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## Crime and the Media: Understanding the Connections

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### Introduction

We live in an age of 'media saturation', an age in which media play an increasingly central role in everyday life. It is also an age in which high crime rates and levels of concern about crime have become accepted as 'normal'. The rapid and relentless development of information technologies over the past 100 years has shaped the modern era, transforming the relations between space, time and identity (see Giddens, 1991; Castells, 1996; Jewkes, 2002; Greer, 2004). Where once 'news' used to travel by ship, it now hurtles across the globe at light speed and is available 24 hours-a-day at the push of a button. Where once cultures used to be more or less distinguishable in national or geographical terms, they now mix, intermingle and converge in a constant global exchange of information. Where once a sense of community and belonging was derived primarily from established identities and local traditions, it may now also be found, and lost, in a virtual world of shared values, meanings and interpretations. In short, media are not only inseparable from contemporary social life; they are, for many, its defining characteristic. In this context, understanding the connections between crime and the media is central to understanding the cultural place that crime and media occupy in our social world.

This chapter is an introduction to the investigation of crime and the media. My main aim is to present a summary of some of the major themes and debates which have shaped the research agenda. But I also want to sharpen the focus of investigation on some less well rehearsed issues. The chapter is divided into four principal sections. The first section offers some background information and addresses the crucial question of why exploring media images of crime and control is important. The second section considers how scholars have gone about researching crime and the media, and presents an overview of the main findings. The third section critically discusses the dominant theoretical and conceptual tools which have been used to understand and explain media representations of crime? And the fourth section considers the evidence for the effects of media representations, both on criminal behaviour and on fear of crime. Finally, I will offer some tentative suggestions about useful areas for future research and investigation.

### **Thinking About Crime and the Media**

Fortunately, though sections of the popular press may suggest otherwise, most of us have little first-hand experience of serious criminal victimisation. Our understanding of the crime problem – how much crime is out there, what types of crime are most prevalent, who is most at risk, what are the best responses – mostly derives from sources other than personal experience. Paramount among these are the media. The media, then, are key producers and purveyors of ‘knowledge’ about crime, disorder and control. For this reason alone, media representations are worthy of in-depth investigation.

But precisely what kinds of knowledge do these representations generate, and to what effect? Below are some of the key questions which have perplexed students of crime and the media:

- Is it possible to discern a coherent picture of 'the crime problem' from the media and, if so, does this picture bear any resemblance to what we may claim, however tentatively, to know of the 'reality' of crime and disorder?
- Do the media merely reflect, objectively and impartially, what happens in the world, or are they active agents in socially constructing 'mediated realities' in which certain values, interests and beliefs are promoted, while others are downplayed, or even actively suppressed?
- Do the media reproduce and reinforce prejudice and the stereotyping of marginalised groups, or actively challenge it?
- Do the media undermine or fortify the existing structures of power and authority?
- Does violence in the media make us more aggressive, more fearful, or both?

Concern about the pernicious influence of the media is perennial, and academic research exploring media representations of crime dates back to the early 1900s (Pearson, 1983; Bailey and Hale, 1996). Yet despite literally thousands of studies, these key questions have generated few straight answers. It is important to be clear that the media cannot (if they ever could) be usefully thought of in the singular, like some monolithic, unified institution to be understood through generalised statements and assumptions. The media *are* a multiplicity of institutions, organisations, processes and practices which are hugely diverse in composition, scope and purpose (Fiske, 1990; Briggs and Cobley, 1998). Today there are more

media forms (television, newspapers, magazines, radio, the Internet, mobile phone Wireless Application Protocol (WAP) technology) and greater levels of diversity within each individual form (satellite, cable and digital television), than ever before. Understanding the media, therefore, requires a critical and reflexive appreciation both of the diversity of forms and formats involved and of the complexity with which images, texts, messages, signs are produced, transmitted and received.

