Constructing Crime: Media, Crime, and Popular Culture

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Arguably one of the most significant and potentially illuminating areas of criminological inquiry is the analysis of crime, media, and popular culture.

As residents of a highly technological society undergoing rapid transformations in the conduits for information on crime, we have an increasing array of options in forming our ideas about crime and justice. A staple assertion of introductory texts and lectures is that societal perceptions of crime are formed through exposure to various forms of media, including television, film, video, and Internet services. Our knowledge acquisition has changed dramatically in the past 200 years, from first-hand knowledge of crime and deviance in rural communities and small urban centres to a society in which we are inundated with so much information that it is difficult to assess what specific impacts media have on our ideas and attitudes. Therefore, when we speak of "knowledge of crime," we must also be specific about the type of information we receive and the form in which this information is presented.

Crime is central to the production of news in Canadian society (Dowler 2004a: 574; Fleming 1983, 2006). Although crime is considered newsworthy and often produced as informative, it is also a central component in entertainment in Canadian and North American society. It grips the collective imagination of television viewers, theatregoers, Internet browsers, and readers of true-crime books. Moreover, the boundary between crime information and crime entertainment has been increasingly blurred in recent years through the rise of reality crime shows. Crime as entertainment has cemented a place in popular culture, reflected in all the above-mentioned media formats and beyond. Canadian viewers are now exposed to American reality television shows including *American Justice, Cold Case Files, COPS,*

Court TV, and *Dallas SWAT*, while "cop" shows focus on the investigation and arrest of suspects for a variety of offences. *The First 48* tracks cases through the investigative process, showing the arrest and interrogation of suspects. Court TV presents sensational trials that typically focus on murder, serial murder, or sexual assault. *The Nancy Grace Show* selectively targets specific kidnappings, sex crimes, or murders, with a particular focus on retribution and punishment. Canada boasts its own equivalent of *COPS*, the less sensational *To Serve and Protect*, which follows everyday police patrols in various Canadian cities. Ideas about crime emerge not only from news sources and reality television shows but also from dramatic movies and television shows that adopt crime as their subject. The massive popularity of crime shows has spawned some of the most enduringly popular television series of the 1990s and beyond, including *Law & Order, DaVinci's Inquest*, and *CSI*. The enormous appeal of crime as entertainment is also reflected in the many spin-offs of these series, all of which are currently running alongside the original series and their re-runs.

What is particularly disturbing about these crime drama shows is that they are presented as "realistic" portrayals of crime and justice, which further blurs the lines between fiction and reality. In fact, they often borrow storylines from real-life cases and advertise their programs as "realistic" crime portrayals (Eschholz, Mallard, and Flynn 2004) – so much so that the expression "the CSI Effect" has been bandied about by such media outlets as CNN, *National Geographic*, *USA Today*, CBS News, and *US News and World Report*. Simply put, the CSI Effect relates to the popularity of *CSI, Criminal Minds, Crossing Jordan*, and other programs that portray scientific and forensic evidence-gathering procedures to catch criminals; the "effect" is the rise in expectations of real-life crime victims and jury members. Prosecutors lament the fact that they have to supply more forensic evidence because jurors expect this type of evidence, having seen it on television. Of course, academic studies have yet to reveal the extent of this effect; at the time of this writing, there are no studies that show it to be genuine.

Crime as entertainment/information has significant audience appeal, since some viewers accept crime drama as crime reality. Ray Surette (2007:17) argues that these portrayals can best be described as "infotainment," a highly stylized, edited, and formatted form of entertainment that is disguised as informative or realistic. Thus, the portrayal of crime and justice is blurred, especially within news

content, in which the most serious and violent crimes are given an entertaining angle and presented as "hard" news, even though the facts are often distorted or misrepresented. Moreover, studies suggesting that Canadians are more afraid of crime than their American counterparts (see Roberts 2001), despite significantly lower crime and victimization rates, may tell us more about our nation's viewing choices, and have the potential to yield interesting analyses of how people filter news, reality shows, and drama to construct their ideas about crime and the fear of victimization.

There is little doubt that the media have become central in the production and filtering of crime ideas. The selective nature of crime news, for example, with its emphasis on violence and sensationalism – essentially crime as a product, playing to the fears, both imagined and real, of viewers and readers – has produced a distorted picture of the world of crime and criminality. Moreover, another form of media, the true-crime book genre, has seen exponential growth, with hundreds of titles emerging every year. All these sources contribute to the public's unending thirst for information on bizarre and violent crime. It may be truly said that to reach the status of national news crime stories must contain elements of extreme violence or special-interest issues that can be expected to elicit a response in a broad spectrum of media consumers. Beyond this, news stories on crime tend to be highly repetitive in nature, reflecting reporters' tendency to revive well-known stories that can be used to contextualize related stories or "new" developments in the original story. The case of Karla Homolka provides a good example of what Soothill and colleagues (Soothill, Peelo, Francis, Pearson, and Ackerley 2002; Soothill, Peelo, Pearson, and Francis 2004) term "mega cases," that is, cases that enjoy relative longevity in the media because they elicit a very strong response in the potential audience the reporter is writing to. Homolka's case has generated more than 1,100 stories or reports in the *Toronto Star* since 1995, yielding some measure of both its utility as a tool to draw to audiences and the relative simplicity of repeating well-understood themes, a common practice in journalism (Fleming 1983, 1996, 2006).

