How Not to Think about Crime in the Media

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Cet article évalue l'état d'avancement actuel de la recherche sur le traitement médiatique de la criminalité. On y avance que la recherche effectuée jusqu'à ce jour présente certains problèmes, les principaux étant qu'on y présume de l'existence de certains effets des médias, on qu'on attribue une certaine uniformité réductionniste à divers aspects des médias et à la manière dont ils façonnent ou sont façonnés par les rapports sociaux et institutionnels. Partant de son analyse de diverses recherches sur la criminalité, telle que décrite dans les médias, l'auteur souligne certaines des limites de la recherche centrée sur les effets de tels reportages. Il avance en outre que la difficile question des effets découlant des influences exercées par les reportages sur la criminalité a été abordée le plus efficacement à ce jour par des études examinant les effets politiques et institutionnels immédiats du crime, tel que dépeint dans les médias. Il faudrait compléter ces études par davantage d'études interprétatives sur le sens que donnent certaines personnes aux reportages sur les affaires criminelles. Il suggère enfin qu'il est nécessaire de procéder à une analyse soutenue de l'interaction entre l'actualité et la fiction en matière de criminalité.

This article assesses the state of the art of current research on crime and the media. It argues that some key problems with previous research lie in simply assuming media effects, or in ascribing a reductionist unity to various aspects of the media and the ways they shape and are shaped by social relations and institutions. In reviewing various bodies of research on crime in the media, it indicates some of the limits of effects research. It further argues that the problematic question of the effects of influences of crime stories has been most effectively dealt with thus far by research that looks at the direct political and institutional effects of crime and the media. This should be supplemented by more interpretive research on the meaning of crime stories for particular audience members. Finally, it suggests that we need a sustained analysis of the interplay between crime news and crime fiction.

Dramatizations of crime and punishment in the popular media continue to be a focus of much public fascination and anxiety. Journalistic and fictional images of crime and control, where they

come from, and their social impacts have also preoccupied many social scientists. In this article I try to point out some common pitfalls in some of our research in this area. I review the literature on crime and the media and offer a series of guidelines for future research.

I will use the shorthand form "crime in the media" or "crime stories" to mean both journalistic and entertainment portrayals. Various research considers either or both. The phrases "crime in the media" and "crime stories" will incorporate not only accounts or representations of crime, but also accounts or representations of the criminal justice system.

Anxieties and ambivalences about crime in the media have often entered into popular culture (for example, in popular films such as *Chicago*). Such concerns have also led to a lot of public debate, most prominently with respect to violence in television and film fiction and the long-running, still-very-controversial question of whether such violence causes further violent behaviour in viewers (see, e.g., Gauntlett 2001; Freedman 2002; Potter 2003). Concerns about crime in the media have also taken other public forms – for example, entering into political debates about law and order, which have featured arguments about whether the media cause unreasonable fear of crime, most recently in relation to the heavily reported series of shootings in Toronto in 2005. Criticisms of crime in the media have been taken up all along the conventional right–left political spectrum. Conservative critics blame crime in the media for various social ills and kinds of moral decay. Liberal criminal-justice reformers have used claims about media distortions to discount public punitiveness as they strive for a somewhat more humane justice process. Other analysts operating from a more critical perspective have seen crime in the media as reinforcing a shift to more coercive modes of control by the state. The classic example is perhaps *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts 1978); a recent key example is *The Culture of Control* by David Garland (2001: 85–87). Not surprisingly, in the context of these concerns, social scientists have devoted extensive study to various aspects of crime in the media.

There are various consistent findings concerning crime in the media. Many content analyses have shown that the news media are saturated with accounts of crime and control (Sherizen 1978; Dussuyer 1979; Graber 1980; Garofalo 1981; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991; Chermak 1995; Reiner 2002; Surette 2007). Similarly, criminal justice has also long been the most common theme of popular entertainment (Kaminer 1995: 50–52; Surette 2007). By the early 1970s the police

drama had replaced the western as the predominant genre of American prime-time television fare (Sparks 1992: 27). One aspect of crime in the entertainment media that is somewhat troublesome for various analyses is a pronounced tendency to promote the lone protagonist working outside the justice system rather than official efforts at control (Sparks 1992; Rafter 2000; Reiner 2000).