One of the key points to grasp – and one of the issues I want to communicate most forcefully – is that we do not all use, interpret, and respond to media representations in the same way. Images of violent crime, for example, may repel some and attract others, disturb some and excite others, frighten some and anger others. I, along with the other contributors in this collection, am keen to encourage you to look beyond the instinctive desire to tackle complex dilemmas with simplified accounts and generalisations. The relationship between media images and the world around us is so fascinating precisely because it is complex and hard to pin down.

### **Researching Crime and the Media**

Research on crime and the media can be broadly split between studies which are primarily either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative analyses are concerned first and foremost with measuring the *amount* of crime, violence or control in the media – for example, the number of crime stories reported in a newspaper, or the number of violent incidents appearing in a television programme. The ‘media picture’ of crime is then compared and contrasted with the ‘real world’ picture, normally derived

from official criminal statistics. Quantitative approaches have traditionally predominated in research on media content. Qualitative analyses, by contrast, are concerned primarily with investigating the *nature* of media representations of crime, violence and control. Though they often incorporate some quantitative component, qualitative research is more interested in untangling the complex processes through which media images are produced, exchanged and interpreted – for example, by exploring the use of language, the forces and constraints that shape media production, or the wider influence of the economic, political and cultural environment. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses may be equally concerned with media effects.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, but some of the limitations of purely quantitative research are particularly noteworthy. Official statistics are a very poor indicator of crime rates and, in fact, may arguably reveal more about the reporting and recording practices of the police and the public than they do about actual levels of offending (Maguire, 2002). Quantitative claims about the relationship between media images and the statistical ‘reality’ of crime, therefore, need to be treated with caution. More fundamentally, because quantitative analyses cannot tackle the crucial issue of meaning, for many they can only ever provide a superficial description of media representations of crime rather than a deeper understanding, which would generally be the favoured research outcome. Nevertheless, quantitative research can offer important insights into patterns and trends in the representation of crime, as well as generating useful data on which more substantive qualitative investigations can be based.

### *The Nature and Extent of Crime in the Media*

A virtually universal finding in the literature is that media representations exaggerate both the levels of serious interpersonal crime in society and the risk of becoming a crime victim. This is the case for studies of newspapers (Marsh, 1991), television (Gunter et al., 2003) and radio content (Cumberbatch et al., 1995), across both news and entertainment media (Reiner et al., 2000a), and literary crime fiction (Knight, 2004). The representation of crime, most significantly in the news media, is largely event-oriented in that it focuses on specific criminal cases and incidents rather than wider debates around causes, prevention, or policy (Rock, 1973; Greer, 2003a). All media forms focus overwhelmingly on violent or sexual offences.

#### **NB: Image 1 - Mirror Front Page - around here**

Calculations of the proportion of news space devoted to crime may vary considerably depending on the definition of 'crime' adopted, and the types of material included and excluded on that basis. Some studies, for example, may only include news reports of particular criminal events or court cases (Ditton and Duffy, 1983; Smith, 1984). Others, in addition to considering news reports, may also include feature items, editorial pieces and letters to the editor (Ericson et al., 1987). Studies may also expand the definition of 'crime' to explore a wider range of deviant acts, such as corporate offending (Cavender and Mulcahy, 1998; Tombs and White, 2001), environmental crime (Lynch et al., 2000), and state violence (Herman and Chomsky,

1994). 'Popular' (normally tabloid) news outlets are generally found to include a greater proportion of crime stories reported in a more sensationalistic style than 'quality' (broadsheet) ones (Graber, 1980; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). Estimates of the amount of crime in the UK news media range from an overall average proportion of four per cent in one study (Roshier, 1973) to 13 percent in another (Williams and Dickinson, 1993). A summary of content analyses in the US found the proportion of crime news to range from just over one percent, to more than 30 percent (Marsh, 1991). In the entertainment media, an average of around 25 percent of US and UK primetime television programming, and around 20 per cent of film releases are crime stories (Dominick, 1978; Allen et al., 1997; Reiner et al., 2000a).

