

Representing Crime:

The Media and Public Criminology in the Post-Leveson Era



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Fig. 1. Recent examples of press headlines about sexual crime

Introduction

The press' interest in crime and criminal justice has grown exponentially over the past two decades, paving the way for a new wave of popular punitivism in justice discourse and policy development. The results of this growth include spiralling rates of incarceration and shifts in media rhetoric to themes such as 'holiday camp prisons' and the creation of a false human rights dichotomy that puts victims directly in competition with offenders.

The idea that media can directly influence attitudes of consumers is conceptually attractive, in that it provides a definitive cause-effect relationship. Support for this stance comes from Hogue and Smith (2008), who reported differences in attitudes toward sex offenders (and judgements of guilt in a high-profile unsolved case) which were dependent upon participants' choice in either tabloid or broadsheet newspapers.

Methods

An analysis of eight of the ten most read British national newspapers (based on print readership in July 2012) was conducted to test several hypotheses within the broad areas of: (a) representations of crime rates, (b) linguistic characteristics of articles on sexual crime, and (c) headline descriptors of convicted sex offenders.

Representations of crime rates were examined by comparing article counts in the collected sample with official crime statistics. Linguistic properties of articles were analysed using *Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count* (LIWC) software, and word clouds were used to look at sexual offender descriptors.

A total of 454 crime articles were sourced between August-November 2012, and these formed the basis of this analysis described here.

Key Findings

Sexual crimes made up 18% of the crime articles in the study sample, with violent crime making up 66%, and acquisitive crime making up 16%. When compared to official UK crime rates for the 12 months ending June 2012 (MoJ, 2012), this represents a nine-times over-representation of sexual crime, along with an almost two-and-a-half-times over-representation of violent crime. Acquisitive crime, however, is under-represented by four-and-a-half-times. When considering the prevalence of these crime types, and associated costs for the taxpayer, this kind of focus appears to be misguided and politically-driven. Some scholars would refer to the moral panic around sexual crime (McCartan, 2004), but others argue the distinction between panic/fear on the one hand, and anxiety about what is unknown on the other. Given that crime rates are so greatly misrepresented within this sample, the argument against moral panic gains support here.

Linguistically, articles written on sexual crime were associated with higher rates of anger and negativity than articles on either violent crime or acquisitive crime. This did not differ between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, meaning that hostility toward perpetrators of sexual crime is rife across the entire spectrum of the British press, alongside marked over-representations of the prevalence of this kind of offending. Analysis of headlines accompanying sexual crime articles found clear differences between tabloids and broadsheets (see Fig. 2), with tabloids being more overtly offensive than broadsheets. All articles were associated with approximately equal levels of positive emotion, meaning that crime-related negativity was not offset against relative levels of positivity.

Four categories of 'sex offenders' were found, namely: (a) 'monsters', 'beasts' or 'pervs', (b) those in positions of trust, (c) celebrities, or (d) others.



Fig. 2: Word clouds showing the prominence of descriptors of sex offenders in (a) all newspapers, (b) tabloids and (c) broadsheets



Fig. 3: Proposed social prophecy of press reporting, public attitudes, and reintegration/recidivism as a cause/remedy of dissonance

Conclusions

It is important to place these trends of press negativity within the context of political rhetoric around the 'rehabilitation revolution'. This idea of a rehabilitative drive within the justice system is reflected in encouraging reports of public support for community-based schemes for the rehabilitation of former sex offenders. However, Brown (1999) stated that, whilst this community rehabilitation is supported, much of society would not support such schemes within their own communities.

Cognitive dissonance theory is one potential framework for understanding this response. The public, whilst acknowledging the importance of ex-sex offender reintegration, are unwilling to support these schemes in local communities. They are then able to draw upon the caricatured press image of 'the sex offender' to alleviate the dissonance associated with their objections.

The stereotyped presentation of sexual crime is the topic of fierce and increasingly polarised public debate. Wilson (2011) argues that crime researchers should address this by being more open about their work, and present findings in public and mass-media circles. This drive for 'public criminology' asserts that presenting the realities of crime, as opposed to the scandalised version promoted by the press, breeds both understanding and rationality, and that this leads to evidence-based strategies to reducing rates of both first-time and repeat offending.

In light of the Leveson Inquiry into press ethics, it seems that the time to promote this evidence-led approach is upon us. The press need to address their practice and present fairer, more ethical, and less scandalised material. This can only help the public criminology drive. We must grasp this opportunity with both hands, promoting research and contribute to the drive to reduce crime.