A great deal of research suggests that the portrayal of crime in the news and entertainment media differs from the picture portrayed by official and other statistics (Garofalo 1981; Orcutt and Turner 1993; Perlmutter 2000). It has also been repeatedly demonstrated that the media are implicated in the construction of "crime waves" (Davis 1951; Hall et al. 1978; Fishman 1978, 1981; Voumvakis and Ericson 1984) in the absence of any statistical increase in the crime in question. This point was noted by journalist Lincoln Steffens early in the century, long before it was demonstrated by social scientists (Antunes and Hurley 1977). Similarly, media construct "new crime problems" such as "freeway violence" or "wilding" (Best 1999) or construct moral panics around particular types of crime (Cohen 2002; Jewkes 2004), although many analyses of the latter focus on the behaviour of media and officialdom, and offer little evidence the public is actually panicking.

Crime news tends to focus heavily on the details of individual crimes, without broader context (Graber 1980), although there are prominent counter-examples, such as the award-winning in-depth analyses of criminal justice policy written by *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Dan Gardner. A great deal of certain types of street crime is shown in both the news and entertainment media; this coverage features a high proportion of violent crime, most notably murder and sexual offences. Both forms also feature a high proportion of solved crime (Reiner 2002; Surette 2007), heavily emphasizing police success as crime-fighters.

Richard Ericson, Patricia Baranek, and Janet Chan (1991) conducted a massive analysis of the content of six media outlets in a major Canadian city over more than 30 days. Not surprisingly, the tabloid newspaper studied provided extensive coverage of violent street crime, law and order as a means of control, and what the researchers called "tertiary knowledge," or emotive and sensational accounts of deviance. Perhaps more surprising was the fact that roughly half the newspaper and television items and two-thirds of the radio items they looked at concerned crime, deviance, and control in some form. One common facet that Ericson et al. found across all media outlets is that structural–causal explanations of crime were given almost no play.

This finding concurs with more general evidence that both news and entertainment media emphasize individualistic accounts of crime and deviance (Surette 2007), although the degree to which this is true varies somewhat among outlets (Ericson et al. 1991).

Various research has detailed the production of crime news and, to varying degrees, captured the nuances of its creation. Crime news tends to rely heavily on the police as news sources (Chibnall 1977; Hall et al. 1978; Fisherman 1980; Chermak 1995) due to their routine availability, authority, and control of information. Although the relationship between media and police is somewhat more complex, diverse, and differentiated (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989; Mawby 2002; Doyle 2003; Leishman and Mason 2003) than earlier accounts suggest, police nevertheless often exert substantial control over news media accounts. However, the police–media relationship is sometimes also highly contentious, as the recent example of the *Toronto Star*'s racial profiling series suggests (Wortley and Tanner 2003). The ethnographic research of Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1989) has thus far provided what may be the definitive account of relations on the police and court beats, demonstrating how news is "negotiated" in a complex way between journalists and various official and unofficial news sources. Other research demonstrates similar complexities in the construction of news about prisons (Doyle and Ericson 1996).

However, much public and academic concern about "crime in the media" centres on various hypothesized negative influences or effects of "crime stories." These hypothesized effects or influences include the fostering of a variety of mistaken public beliefs and consequent attitudes about crime and control, such as, for example, increased fear of crime and increased support for law-and-order measures. The most studied and most publicized concern has been the possibility that violence in the visual media is itself a cause of aggressive behaviour and, by extension, violent crime. This is often described in shorthand form as the problem of "television violence."