Given the limitations of purely quantitative analyses, many of these studies have also attempted to develop a qualitative appreciation of media representations by investigating their structure, meaning and origins, or by scrutinising language, style, presentation and context. A number of studies have adopted this kind of approach. My own research provides one illustration. In *Sex Crime and the Media: Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society* (2003a), I investigated changes in reporting throughout the 1980s and 1990s within a context of ongoing political conflict (Greer, 2001a, b; 2003b). Quantitatively, the amount of press attention to sex crime increased massively over the period, more than trebling between 1985 and 1997. Qualitatively, reports became increasingly case-based and featured ever-diminishing levels of discussion around wider issues like crime prevention and personal safety. Significantly, on the few occasions on which advice was forthcoming, it was nearly always in relation to cases involving a predatory sex attacker on the loose.

Compounded by the use of emotive and sometimes highly inflammatory language, and the selective reporting of only certain types of sexual offence, the prevalent but deeply misleading notion that strangers pose the greatest threat was consistently reinforced.

In order to explain these and other findings, the representation of sex crime was located within the wider contexts of social, political, economic and cultural change in late modernity. A range of factors were found to be of particular significance. These included: growing competition in the newspaper market; the power relations between journalists, editors and news sources; the impact on social awareness of particular high profile cases; the relentless campaigning activities of victim groups; changes in the political climate in Northern Ireland; and wider cultural shifts in thinking about sex and crime, and law and order more generally. Collectively, these factors have contributed to increasing the newsworthiness of sex crime and altering, sometimes radically, popular consciousness about the full range of sexual offences. The resulting intensification of public interest is not necessarily a bad thing; the problem of sexual violence is now a public issue, no longer 'hidden' behind social awkwardness and cultural taboos. But a parallel consequence has been the generation of a media space in which the reporting of sex crime is increasingly event-oriented, progressive discussion and debate are increasingly rare, and press representations become ever-more starved of useful information.

Qualitative studies employ a range of research methodologies, including interviews – with journalists, editors and producers, police and probation officers, and victims and offenders – audience research – focus groups to explore what media



representations 'mean' to media consumers – and ethnographic approaches – immersing oneself in the natural environment of the research subjects (for example, exploring crime journalism through working in a newsroom). The significant contribution of this type of research is to offer the potential for explanation and understanding over description (see Soothill and Walby, 1991; Jenkins, 1992, 1994; Sparks, 1992; Kitzinger and Skidmore, 1995; Allen et al., 1997; Reiner et al., 2000a, b; Reiner, 2001; Leishman and Mason, 2003).

### *Research Questions*

1. Why is it both important and useful to study crime and the media?
2. What are the main differences between quantitative and qualitative methods of content analysis and what are their respective strengths and weaknesses?
3. Can a coherent picture of the crime problem be discerned from media representations? If so, what is it, and is it accurate?

This section has provided a review of the research literature on media representations of crime and control. It has identified some of the main findings regarding the nature and extent of crime in the media, and begun to develop some of the connections between media images and the wider cultural and economic spheres within which media representations and consumers interact. The aim in next section is to establish a clearer picture of the forces and influences that shape media representations of crime.

## **Theorising Crime and the Media**

Crime news is not simply plucked out of thin air. Nor does it exist in a vacuum. It is the end result of a complex process of selection, processing and prioritisation, and is shaped by interactions between journalists, editors, their working conditions, the wider environment and, crucially, news sources. News sources are those individuals, organisations and institutions which provide journalists with the information on which news stories are often based. In relation to crime news, key sources include the police, probation, prison and court services, politicians, penal reform groups, victim organisations, and a host of other interested parties.

