



IMAGES OF LEGAL CONTROL: CRIME NEWS AND THE PROCESS OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMATION

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The importance of mass media images of crime is widely recognized by media researchers and criminologists. The findings of content analyses of crime news are consistent. The research indicates that reports of legal violations and other forms of "social disorder" are among the most durable of news commodities. Moreover, it is widely reported that media accounts of crime, when compared to official measures of crime, tend to exaggerate the prevalence of violent criminal victimizations and to under-represent minor property offences and corporate and white-collar violations (Cumberbatch and Beardsworth, 1976; Davis, 1952; Garofalo, 1981; Graber, 1980; Roshier, 1973; Sherizan, 1978). Theoretical interpretations of these findings have tended to stress the role that such images play in the reaffirmation of legal order and the perpetuation of the social and economic hierarchies which that order reflects (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1978; 1981; Hall et al., 1978; Humphries, 1981; Quinney, 1979; Reasons and Perdue, 1981).

A parallel, if somewhat neglected set of themes relates to mass media portrayals of the state agencies involved in legal control. The present paper is directed toward an attempt to correct this imbalance. Employing data from a more comprehensive study of press images of crime and crime control, we will analyze images of legal control that emerge from daily press reports. A theoretical position is taken which relates the study of these images to the concept of "organizational impression-management" (Altheide and Johnson, 1980). We conclude with a consideration of the implications of this analysis for the study of the ideological content of crime news.

On Images of Legal Control

It is widely argued that the legitimacy of state agencies within liberal democratic societies is rooted in those perceptions of legitimacy that find expression as public opinion (Friedrichs, 1980; Spier, 1950). The claims to legitimacy made by state agencies necessitate a process of symbolic manipulation through which they attempt to justify their organizational mandates and to articulate to relevant audiences the value and morality of action that is directed toward the pursuit of these mandates. Viewed from the position of the state agency itself, such problems are akin to those experienced by individuals in their attempts to seek validation from others of personal identities to which claims are being made. Thus, Altheide and Johnson (1980) have extended the dramaturgical framework to the study of these problems of organizational impression-management and have introduced the term, "bureaucratic propaganda" to describe how "a major contributor to social order - the organizational form - survives through the appearance of legitimacy" (1980: 1).

However, as Altheide and Johnson note, there are important differences between individual and organizational legitimating activities. Most notably, communications intended to influence impressions of an organization frequently reach the audience through indirect channels such as, for instance, mass media reports about the organization. In such cases, attempts at organizational impression-management may be further complicated by the priorities and biases of the mediating agencies which are themselves involved in processes of bureaucratic impression-management.

In no area of institutional functioning are these issues brought into sharper focus than in the study of legal control agencies. While legal control agencies are able to derive legitimacy from traditional symbols of political authority, they do face some unique problems in this regard. Agencies of legal control are the most evidently coercive of state agencies. In addition, the actions of legal control agents tend to be socially visible. In the case of the police, for instance, the high level of public visibility emerges from the belief on the part of agency managers that a high public profile facilitates the accomplishments of organizational goals.

The major agencies of legal control, the police, the courts and correctional services devote considerable organizational resources to the cultivation of favourable public impressions. Such efforts may involve direct interaction with members of the public; neighbourhood crime prevention classes, school liason projects, open houses and "law days" are familiar examples. More routine aspects of bureaucratic self-presentation are evident in the daily news reports of organizational activities. However news agencies do not merely reproduce the bureaucratic propaganda generated by officialdom but reconstruct these images in ways that reflect the professional values of newswriters and the organizational imperatives of the news production process (Gans, 1979; Fishman, 1978; Tuchman, 1978).

This study investigates the unique problems of organizational impression-management that characterize police, judicial and correctional agencies in their interactions with the news media. It will be shown that these agencies do not benefit equally from these interactions because of the unique nature of the routine legal control activities in which each type of agency is involved. More specifically, we contend that differences in control activities imply differences with respect to the types of relationships that are established with media agencies and with respect to the process that result in judgements of control activity as newsworthy.

The Study

The data discussed below derive from an examination of all crime articles that appeared in the morning edition of the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper between January 1 and December 31, 1980. In all, 2027 items were gathered and analyzed. A distinction was made between "hard crime news" which reported on the occurrence of specific crime-related incidents and "soft crime news" such as feature pieces, letters

to the editor or editorials. In both cases the unit of analysis was the individual news item.

Each news item was coded using a modification of the coding instrument originally developed by Doris Graber (1980) in her comprehensive investigation of crime news coverage in Chicago. This instrument permits the quantitative examination of press reported crime news according to 55 closed-ended variables. These variables include measures relevant to both content and style of presentation.

Findings

The data indicate that approximately 80% of the crime articles were of the "hard crime news" type, while only about 20% could be described as "soft crime news". The majority of these hard news stories Table 1 suggests focussed upon the commission of or reaction to specific criminal incidents. These findings reflect the tendency of contemporary news media to emphasize the reporting of discrete events rather than the interpretation or contextualization of these events (Graber, 1980; Sherizan, 1978; Roshier, 1973). The data also indicate that it is relatively rare that an incident is judged to be sufficiently newsworthy to warrant long-term attention. Seventy percent of the "hard crime news" items were new stories and only about 30% reported further developments relevant to incidents that had been previously reported.