In general, understanding and demonstrating influences or effects of mass media has often proved much more difficult and problematic for social scientists than issues of production or content – yet it is also here, I suggest, that the most fertile unanswered questions remain. Most research on crime in the media either explores such influences or is simply based on the assumption that they occur. In general, when they are not simply assumed, media effects on audience attitudes and beliefs have often proved quite difficult to demonstrate empirically

through quantitative methods. This presents a highly ironic contrast to the fact that many news sources that deal daily with news organizations regard the media as the most powerful institution in society (Ericson et al. 1989: 397). Yet, in something of a parallel to the criminological quest for "the cause" of crime, some media-effects researchers have continued to search for a reductive lone "magic bullet" (Cumberbatch and Howitt 1989) – some simple universal law of how the media directly affect audiences.

I will begin by offering a series of cautions concerning the future directions of research on crime and the media. First, social scientists should be very careful about making assumptions about either the production or the reception of media products based simply on analyses of the media products themselves. There is a tendency in some research on crime and the media, and on the mass media more generally, to make assumptions about both the production and the reception of news texts based on readings of the texts themselves (for critiques of this literature, see Ericson 1991; Tudor 1995). John Thompson calls this the "fallacy of internalism" (1990). Indeed, a number of analyses of "crime in the media" have simply assumed certain effects on a homogeneous public, based on their analyses of media content. (This assumption is stated explicitly, for example, by Antunes and Hurley [1977]). This often involves a very passive model of the audience, so that such research tends to deny the audience agency (Fiske 1987; Thompson 1990, 1994; Tudor 1995). While this problem is demonstrated in some "effects" analyses, work rooted in various critical theories must similarly avoid the pitfall of simply assuming that media audiences buy into dominant ideology in a uniform way (Tudor 1995). Similarly, some such accounts may impute to the news media the role of an "ideological state apparatus" simply from readings of media content, without exploring empirically how news accounts are produced (Hall et al. 1978).

Second, sociologists must acknowledge the considerable diversity and complexity in media organizations, production, formats, content, audiences, the contexts in which media texts may be received, and the influences they may have. Given how I have defined it, the reader will see at the outset that "crime in the media" is a very diverse phenomenon – much like "crime" itself or the criminal process. Nevertheless, one key flaw across the spectrum of academic and other accounts has been to give "crime in the media" rather unitary and reductionist readings in terms, for example, of its production, content, audiences, and influences.

Why might it be assumed that "the media" have some unitary effect, when one does not make similar assumptions that, for example, books have such an effect? There often seems to be an assumption that "the media" are more homogeneous than other social phenomena. On the surface there seems some basis to this, given, for example, a sometime tendency toward "pack journalism" in the news media (Ericson et al. 1991) and, more generally, an attempt to achieve broad appeal to a wide popular audience in both news and entertainment media, especially television. However, there is also very considerable evidence of diversity among news media organizations and formats such as newspapers, radio, and television; Ericson et al. (1991) offers extensive illustrations. Similarly, both Robert Reiner (2000) and Nicole Rafter (2000) give excellent analyses of the diversity in the vast array of different representations of crime and policing in fictional television and film. In fact, as John Fiske (1987) and Richard Ericson (1991) argue, it may indeed be that the media must be relatively diverse and "polysemic," or open to multiple interpretations, just to maintain a broad commercial appeal. Furthermore, with the rise of cable television and the Internet, the mass audience is fragmenting further and further.

There is often also an assumption of audience homogeneity. Such efforts may be rooted in a more general construct of a phantom unitary "public" that pervades liberal democratic discourse (Robbins 1993). On the other hand, for example, women may have a very different experience of crime in the media from men (Schlesinger, Dobash, Dobash, and Weaver 1992), and different women may also have very different experiences from one another, based on their personal histories and on variables such as class and ethnicity. Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton propose an evolving model of Stanley Cohen's "moral panic" (2002) that includes recognition of this point:

> In original moral panic theory, "society" and "societal reactions" were monolithic.... when social differentiation and audience segmentation are the order of the day, we need to take account of a plurality of reactions, each with their different constituencies, effectivities and modes of discourse. (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 564)

In general, situating the large body of sociological understandings of crime and the media in relation to one another suggests a broad range of parallel and interacting influences on various audiences in different social realms. Richard Sparks (1992) argues that crime and

television come to stand in for public anxieties around various wider concerns. This argument may be extended to social scientists' readings of crime and the media, which may often tell us at least as much about the various broader concerns of social scientists themselves as about. Competing one-dimensional accounts of "crime in the media" may, to varying degrees, be accurately capturing a multidimensional situation. This is not to suggest resignation to a kind of postmodern relativist chaos – just the need for more complex, specific, qualified, and contingent ways of thinking about crime and control and how they are represented in the media.