Reporting crime takes time, money and effort. Editors and producers seek to maximise the efficiency and cost effectiveness of this process by concentrating limited resources around sources which can offer consistently reliable and reportable crime material within the rhythms of the news production process. Powerful criminal justice institutions like the police and the judiciary routinely produce a significant volume of reportable information, and are therefore extremely useful to crime journalists. For this reason, they enjoy what Hall et al. (1978) refer to as 'privileged access' in the media: that is, they find it easier than less powerful, or less useful (in news terms), organisations to have their views or version of events publicised. This 'privileged access' is further enhanced by the credibility and cultural authority – the 'expert status' – associated with official agencies on matters of crime and control (Ericson et al., 1989, 1991). That journalists are to an extent reliant on powerful institutional sources is undeniable. The consequences of this reliance, however, and the wider implications for the democratic flow of information and the

objectivity and impartiality of the news product, may be interpreted very differently depending on the theoretical approach adopted.

### *Media Theory and Crime News Production*

Analyses of media production can be broadly distinguished according to two opposing theoretical perspectives: radical and liberal pluralist. Radical approaches are influenced by the theories of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, among others, and stress the unequal distribution of economic and cultural power throughout society, and its impact on media production. Liberal pluralist interpretations are underpinned by the ideals of classical liberal theory, and emphasise the principles of freedom, choice and democracy, and their impact on media production. There are a numerous variations on each perspective, but in their simplest terms, radical readings see the mass media as controlling people, while liberal pluralist readings see the mass media as serving them. The liberal pluralist approach is capable of capturing both political left and right positions. The radical view is more explicitly associated with the political left. Since the vast majority of criminological debate in this area has concentrated on news production, this will provide the focus for the discussion that follows.

At the radical extreme, the 'propaganda model' views the media as an extension of the state's apparatus of ideological control. Over three decades, Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky have argued that economic, political, military and cultural elites conspire to control the content and flow of media information, filtering out or delegitimising dissenting views to protect ruling class interests (Chomsky,

1989; Herman and Chomsky, 1994). Through analysing media coverage of 'terrorism' and the media's alleged collusion in the 'criminalisation' of non-friendly regimes, the authors argue that the key actors in the news production process are not journalists, who are seen as largely powerless, but media owners, who share interests in common with other elite groups. In this critical materialist interpretation of news production – underpinned by Marxist theory – the function of the news media is to 'manufacture consent' around elite ideas in the name of the 'national interest' and, in so doing, to engender political compliance and acceptance of the established order.

A less conspiratorial approach is the 'hegemonic model', based on the neo-Marxist writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971). Here the media are viewed not as the direct mouthpieces of the powerful, but as sites of contest on which alternative viewpoints actively compete for ideological dominance, or 'hegemony'. Due to their privileged access, however, criminal justice institutions are able to advance a 'primary definition' of crime-related issues, which frames the terms for any ensuing debate and subverts competing viewpoints, though these may still be heard, to marginal status (Hall et al., 1978). While journalists may think they are autonomous, in practice they are constrained to reproduce the elite 'ideas' of the dominant sources on which they rely, in turn, helping to make these the 'ideas' of everyone. This is why, it is suggested, crime reporting tends to favour an elite (conservative) portrayal of the crime problem – an issue of working-class minority youth offending (not white collar corruption or state violence), requiring greater punishment and control

of particular groups (not government accountability and corporate regulation) (Fishman, 1978; Barlow et al., 1995).

The radical perspective, in its various guises, contrasts with the liberal pluralist perspective (Gans, 1980; Koss, 1984; Hetherington, 1985). Liberal pluralists concede that certain official interests are advantaged in the media. But they insist that any significant source bias or pressure from media owners is offset by journalistic professionalism (in particular the requirements of objectivity and balance), the ideological and stylistic diversity of the media, and what is viewed as open and equal competition between a wide range of groups for media access and influence. Journalists insist upon, indeed pride themselves upon maintaining high levels of professional autonomy and are actively encouraged in this pursuit by colleagues who share the same system of values (Gans, 1980). Any pressure to follow a particular line, apply a particular 'spin', suppress a particular piece of information, or in some other way distort the 'truth status' of the news will be forcefully resisted.