TABLE 1
TYPE OF CRIME ITEM

Specific Crime	96.8
Organized Crime	.1
Police Activities	.4
Criminal Justice Process	.1
Prison Escape	1.8
Prison Riot	.4
Criminal Law Changes	.1
Other	.4

N = 1580

Consistent with earlier research, we found that press attention to crime varies dramatically with the type of offense. Table 2 provides a comparison of the frequency of the occurrence of several specific types of offenses, as reported in the *Vancouver Sun*, with the frequency of these same offenses as recorded in the Uniform Crime Reports.¹ The column labelled, Frequency Ratio, is produced by dividing the number of newspaper crimes as a percentage of total newspaper crimes by the number of U.C.R. crimes as a percentage of total U.C.R. crimes for a given offense category. The

magnitude of this ratio may be interpreted as an expression of the occurrence of crimes in the news in proportion to their occurrence in official data. The table suggests the extent to which press attention is focussed upon violent, relatively infrequently occurring crimes (such as homicide), while more frequently occurring non-violent offenses such as break and enter tend to be under-reported.

TABLE 2
COMPARATIVE FREQUENCIES OF
SELECTED OFFENSES AS REPORTED
IN UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS AND VANCOUVER SUN 1980

Offense Category	Uniform Crime Report		Vancouver Sun		Frequency Ratio
	N	Percent of Total	N	Percent of Total	
Homicide	593	.04	298	39.01	100.13
Rape	2,315	.15	31	4.06	26.70
Robbery	24,581	1.61	106	13.87	8.60
Gambling	2,695	.18	11	1.44	8.14
Other Sex Off.	10,472	.69	18	2.36	3.42
Drug Offenses	74,196	4.88	76	9.95	2.04
Assaults	198,007	13.02	107	14.01	1.08
Break and Enter	349,694	23.00	41	5.37	.23
Theft	858,013	56.43	76	9.95	.18

With respect to all categories of offenses, however, the press imagery is consistent in its portrayal of the police as effective in their law enforcement role. This is demonstrated by Table 3 which compares, for each offense category, the percentage of newspaper crimes which result in the apprehension of a suspect with the percentage of U.C.R. crimes for which a suspect is identified.² The final column of this table expresses the former percentage as a ratio of the latter one. For all crime categories except homicide, the police appear to be performing at least as efficiently as official data would indicate. Notably, with respect to the offenses of theft and break and enter, for which official data suggest suspects are identified in only a minority of cases, the press image is one of relative success.

TABLE 3
COMPARATIVE FREQUENCIES OF OFFENDER APPREHENSION
AS REPORTED IN UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS
AND VANCOUVER SUN, 1980

Offense Category	Uniform Crime Report Percent of Incidents Resulting in Apprehension	Vancouver Sun Percent of Items Mentioning Apprehension	Apprehension Ratio
Theft	21.36	68.42	3.20
Break and Enter	23.60	56.10	2.38
Robbery	31.30	56.60	1.81
Other Sex. Off.	57.80	72.22	1.25
Rape	59.91	64.52	1.08
Drug Offenses	91.90	98.68	1.07
Gambling	94.58	100.00	1.06
Assaults	79.24	82.24	1.04
Homicide	87.85	74.16	.84

In contrast to the press presentation of the police as efficacious agents of legal control, the data indicate that the institutional activities of both courts and correctional agencies are less frequently and less positively displayed. As compared with the high visibility of arrest, court dispositions were mentioned in only 23% of the crimes articles; and, these dispositions involve the application of penalties in only about 68% of the cases. In other words, the state is portrayed as reacting to criminal offenders in only about 15% of all press reported crimes.

It is not only the infrequency of such information but also the lack of prominence that is noteworthy. Table 4 presents data relevant to several measures of story placement, which may be interpreted as indicators of judged newsworthiness. These data indicate that items which report upon prison sentences awarded to offenders receive less prominent placement than those items which do not contain such information. This pattern contrasts with the data in the same table which relate these measures of placement to crime item which deal with the apprehension of offenders. Those items in which apprehension is indicated are more likely to be given prominent display than those items in which it is not indicated.

TABLE 4
SELECTED MEASURES OF NEWS PROMINENCE BY APPREHENSION STATUS AND PRISON SENTENCE STATUS

Placement Measure	N	Apprehension Status		Prison Status	
		Mentioned	Not Mentioned	Mentioned	Not Mentioned
First Crime Item on Any Given Page	143	64.3%	35.7%	15.4%	84.6%
Placement in First Three Pages of Newspaper	329	67.2	32.8	41.6	58.4
Placement in "Section A" of Newspaper	810	73.0	27.0	14.2	85.8
Accompanied by picture	29	51.7	48.2	—	100.0

While the analysis thus far has concerned itself with the images of legal control implicit in crime news, some mention should be made of those items in which explicit evaluations of legal control institutions are developed. Table 6 indicates that of the relatively small number of articles that contain explicit evaluative themes, those relating to the police greatly outnumber those concerned with either the courts of corrections. In addition, although the patterns of evaluations of institutional performance are somewhat unclear, the police receive the most favourable appraisal. Their "quality of service" is portrayed as declining in only 5.8% of the articles as compared with 26.3% and 28.6% for the courts and corrections respectively.