Effects research has faced a great deal of difficulty in isolating and measuring the influences of representations of crime and the media. For example, one prominent strand of work in this field is social psychological research trying to demonstrate the "cultivation" of fear of crime by the media (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Shanahan and Morgan 1999). This research has proved inconclusive (Gunter 1987; Heath and Gilbert 1996) and is not without a substantial number of critics (Zillmann and Wakshlag 1985; Cumberbatch and Howitt 1989: 32; Sparks 1992). Such research has been widely criticized for the way it operationalizes key concepts, for example, simply by counting the amount of television people watch and contrasting the attitudes of heavy viewers and light viewers.

Sparks (1992) is convincingly critical of literature that attempts to measure effects of television fiction on fear of crime. Like many other critics (e.g., Lupton and Tulloch 1999). Sparks argues that it is folly to suggest that fear can be quantified and judged as rational or irrational by comparing it with objective risks. Nevertheless, there remains a consistent finding that people who watch a lot of crime on television tend to be both fearful of crime and supportive of law-and-order measures (see Sparks 1992). While this might suggest that viewing a lot of crime causes fear or punitiveness, an alternative explanation is, for example, that people who are afraid of crime stay home and watch more television. While much academic ink has been expended – and various complex permutations developed – trying to attribute direction of causality in this equation, ultimately it seems likely that fear/punitiveness and heavy viewing reinforce each other (Gunter 1987).

Another approach to isolating causality in media consumption has been to impose more control through the creation of experimental situations, an avenue that has been extensively pursued in relation to television violence and the somewhat

related research on pornography, as well as, in a more limited way, in other areas, such as work on punitiveness (e.g., Roberts and Doob 1990). Here, while there are compelling findings, one key problem is with external validity: it is very difficult to judge how much the artificially created experimental situation generalizes to the "world outside."

One way forward for explorations of effects or influences has been to move away from the construct of the imagined homogeneous audience and, instead, to look directly at the repercussions of representations of crime in the news media in particular political and institutional contexts (Doyle 2003). Analyses of effects on imagined audiences such as "fear of crime" or "punitiveness" are sometimes, in any case, concerned largely with how these constructs result in particular political consequences. Indeed, "the public" itself may be bypassed by politicians who simply read off an imagined public response from media content and act on these readings (Doyle and Ericson 1996; Doyle 2003; Surette 2007). In fact, it has proved much easier – and, arguably, more relevant – to demonstrate the political effects of particular episodes of media coverage of crime and control in much more localized and specific ways through case studies (i.e., Fishman 1978, 1981; Altheide 1993; Best 1999). For example, Mark Fishman has demonstrated in a very direct way how New York police and politicians were involved in the manufacture of a media crime wave that served their ends and resulted in more police resources and tougher laws, even though he does not attempt to show that the crime wave produced measurable "fear of crime." Similarly, a valuable component of classic works such as Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002) and Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* (1978) is a historically specific analysis of the direct political consequences of particular media coverage of crime or deviance.

The news media also have very demonstrable effects on the organization and behaviour of various other institutions, such as the police, and on the realm of partisan politics (Altheide and Snow 1979; Ericson et al. 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Doyle 2003). Recent research offers extensive empirical illustrations of how institutions both within and outside the criminal-justice system are increasingly devoting massive resources and shaping their activities to achieve favourable media coverage. The criminal-justice system and, particularly, the police are becoming "mediatized."

The media are a central institution of social control and work in conjunction with the legal system and other institutions to define deviance and effect control on a broad range of individuals and in various institutional sites, certainly with very demonstrable effects on the targets of their efforts (Ericson et al. 1987, 1989, 1991). However, the argument of Ericson et al. that such efforts tend to result in rituals of expunging rotten apples, thus legitimating the institution as a whole, may oversimplify and minimize the critical power of media accounts.

Such institutional accounts may also sometimes neglect the contribution of people, in their roles as private citizens, to shaping crime news. For example, Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber (1994) characterize the news-media politics of criminal justice as a dialogue between a network of organizational and institutional elites. This finding was pre-ordained, however, because their research focused entirely on interviewing members of such organizations and institutions. This methodology ignores the fact that private individuals are sometimes important news sources in crime stories (as demonstrated by Ericson et al. 1991).

These points aside, analyses of more direct political and institutional effects of crime and the media represent a very substantial advance. They offer perhaps the best means available of approaching the question of how news-media coverage contributes to the politics of law and order. In my view, however, the study of direct political and institutional effects of crime in the media offers only one part of the solution to the problem of the effects or influences of such media representations.

Focusing on the direct political and institutional effects of crime in the media leaves untouched wider questions about the place of crime stories in the lives of individuals and of late-modern culture, questions that the effects research discussed above on topics such as "fear of crime" has failed to address successfully. These questions are of considerable sociological interest in their own right, as well as being implicated in the politics of criminal justice. Some more interpretive analyses have begun to address these questions, speculating in interesting and varied ways about the cultural role of crime stories and how individuals may draw on them to make meanings not only about criminal justice but about late-modern society and their role in it more generally (Katz 1987; Dahlgren 1988; Sparks 1992). For example, both Jack Katz and Peter Dahlgren, following Émile Durkheim

(1893/1933) and Kai Erikson (1966), have offered somewhat function-alist accounts of the role of crime stories in allowing for the reiteration and reworking of moral boundaries; Sparks gives a perhaps more critical account of how various wider concerns about modernity may be played out in crime stories, in a perpetual tension between anxiety and release. However, without reviewing these diverse accounts in any detail here, these three pieces are all based only on the authors' interpretations of media content; a key point is that such analyses should be further developed empirically by means of ethnographic research concerning the audiences for crime stories, as some of these authors acknowledge. Fine-grained ethnographic research, which allows a much more complex and nuanced view of "the public" and its understandings of crime, has recently been conducted on fear of crime in Britain and Australia (e.g., Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Lupton and Tulloch 1999; also called for by Ditton, Chadee, Farrall, Gilchrist, and Bannister 2004). Such research needs to be conducted in the Canadian (and American) context and extended to allow us to develop a fuller picture of the role of the media in these understandings.

Such audience work offers a way into thinking about prominent frames of meaning about crime and punishment in the broader culture. It is apparent that representations of crime in the media should be understood in part by considering how they interact with such frames of meaning, which are only partly shaped by the media.

Systems of meaning about crime and punishment develop in complex interplay between various cultural representations of crime, some modern, some age old, and with the pronouncements of other key authorities on crime, such as police and politicians. These systems of meaning are also interpreted differently by diverse audiences. People also draw a great deal on personal experiences, social networks, and signs of local disorder in making sense of crime (Sasson 1995; Innes 2004). Indeed, research on public reactions to environmental risks suggests that people tend to privilege their own experiences and those of close friends and family over media and expert sources (Wynne 1996). Another key influence is higher education: an increasingly educated public is more likely than ever before to have been exposed to academic critiques of the news media. If the news media are such a strong influence, what are we to make of repeated findings of dramatically declining trust in such media (e.g., Jones 2004)?

Tendencies in crime news and fiction also interact with wider systems of meaning about gender, "race" and ethnicity, sexuality, age,

and affluence. These relationships are complex and recursive; representations of crime in news and entertainment do not simply cause public beliefs and attitudes.

The importance of such frames of meaning around crime and punishment may seem obvious enough, but it is sometimes either overlooked or dealt with in a rather ad hoc way. For example, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) analyse the inter-organizational politics of news of criminal justice and the various resources that different organizational players can bring to bear in promoting their aims in the media; however, they offer little consideration of the symbolic resources in the broader culture that different players may draw on and how these, too, may create power imbalances. To give a very straightforward example, organizations that advocate criminals' or prisoners' rights must work against powerful prevalent symbolism demonizing criminals. As has been recognized elsewhere, research on media production also necessarily involves an ethnographic inquiry into the role such frames of meaning play in the work of journalists and news sources (Ericson et al. 1987).