Nor does the 'privileged access' of powerful institutions guarantee definitional control. Journalists, and other social actors, both can and do challenge the established order. This is clear, for example, when the high-profile exposure of scandal (political, sexual, economic) forces senior politicians to resign from office (Thompson, 2000), or the credibility of criminal justice agencies is undermined by media exposés evidencing corruption, incompetence, or institutional racism. In the liberal pluralist view, then, the media act as 'fourth estate' – exposing injustice and holding the powerful to account. They provide a voice for marginalised groups and,

in so doing, defend the integrity of the democratic process (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995).

In practice, the power relations between journalists and sources are more fluid than radical scholars have tended to argue, but more constraining than liberal pluralists suggest. The radical position tends to overstate the dominance of official agencies and rather understates the ability both of journalists to challenge the status quo, and of other competing groups to enter and, sometimes with alarming effectiveness, reframe the terms of a given debate (Miller, 1993). Marginal groups prepared to proactively deliver news 'fit to print' are attractive to journalists with tight deadlines and, in that way, may have their views circulated over and above more powerful institutions which sit back until approached. The victim-centred nature of contemporary crime narratives places victim groups (like Victim Support and Rape Crisis) in a strong position to advance their values, interests and beliefs in media discourse, whether these beliefs coincide with 'official' viewpoints or not (Greer, 2003a; forthcoming). The radical view also assumes, on some level, the existence of an 'elite consensus' which is then promoted by some unified constellation of ruling class interests (McNair, 1998, 1999). This interpretation overlooks the considerable levels of conflict and competition both between and within political and economic elites (the ongoing debates around a European Constitution, the legality of the 2003 war in Iraq, the privatisation of public services), and fails to recognise that access to the media changes over time.

On the other hand, liberal pluralists understate the various influences within news agencies which severely limit journalists' freedom to report 'objectively and

impartially', and the fact that competition for media access and influence is clearly not equal. Journalists are required to produce news which is not only pitched at the right market (for example, broadsheet or tabloid), but which also reflects the appropriate editorial position, regardless of their beliefs as individuals. If a newspaper takes a hard line on youth offending, for example, journalists at that newspaper are professionally obliged to reflect that position in their reports. Failure to do so may result in stories being 'spiked' (that is, not run), individuals being passed over for promotion or, in extreme cases, dismissal. And it is beyond doubt that criminal justice agencies maintain a clear definitional advantage, it not guaranteed definitional control, on issues of crime and justice. Less powerful or marginalised groups can gain access, sometimes to great effect, but they generally need to work harder and more creatively to have their views heard. These constraints have real consequences for the production and dissemination of crime and justice knowledge, and cannot be simply disregarded on the basis of claims to professional autonomy, ideological diversity and equal competition.

Postmodernist thinking maintains that there is no general explanation, still less some grand theory, capable of accounting for news production in all its diversity and complexity (Brown, 2003). Many postmodernists argue that in societies where images, signs and codes are constantly recycled through the media, it is no longer possible to distinguish with any certainty between 'image' and 'reality', the 'represented' and the 'real' (Baudrillard, 1983; Poster, 1990); *how* crime policy is presented becomes more important than *what* the policy actually is. In an age of media proliferation, political spin, ubiquitous public relations operatives, and ever-

more sophisticated media audiences, perceptions of credibility and the balance of definitional power may shift from story to story. Different media in different markets uphold different agendas, manufacture different products, cater to different audiences and are constrained by different pressures and demands. Relationships of power and authority, dominance and subservience, exist at all levels of the news production process – between more and less senior journalists, between journalists and sources, between journalists, sources and the law, and between journalists, sources, the law and the public. The nature, content and ideological substance of ‘crime news’ is the outcome of a complex dialectical interplay between a diversity of dynamics, interests and influences.