TABLE 5
EVALUATIVE ITEMS RELATING TO POLICE, COURTS AND CORRECTIONAL SYSTEM, VANCOUVER SUN, 1980

Agency	Improving	Assessment			N
		Stable	Declining	Mixed	
Police	12.5%	66.0%	5.8%	16.1%	56
Courts	5.3	52.6	26.3	15.8	19
Corrections	4.8	38.1	28.6	28.7	21

It is inadvisable to make glib generalizations about the way in which "the criminal justice system" is portrayed in the popular press, since there are important differences in the ways the institutional activities of distinct legal control agencies are presented. Not only are police activities more prominently displayed than court of correctional activities, but in terms of popular understandings of their respective mandates, they are also more favourably presented. While caution must be used in making inferen-

ces about audience members, there appears to be thematic consistency in public and press images of police, courts and corrections. Public opinion data suggest that, while attitudes towards the police tend to be positive, courts and correctional agencies are widely criticized for failing to prevent crime or for "coddling criminals" (Boydell and Grindstaff, 1974; Blumstein and Cohen, 1980; Klein et al., 1978; Stinchcombe et al., 1980; Tepperman, 1977; Thornton, 1975).

Contemporary studies of news production have emphasized the ways in which organizationally-determined sets of news values structure the processes by which designations of "newsworthiness" come to be applied to categories of events (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1978; Gans, 1979; Hall et al., 1978; Knight, 1982; Tuchman, 1978). These professional imperatives, it is argued, reflect journalists' common sense view of social and political order and disorder and their ideological understanding of their work and the wants of the constituencies they serve.

Chibnall, Fishman and others have demonstrated that crimes (particularly violent crimes) conform closely to the criteria of relevance which these news values embody. First, such incidents have spatial and temporal characteristics that lend themselves easily to the routinized production of news as commercial knowledge. Rapes, muggings, murders and thefts may be seen as discrete incidents which occur in the period between the publication of successive editions of a newspaper or in the period between successive radio or television newscasts. This conceptualization of crime as occurrence also suggests that reports of such events are viewed as readily comprehensible to an audience and thus require little detail or background. In addition, because there is a steady supply of crimes, crime news has become a valuable journalistic commodity which can be expanded or contracted depending on the size of the "newshole" or the substance of editorial decision-making (Graber, 1980).

The reliance of news organizations upon a continuous flow of crime news has led to the formation of well-articulated relationships between such organizations and those who are viewed as routine, yet credible, suppliers of such information (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1978). Thus, the police become a principal source of crime news and the "police wire", press release or beat reporter provide the important link between the world of crime and press constructions of that world. Because crime is such a durable news media commodity and, because the police are a major source of such information, they will be assured a high media profile. Although the police are not consistently successful in apprehending offenders, the greater media concern with traditionally defined violent crimes restricts the range of failures in this regard.

In contrast to the police, it may be argued that the routine institutional activities of court and correctional personnel are not as readily definable as newsworthy. Whereas policing functions such as law-enforcement or crowd control generate newsworthy incidents, in the case of other criminal justice agencies, it is, in many cases, the deviation from routine activities rather than the activities themselves that

are judged to have news value. The escape of a prisoner, the prison riot or the courtroom antics of an accused are likely to make good news stories. Our analysis (see Table 2) indicates that items of this type appear infrequently in press reports; but, when they do, they reflect negatively upon the agencies in question. The infrequency of such events and the low level of newsworthiness associated with the more routine activities of judicial and correctional agencies has meant that such agencies have not established to the same extent as have the police, stable relationships with news organizations.

Further, the concern in news media with the immediacy of events as a defining characteristics of newsworthiness implies that, except in unusual cases, the sentencing of an offender or the actual commencement of a sentence will be regarded as an update of an earlier story rather than "breaking news" such as the commission or discovery of the crime itself. Not surprisingly, stories that report such developments receive less prominent coverage than reports of the occurrence of the crime or the apprehension of the offender.

In general, our findings are consistent with those of some other researchers who have found that press imagery tends to reflect more favourably upon the police than upon other agencies of social control (Sherizan, 1978). These patterns, it has been argued are the logical outcomes of the particular linkages that join the institutional activities of legal control to the institutional activities of news production. Our data suggest that differences in routine activity patterns among agencies of legal control interact with press definitions of newsworthiness to create distinctive problems of organizational impression-management. By implication, it is misguided to speculate or theorize about press images of legal control in ways that do not take such problems into account.

Notes

1. Official crime data are themselves deficient in many respects. For a discussion of problems with such data in the Canadian context see Silverman and Teevan (1980).
2. The definition of apprehension in U.C.R. data is not straightforward. The figures used in the present study refer to "cleared offenses". For a more detailed explanation see Canada (1980).

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