A consideration of these frames of meaning somewhat problematizes the whole notion of effects as flowing unidirectionally from media producers to media texts to media audiences. News sources, media workers producing media texts, and audiences all draw on these frames of meaning even as they reiterate, renew, and re-inflect them. Thus the effects or influences of media accounts should be seen partially in terms of how they interact with, shape, and are shaped by these broader frames of meaning about crime and punishment. The media are only one source, but nevertheless a key one, in shaping these frames of meaning.

A final important point is that we should give more attention to the very substantial interplay between crime news and crime fiction. Different publics offer parallel and overlapping anxieties about representations of crime in both news and entertainment media. Yet most social-scientific analyses consider either crime news or crime fiction in isolation, or else place them side by side in order to discern the extent to which they are similar or different from one another. These approaches ignore the extent to which crime news and crime fiction may be seen as intertwined or, to some extent, mutually constitutive (Doyle 1998). I suggest that this interplay should be subject to a sustained investigation. Both news and entertainment media texts interact with, shape, and are shaped by broader frames

of meaning about crime and punishment. There is evidently considerable direct interplay between crime news and crime fiction at the stages of both production and reception. News accounts may offer many of the same qualities of drama as fictional accounts (Ericson et al. 1991: ch. 4). Furthermore, the news often refers to fictional accounts directly for illustrative purposes. In a parallel way, fictional crime programs may take their storylines directly from the news. For example, in a number of instances producers of the popular crime drama *Law & Order* have run disclaimers distinguishing events in their program from those in prominent criminal cases on which particular episodes are evidently based while, ironically, at the same time advertising that they are "ripped from the headlines." The 1990s American drama series *Murder One*, built around one season-long criminal case involving the lengthy and spectacular trial of a prominent male Hollywood celebrity accused of murdering his female lover, was apparently an attempt to capitalize on the recent O.J. Simpson case, and it was read by many viewers in the context of that case. Furthermore, genres such as the docudrama and the reality crime program blur news and entertainment formats (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Schlesinger and Tumber 1993; Fishman and Cavender 1998). Gray Cavender and Lisa Bond-Maupin (1993) briefly speculate that "reality" programs such as *America's Most Wanted* may be seen to offer "gritty realism" precisely because their dramatic reconstructions of "real crime" closely resemble the fictional crime drama the viewer may have experienced.

While this suggestion must be investigated empirically, crime news and crime drama seem likely most often also to be interpreted intertextually, as a package, by viewers. To put it simply, if one's daily rhythms are structured to include an hour of news at six o'clock, so that mealtime is spiced with liberal lashings of deviance and control, then topped off by a couple of hours of prime-time police dramas, it is unlikely that one absorbs the two genres independently of each other. One might hypothesize that, in general, being read in the context of news may add immediacy to crime fiction; being read in the context of fiction may add drama to crime news. This is one area that could be investigated using the type of audience research touched on above.

Conclusions

I have argued that some key problems with previous research lie in simply assuming media effects, or in ascribing a reductionist unity

to various aspects of the media and the ways they shape and are shaped by social relations and institutions. In reviewing various bodies of research on crime in the media, I have indicated some of the limits of effects research. I have further argued that the very problematic question of the effects of influences of crime stories has been most effectively dealt with, thus far, by research that looks at the direct political and institutional effects of crime and the media. I have briefly suggested here that one way such work might be supplemented would be to combine it with more interpretive research on the meaning of crime stories for particular audience members. Finally, I have briefly suggested a specific avenue of research that could apply these guidelines: a sustained analysis of the interplay between crime news and crime fiction. Sagas of crime and punishment in the media may seem eternally recurrent; we must be careful to avoid a similar eternal recurrence of problematic analyses of them.

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