#### *News Values and Newsworthiness*

On 26<sup>th</sup> December 2003 Iran was struck by an earthquake which killed upwards of 25 thousand Iranian citizens. This was a natural disaster on a massive scale, and the second story reported on the UK evening News at Ten. The headlining item disclosed that an English police officer had been shot.

It would be neither possible nor desirable to report everything that happens in the world. Only a tiny fraction of events, criminal or otherwise, are deemed sufficiently ‘newsworthy’ to merit media attention. News values are the criteria that determine ‘newsworthiness’. They enable journalists and editors to decide which stories to run and which to drop, which are headliners and which are fillers, which are the most important details and which are the least. Having ‘a good nose for a



story', then, may equally be interpreted as having a well-honed appreciation of news values.

Figure 1 outlines three separate, but overlapping, sets of news values. They represent alternative interpretations of what it is that make events in general, and criminal events in particular, worthy of media attention.

<b>Galtung and Ruge (1965)</b>	<b>Chibnall (1977)</b>	<b>Jewkes (2004a)</b>
Threshold (importance)		Threshold (importance)
Unexpectedness (novelty)	Novelty (unexpectedness)	
Negativity (violent, harmful, deviant, sad)		Violence
Unambiguity (clear and definite)	Simplification (removing shades of grey)	Simplification (removing shades of grey)
	Dramatisation (action)	
Frequency (timescale, fit within news cycle)	Immediacy (the present, fit within news cycle)	
Elite-centricity (powerful or famous nations or people)	Personalisation (notable individuals, celebrities)	Celebrity or high-status (notable individuals)
	Structured Access (experts, officials, authority)	
Composition (balance, fit with other news)		
Personification (individual focus or causality)	Individual pathology (individual causality)	Individualism (individual focus or causality)
		Children (young people)
Continuity (sustainability)		
	Graphic presentation	Spectacle or graphic imagery
	Visible/spectacular acts	
Meaningfulness (spatial and cultural relevance)		Proximity (spatial and cultural relevance)
Consonance (fit with existing knowledge and expectations)	Conventionalism (hegemonic ideology)	Predictability (expectedness)
	Titillation (exposes, scandal)	
		Risk (lasting danger)
	Sexual/political connotations	Sex
	Deterrence and repression	Conservative ideology or political diversion (deterrence, distraction from wider problems)

Figure 1: Criteria for Newsworthiness <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Galtung and Ruge (1965) listed 'elite nations' and 'elite people' as separate news values; they are combined here. Chibnall (1977) listed general and crime-specific news values separately. These are also combined here.

News values help to explain the broad profile of media representations of crime and control. Interpersonal crimes of sex and violence can be more easily presented as dramatic and titillating than non-violent crimes – for example, most property and white collar offences. By focusing on people (as victims and offenders) and events rather than abstract issues and debates, crime reporting is individualised and simplified, which also contributes to the common association of crime with individual pathology rather than wider social, structural and political influences.

Crimes are more newsworthy if they involve famous or notable people. Indeed, in an increasingly secular society, some suggest that the culture of celebrity is for many a more powerful source of social cohesion than religion (Rojek, 2001). Although names will generally be included where possible, one of the most compelling images in crime narratives is that of the ‘unknown’ predatory stranger. As the producers of reality crime shows like *Crimewatch UK* or *America’s Most Wanted* and countless newspaper editors know only too well, few stories capture the public imagination as forcefully as the killer on the loose, especially when the (potential) victims are children. In addition to their inherent drama, individualisation and violence, such narratives possess a unnerving sense of immediacy and a palpable risk of further attacks. They have a clear capacity to fulfil that increasingly important, commercially driven journalistic imperative; the requirement to shock (Greer, 2003b).

I have suggested elsewhere that all of these news values are mediated by the overarching notion of proximity; that is, the spatial nearness and cultural meaningfulness of an event (Greer, 2003a). How dramatic or shocking a particular

crime story is will depend on the extent to which it resonates with the consumer. Crimes, and indeed any events, happening close to home are perceived as both spatially and culturally 'close', and will generally be considered more newsworthy than the same crimes, or events, happening far away. This is particularly the case if the latter occur in non-western countries, which are widely perceived as more spatially and culturally distant. The news value of proximity helps to explain why the story of one police officer being shot at home was considered more newsworthy than 25 thousand citizens being killed by an earthquake in Iran.

#### *Review Questions*

1. What are the principal characteristics of the radical and liberal pluralist readings of news production? How does each reading view journalistic freedom and source power?
2. What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the radical and liberal pluralist readings, and what contributions has postmodernist thinking offered?
3. What is it that makes some crimes so eminently reportable, whilst others are scarcely mentioned?

The previous sections have reviewed the literature on the nature and extent of representations of crime and control in the media, and offered an overview of some of the main theoretical and conceptual tools used to understand why media representations take on the form that they do. The next section considers the evidence for media effects.

## **Problematizing Crime and the Media**

When toddler James Bulger was murdered by two ten-year-olds in 1993, enormous attention was directed at the film *Child's Play III*, and other 'video nasties', as a likely cause (Muncie, 1999; Barker, 2001). Director Oliver Stone was prosecuted (unsuccessfully) amidst claims that his graphically violent film *Natural Born Killers* (1994) incited a number of copycat murders (Carter and Weaver, 2003). And when two teenagers shot 12 classmates and one teacher in Columbine in 1999, before killing themselves, the music of Marilyn Manson, the Hollywood film *The Basketball Diaries*, and violent computer games were all cited as possible causes (Muzzatti, 2003).

Few today would suggest that media representations have no influence on their audiences. Rather, the debate has been around the nature, extent and significance of that influence. Two schools of thought have dominated. On the political right, the concern has been that media images glamorise crime and violence, undermining respect for authority and the rule of law and encouraging criminality. On the political left, it has been that media images of crime and deviance increase public fears and anxieties, helping to win support for authoritarian measures of control and containment. Both of these viewpoints have their supporters and detractors. The evidence for the criminogenic effects of the media will be considered first.

### *Media Violence and the Problem of 'Effects'*

Research on media effects has for decades sought to demonstrate a causal relationship between media violence and violent thoughts and behaviours in the real world. Typically, subjects (most often children) are exposed to some aggressive stimulus (say, a short violent film) within a controlled setting (frequently a laboratory or office), and then observed to see if they think or behave more aggressively than a control group not exposed to the aggressive stimulus. Myriad variations have been conducted on this 'stimulus-response' (SR) format, variously controlling for participant characteristics, type of violence shown, duration of exposure, and so on.

In a frequently quoted statistic, more than seventy per cent of studies claim to demonstrate that media violence does cause real life violence (Anderson, 1977; Howitt, 1998). In the classic example, children exposed to a short film in which aggressive interaction with an inflatable 'Bobo doll' was rewarded performed more imitative aggression (for example, striking the Bobo doll with a mallet after having observed it in the film) than those who had viewed non-aggressive interactions, or interactions in which aggression was punished (Bandura et al., 1961, 1963). The authors concluded that aggressive behaviour may result, to a significant extent, from 'social learning'. Furthermore, the effects of media violence, though typically small, appear to diminish over time, but not disappear entirely (Livingstone, 1996). Huesmann (1995) concluded after a 20 year follow-up study that children who watched more violent television at age eight had secured significantly more violent criminal convictions in adulthood, even after controlling for social class and

intelligence levels. The relationship between childhood exposure to television violence and later criminality has been supported in a host of other studies (see Paik and Comstock, 1994; Wilson et al., 1998).

**NB: Image 2 - Bandura Photos - around here**

Such 'evidence' of criminogenic media effects is regularly cited by right-wing moral campaigners as justification for greater controls and censorship. But these claims should be treated with caution. Effects research has been heavily criticised on methodological, theoretical and conceptual grounds. Gauntlett (2001), and others (Howitt, 1998; Barker and Petley, 2001; Murdock, 2001; Reiner, 2002; Carter and Weaver, 2003), have identified a number of problems with the 'effects model'. Some of the most pertinent are summarised below.

- Counting 'units' of violence in accordance with the pre-established definitions of the researcher ('this is violence, this is not'), ignores the different meanings that people attach to acts and behaviours and implicitly assumes not just that we all think the same way, but that we all think the same way as the researcher.
- It is dubious to suppose that how subjects behave in controlled laboratory or field experimental situations (where they know they are being observed), sometimes toward inanimate objects (for example, an inflatable doll), reflects how they will behave in the real world toward real people.

- There is an assumption that only certain types of person are susceptible to the influences of media violence – mostly children, who are considered helpless victims, but sometimes also ‘uneducated’ or ‘working class’ populations, who apparently lack the maturity and sense most people take for granted.
- Different forms of violence – for example, in cartoons, soap operas, and horror movies – are often conflated, treated as equal in weight, and reduced to statistical data lacking any sense of plot or context. Whether violence is rewarded or punished, realistic or humorous, perpetrated by a ‘hero’ or a ‘villain’, may influence its impact profoundly.
- A correlation – violent people enjoy violent media – is not the same as a causal relationship – people are violent *because* of violent media. Media representations may provide technical knowledge about committing violent crimes, but that does not mean they also provide the motivation to use it.
- Whether intended or not, effects studies play into the hands of conservatives and right-wing moral campaigners who wish simplistically to blame the media for society’s ills, rather than addressing more intractable sources of crime like social inequality, prejudice and stereotyping, and relative deprivation.
- Media influence, short term or cumulative, can never be disaggregated entirely from other social, psychological and cultural influences, yet studies routinely search for a ‘pure’ (negative) media effect. Prosocial images, though rarely considered, may be every bit as powerful as anti-social ones, and perhaps even more so.

While some critics have challenged the validity of the entire effects enterprise (Barker and Petley, 2001), others are less damning. Carter and Weaver (2003: 8), for example, recognise the limitations, but maintain that the effects tradition 'needs to be engaged with intelligently, rather than rejected out of hand as ill informed'. A growing body of work is using sophisticated methods of audience research to investigate the reception and interpretation of media images, not in isolation, but as part of an ongoing process of interaction, both with other media images and with the 'material and social realities of people's lives' (Kitzinger, 1999: 11; see also Buckingham, 1993, 2000; Philo, 1999). Gauntlett (1997), for example, has explored the influence of mass media on children by inviting young participants to make their own videos, and Hunt (1997) has studied the complex ways in which 'raced subjectivity' - racial sense of identity and community - influences the viewing and interpretation of images of racial violence.

Despite growing appreciation of the complexity of media influence, claims of a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship persist. A seemingly direct recreation of Bandura's Bobo doll experiment was offered up by Labour peer Professor Robert Winston as conclusive 'once and for all' evidence of the link between media violence and real violence in an article appearing in *The Guardian* newspaper supplement in January 2004 (Winston, 2004 - reproduced in Figure 2). Though the second half of the article did include some qualification, the relationship between media violence and real world violence was presented as clear and unambiguous. The availability of more sophisticated approaches, therefore, is no guarantee that those approaches will



be used. As with the media-violence debate, the connections between media and fear of crime are also highly contestable. It is these connections that are considered next.

### *Media and Fear of Crime*

Fear of crime first registered on the policy agenda in the early 1980s, when the British Crime Survey suggested it was becoming as big a problem as crime itself (Hough and Mayhew, 1983). Its consequences may range from not walking home alone at night to withdrawing from society altogether and living in isolation (Ferraro, 1995). Given the centrality of fear of crime in the public and political imagination, understanding its origins is an important criminological undertaking. