Discourse Analysis CDA study. This study presents a transparent process for aligning large-scale text modeling with historiographical interpretation.

3.2 Methodological Contribution

The methodological design of this study contributes an adaptable and transparent model for examining historical representations of law enforcement and racial violence in the press. The study adapts digital tools in the context of archival historical text that has been degraded over time and pairs machine-assisted analysis with qualitative close reading and analysis, demonstrating how mixed methods can signify institutionalized representations that are historicized in media. The supervised classification model distinguishing “Police Success” from “Police Failure” had high performance when evaluated, surpassing 0.85 for accuracy, precision, and recall, which speaks to the reliability of the approach. The Narrative Policing Analysis (NPA) Framework offers a replicable model for future work examining how journalism narrativizes the boundaries of justice, authority, and racially based power in the past and in contemporary times.

6 FINDINGS

A. Unsupervised Topic Modeling: Lexical Anchors and Discursive Gravity

This study utilized an unsupervised topic model to identify high-frequency semantic fields within articles discussing law enforcement in comparison to the larger context of lynching-related coverage in the press. Figure (1) illustrates the highest co-occurring terms found within the dominant topic cluster regarding law enforcement and mob violence.

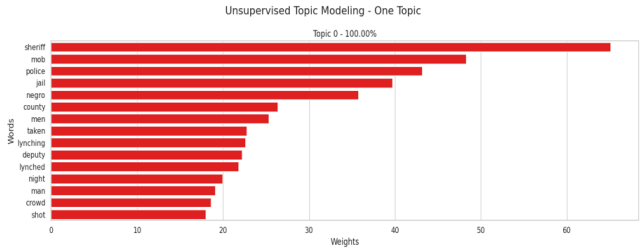

Figure 1

At the center of this semantic constellation sits "sheriff," which emerged in over 65% of articles exploring the dominant law enforcement topic. This term appears not simply as a referential marker, but serves as a discursive anchor—evoking personal, often rural, legal authority in the lynching narrative. The term "sheriff" acts as a particular and localized representation of state power—its upholder or its abandoner; the removed, abdicating community keeper. "Police" is the institutional, but abstract, substitute for sheriff. The term "mob," (48.26%) as well as "crowd," (18.59%) suggest the collective nature of racial terror and violence—highlighted by their frequency of occurrence. They suggest that lynching is more than the breakdown of law and order, but, rather, an implementation of community consensus—routinely with law enforcement agency involved as actor, facilitator, or silent observer. The term "jail" (39.67%) serves as a symbolic frontier in many articles—a representation of the porous boundary between legality and lawlessness. Frequent references to jail support the familiar trope of the "prisoner taken from the jail," "crowd storming jail," "crowd breaking jail locks," and, in the further examples, official protection or recourse is abject when necessary.

The racial signifier "Negro" (35.71%)—often the only identifier associated with victims—illuminates an explanation of how language racialized the legal subject while dehumanizing them and racially categorizing Black people into a category of threat and/or spectacle in the lynching narrative. This is distracting, to study how newspapers framed racial violence and terror by quietly embedding ideology through circulation of signifiers to its white reader. Taken with the verbs "taken," (22.77%), "shot," (18.01%) and "lynched" (21.78%), these were no longer location 3.0, but framed the text's grammar of violence, suggesting not only that violence occurred, but these were stylized scripts to convey meaning to a white readership or newspaper audience for coherence and connection.

Thus, together the lexical field does not simply demonstrate frequency; it illuminates the self-evident logic of different positioning of law enforcement in popular narratives—between protector and perpetrator, performance, and failure, the margin of silence and the act of tacit complicity.

B. Supervised Topic Modeling: Tracing Newspaper Portrayals of Law Enforcement Across Historical Periods

To trace this evolution, we used supervised topic modeling to classify the articles into two dominant narrative frames across the five historical periods previous described:

• "***Police Success***" - framing policing as active guardians of legal order.

• "***Police Failure***" - framing policing as overwhelmed, complicit or intentionally absent.

1. Antebellum Period (1835–1860): Silence, Struggle, and Discursive Ambiguity

Coverage in this period was limited yet revealing. Law enforcement was not consistently positioned as blameworthy; rather, its operation was often described in moral or legalistic terms. An article from *The Daily Crescent* in 1851, discusses a Louisiana sheriff's vigorous dissuasion of mob action through the employment of armed personnel. While the reporting praises the sheriff's firmness, it also questions the legality of the sheriff's intervention, indicating a distinction between what was "legal" and "lawful." This distinction in language is evidence of an early situation of ambivalence in the press, whereby law enforcement is not characterized simply as access to justice, but as a cause of moral and procedural ambiguity. *The Cadiz Democratic Sentinel* (1856), on the other hand, reports on an Ohio sheriff who failed to dissuade a mob that openly humiliated and disregarded his authority. Notably, the article did not chastise the mob, nor did it imply the sheriff's failure was disastrous; in fact, it framed the episode as almost unavoidable, as if a public normative consensus — rather than legal mandate — defined the boundaries of the legitimate use of force. In both instances the press indicates and reinforces a pre-Civil War social order in which law enforcement's role was conditional, tenuous, and deeply tied to community values -- rather than constitutional terms.

2. Reconstruction & Post-Civil War (1865–1890): Emergence of Law as Contested Authority

During this time there was an increased amount of coverage as newspapers addressed the struggle between federal reconstruction policies and local racial conventions. In the period immediately following the Civil War, law enforcement officers found themselves at the intersection of a highly volatile political environment. The coverage in the press from this time indicates a state apparatus pulling in two directions—where the legitimacy of police and sheriffs was questioned as it was theoretically over-laden with honor and the legal obligation to enforce law and order in society. *The Abilene Reflector* (1887) describes a violent fight involving police and citizens at Louisville, Kentucky, as a "pell-mell, hand-to-hand fight." The account does not only emphasize the brutality of the police and citizens but also grounds these officers with a sense of heroism as the protectors of civil order. The police "stood fast," and made their stand between the mob and the intended victim. This narrative of police as a wall between legality and mob justice is a break from the reluctance present in the antebellum press. However, the idealization of law enforcement presented in the previous example is contradicted by an article in *The Salt Lake Herald* (1890), which presents law enforcement's failure to secure Charles Pratt's protection. While the former press narrative worked to see possible failures of law enforcement as an indication of the limits of state power, here the press narrative draws in an entirely different thread regarding the limits of the state's protection—not as a critique but laying bare the process of justice being replaced by retribution. That the sheriff was unable to act is recounted as a historical moment and tragic episode due to the continued proximity of outlaw justice and the enforcement agents being shaped by extrajudicial power. Here, it is the reckoning of law enforcement with the ideals of the legal realm and the role of the community practicing vengeance on a citizen.

3. Turn of the Century (1890–1910): Spectacle, Contestation, and Institutional Collapse

The time period identified as the highest rate of lynching in the U.S. was also a time for escalating narrative. Law enforcement was no longer incidental to the story—it was positioned as the fulcrum of legitimacy. Some reports glorify the heroism of law enforcement for fighting against lynching. In *The Little Falls Weekly Transcript* (1894) the police disperse a lynch mob "at the point of the bayonet"—a phrase that evokes the presence of state power in its most conspicuous and theatrical form. The Bryan Morning Eagle (1901) describes whether the officers use clubs in a heartbeat to defeat a mob in defense of Julius Seibel. The recitation of officers resorting to physical confrontation reinforces the idea of law enforcement as beleaguered protectors of justice. But for every word for resistance, there is an equal measure of complicity and institutional failure. *The Mena Weekly Star* (1909) chronicled Sheriff Shipp's contempt charges (in a magnificent shot of decades of abuse by law enforcement officials), after a lynching. This was a stunning example of law enforcement facilitating mob violence. *The Yale Expositor* (1901) went even further, detailing how officials in California—all of whom were law enforcement officers—were witnesses to the lynching of five prisoners in the town square. They stood and watched. These narratives expose the myth of isolated institutional failure and reveal an unspoken, systemic cooperation between law enforcement and acts of white supremacy. Across this timeline the press narratives become even more polarized. Law enforcement was failing or succeeding—they were either acting to legitimize mob violence or they were active agents acting on behalf of the mob.

4. Progressive Era (1910–1930): Moral Reckoning and Narrative Professionalization

As public conversations concerning lynching slowly evolved downward statistically, media narratives became increasingly ritualized and emotionally charged. Heroism and ethical virtuousness became commonplace framing narratives. *The Birmingham Age-Herald* (1920) reported in a feature on the Methodist ministers praising police officers for their endeavors to save an accused Black man "at the risk of their own lives." The obvious moral framing in the article—police as protectors of not

only life but also Christian virtue—is indicative of a notable shift in the press narrative that aligned police with progressive notions of duty and sacrifice. Additionally, in *The Evening Star* (1911), Sheriff Beck was also fawned over in his quick-thinking tactical move of a prisoner that the paper framed as both smart and fair. The language of planning, strategy, and restraint indicates a degree of professionalization in the reporting of law enforcement narratives that easily departs from prior depictions of unbridled violence. However, the articles still report on failure. *The Imperial Valley Press* (1920) reported upon a lynching in California in which officers, "made no opposition to the mob." It is a strikingly blunt phrase — and one that not only suggests failure, but also the deliberate avoidance of the legal process. By 1922, this publication continued covering sheriffs overrun by mobs. Despite mounting pressure for reform, institutional inertia and community antagonism continued to overwhelm the justice system. The span of this time period demonstrates a shift from a raw reporting of the facts to morally laden mythmaking, which located the actions of law enforcement within the broader narrative of progress towards reform and a public accountability.

5. World War II Era (1930–1950): Withdrawal, Critique, and Discursive Fatigue

As lynching receded, in part because of legal changes, press attention decreased also, although the stories that remained carried a sharper tone. *The Tacoma Times* (1940) recounts earlier episodes featuring Senator William Borah, who brilliantly foiled lynch mobs through deception and diplomacy. While certainly attention-catching, the focus of these stories shifts the focus away from the power of formal police authority toward the bravery of solitary figures of moral clarity, indicating a movement of faith from formal processes to extraordinary people. *The Times-News* (1935), by comparison, offers one of the harshest renditions of the police's failure, labeling police as “feebleminded” in the wake of Govan Ward’s lynching. Such language is unprecedented in newspapers; it is both direct and degrading for what the police's inaction meant for the community, which allowed for institutional critique on some level. This suggests that by the 1930s, the press was starting to feel a little freer to name and shame police, despite of the deep-seated hesitancy that arose in the 1920s. However, even when words appeared like those in the *Times-News* report, that inconsistency persisted. The long diminution of stories from earlier decades is neither a closing of stories or a making safe of public attitudes toward violence but rather a discursive fatigue in and of itself—a waning of journalistic energy from a persistent crisis that remains unresolved.

7 CONCLUSION

What does it signify to say that law enforcement pervades nearly every story of lynching? Not as a neutral institutional function, over and over again, but as a protagonist, an accomplice, or a failed protector? This study argues that the press has provided an answer to that question, over and over again, for more than a century. And in so doing, it constructed a moral architecture around law enforcement, sometimes romanticizing it, sometimes condemning it, but always shaping the public's understanding of where justice ends and violence begins. Stakes were never only historical, they are hauntingly contemporary. The debates that we are having related to police legitimacy, state violence, and media responsibility are inextricably linked to the stories we have told (and not told) about who has power, who is protected, and who is abandoned. By excavating the discursive legacy of press coverage during the lynching era, this study does more than expand our historical understanding of this period; it also holds up a mirror to our present, asking the question: what narratives are we building now?

8 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This paper, while contributing a new computative lens onto the press narratives of law enforcement and lynching, has some limitations. First, the dataset was drawn from a stratified sample of newspapers available in Chronicling America. While this dataset is extensive, it cannot fully encompass the geographic, political, and racial diversity of the American press. In particular, African American newspapers remain largely absent from digitized archives, and this is a barrier to making a fuller comparison of how the press owned by whites and Black newspapers narrated lynching. Second, topic modeling (supervised and unsupervised), of necessity, abstracts textual complexity into probabilistic abstractions. It provides the value of mapping themes that rise to the surface but does not fully map dimensions that might be more abstracted, such as irony, sarcasm, or ambivalence. Therefore, complicity and failure were collapsed into a single 'failure' narrative to be computationally tractable, thereby oversimplifying the spectrum of behavior of law enforcement.

Going forward and in future research, the sample could be expanded to include more African American and regional press newspapers, as well as transnational archives, to begin to build things comparatively. Furthermore, the methodological options for extending features contain possibilities for moving beyond traditional topic models and even using large language models (LLMs) such as GPT-style transformers. Unlike dictionaries or probabilistic models, LLMs can model discursive nuance, contextual shifts, and rhetorical strategies in ways that are closer to the experience of human reading and interpretation. For instance, utilizing fine-tuned LLMs trained on historical text, can provide more forthright identification of irony, ambivalence, or coded racial discourse. At the time of this research, the speed, accessibility, and tooling of LLMs were still developing and limited further practical use, but rather, the current work illustrates a fundamental approach for how in-house computational pipelines can address opportunities for historical press analysis and signal opportunities for re-engagement with LLMs in the future. Melding such models with adversarial validation could also assist in reducing bias in training corpora and allow for more historic reflexivity.

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