The study of media portrayals of crime has broadened substantively in the more than 30 years since the emergence of the modern British wave of crime and media studies (Chibnall 1977; Cohen 1971, 1972; Cohen and Young 1973; Glasgow University Media Group 1978, 1979; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts 1978; Roshier 1973). In Canada, the research of Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek, and

Janet Chan (1987, 1991) on news organizations and crime in the news ushered in an era of renewed interest in and increasingly diverse studies of crime, media, and popular culture. As scholars continually mined and refined research on emerging issues and media forms from the 1970s to the present, our knowledge of the relationship between crime, media, and popular culture expanded substantively. Mark Fishman's (1978, 1980) and Steven Gorelick's (1989) seminal works on the ideological dimensions of crime waves and police news; Jason Ditton and James Duffy's (1983) study of bias in news reporting; Thomas Fleming's (1981, 1983) articles on the presentation of mentally disordered offenders in the British press and the use of media to create criminals; Joseph Dominick's work (1978) on crime and law enforcement; Inez Dussuyer's (1979) study of crime news in Ontario newspapers; and Drew Humphries' (1981) research began to demonstrate that the construction of crime news is a complex process that requires analysis of a variety of interrelated issues. Research on ownership of the production of news, issues of story choice, and over-representation of violent crime (Duwe 2000; Jerin and Fields 1994, Chermak 1995), as well as renewed interest in the production of crime "waves" (Sacco 1995), provided important contributions to the expansion of the field.

Crime has made a dramatic entrance into North American popular culture. Fascination with the "underside" of society and unjustified concerns about the seeming rising of violence in our society have Lombrosian overtones. The need of various groups to see "others" as active participants in criminal cultures, as different, is brilliantly expressed in the arguments presented by philosopher Jeffrey Reiman (2003). The highly skewed presentation of crime stories on U.S. national television news and in leading newspapers highlights stories on select forms of violent crime and crime victims (Cohen and Young 1973; Duwe 2000; Levin and Fox 1996; Gabor and Weimann 1987; Gorelick 1989; Graber 1980; Lofquist 1997). For instance, in a study of local crime newscasts, Kenneth Dowler (2004b) argues that in both Canadian and American newscasts, racial images saturate media portrayals of criminality and victimization; minority crime victims receive less attention and less sympathy than white victims, while crime stories involving minority offenders are rife with racial stereotypes. Essentially, the racial status of the victim is one of the most important elements in the presentation of crime stories (Dowler 2004b; Weiss and Chermak 1998; Sorenson, Manz, and Berk 1998; Dixon and Linz 2000). Dowler (2004b: 94) claims that the common

statement "if it bleeds it leads" is not entirely truthful, as "it really depends on who is bleeding."

Gender is another very important ingredient in the portrayal of crime: the media frequently hold female victims responsible for their victimization while reducing or mitigating the perpetrator's responsibility. Essentially, violence against women is devalued, while the female victim is depersonalized, objectified, and dehumanized (Anastasio and Costa 2004). Although female victims may be more newsworthy than their male counterparts, as is evident from their overrepresentation in media coverage (Graber 1980; Humphries 1981; Mawby and Brown 1984; Chermak 1995; Weiss and Chermak 1998; Sorenson et al. 1998; Pritchard and Hughes 1997), this newsworthiness is contingent on the victim's social status: victims must be judged innocent, virtuous, and honourable. Consequently, a paradox exists between victims who are "innocent" and those who are "blameworthy," a paradox rooted in patriarchal notions of femininity and gender stereotypes (Dowler 2005).

Moreover, the overwhelming infiltration of crime into our lives through increasingly numerous and pervasive media outlets has led to debates about whether crime news, drama, and related ephemera contribute directly to the production of crime and violence. The glorification of crime in popular music videos provides a sharp contrast to the reality of crime presented in detectives' interrogations of murder suspects on *The First 48*. But our understanding of the linkage between multimedia crime programs and criminal behaviour still requires further investigation (Freedman 2002; Potter 2003). So, too, do questions of the relationship between media consumption and attitudes about crime (Dowler 2003; Dowler and Zawilski 2006). We need to be more specific about delineating the audiences we are discussing in assessing the impacts of crime news. The supposition of a homogeneous audience, even within one urban setting, is difficult to sustain, as most researchers would concur, but the measurement of specific effects will require substantive efforts.

Crime news has long been understood to have a profound influence in moving society toward "law and order" campaigns (Ratner and McMullan 1985; Fleming 2006; Muzzatti 2004), increasing social control, intrusion into civil rights (Fleming 1981; Muzzatti 2005), and punitive responses to criminal conduct. From Stanley Cohen's (1972) lead on the production of moral panics, social scientists have moved

on to increasingly sophisticated understandings of the interplay between the police, politicians, and the media in constructing new forms of crime and new fears that underscore social-control agencies' attempts to reinforce the production of docile bodies (Foucault 1995). The cycle of producing crime waves, igniting fears, and public outcries for harsher laws and increased policing reflects a significant knowledge gap in the public's ideas about crime and its control. While criminological knowledge arising out of research might logically be viewed as a corrective to politically motivated portrayals of crime, opinion- rather than fact-based assertions, sporadic moral crusades, and moral panics, an interesting question is why, in fact, our voices as professional researchers hold so little way in shaping public reaction to crime. It is apparent that the only message that appeals to media outlets is one supporting harsher measures, critiques of the inadequacy of police efforts (another means of encouraging more draconian law enforcement), strengthening laws, or increasing prison sentences. The Stephen Harper government's movement toward mandatory minimums and longer sentences will necessarily lead to the expansion of the prison system.

It is apparent, given the research of the past three decades, that particularly heinous crimes have tremendous appeal for the media, the public, and politicians. The use of serious crime stories as political events for the advancement of specific causes is, unfortunately, a regularly recurring effect of these accounts. The kidnapping, sexual assault, murder, and dismemberment of a young girl, Holly Jones, in Toronto in 2004, for example, became an occasion for impassioned calls for a sex-offender registry on the part of police authorities. Such a registry, it was contended, would make the identification of the responsible party much easier. However, the individual eventually arrested and convicted of these crimes had no criminal history of sexual offending. Similarly, building on fears of crime, the Ottawa Police Services recently purchased high-powered rifles to "eliminate mass murderers" (MacLeod 2006)! Given the small number of mass murders that have occurred in this country, it appears ridiculous to equip police in one major urban centre to deal with this type of situation ("Mass killings" 2006). But, by juxtaposing the long shadow of Marc Lepine, Columbine, and the 1999 Pierre Lebrun mass murder in Ottawa, these newspaper reports allowed police to produce a rationale for armament that cannot be supported. The non-critical stance of such crime reportage that does not question either the rationale for increasing security measures and police armament or the selective use of tragic situations

to rationalize policy. The subsequent arrest of 17 "suspected terrorists" who apparently counted among their plans the idea of storming Parliament, taking hostages, and beheading the prime minister seems more likely to be the thrust behind this development. Given the centrality of the police to crime news creation, it is difficult to see how reporters cannot be circumscribed in their presentation of crime; their heavy reliance on police as official sources of news means that it is difficult for them to adopt a highly critical perspective on police behaviour without losing access to police services. Perhaps, like the prime minister, they may decide to deny access to those who either do not ask the "right" questions or "are discriminating" against them. For the more powerful, there appears to be little to worry about, given their control of the media. Critical stories will not appear; certain individuals, groups, and stories will remain "invisible" (McMullan 2006); other persons will provide continuing fodder for journalism that encourages violence (Perry and Sutton 2006); and our knowledge of the effects of crime reporting and its relation to popular culture will remain in need of new directions for research and theory (Doyle 2006).

In this special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* we present three articles that deal with various aspects of the interplay between crime, media, and popular culture. Aaron Doyle writes on the current state of research in the field. Tracing the development of criminological research and thinking on crime, media, and popular culture, he highlights the types of problems that have persisted in media analysis by criminologists, particularly assumptions concerning media effects. Doyle argues that research focusing on the direct political or institutional effects of such research have yielded the most useful data so far. His article also engages the issue of the relationship between crime news and crime fiction, an important area of research that is beginning to emerge more frequently in the current literature.

Barbara Perry and Michael Sutton examine the compelling area of inter-racial relationships and their connection to racial violence. Beginning their analysis with the well-known murder of Anthony Walker, they trace the mythologies, both historical and contemporary, that propel stigmatization of inter-racial relationships. Their argument is that media reporting, in various forms, contributes to an environment that "facilitates, if not encourages" violence against individuals involved in such relationships.

John McMullan's article documents the press coverage of the Westray mining explosion and the developments in news reporting that followed it for the period 1992 to 2002. His research provides clear evidence of the construction of what he terms "regimes of truth" by the media around various aspects of the disaster. The three elements that emerge in his analysis are natural accidents, legal tragedy, and political scandal. However, the absolute absence of any media discussion around corporate crime in relation to these events clearly points to an inability or unwillingness to address issues that involve wrongdoing, negligence, or abuse by corporate and state interests. McMullan's work reinforces the vulnerability of workers, their lack of rights, and the overwhelming media silence on injury and death among workers when powerful economic and political interests are threatened. His article provides an important contribution to our understanding of the processes involved in the "exercise of power" in disasters and, more importantly, how this draws a curtain around workplace crime, making it effectively "invisible" in our society.

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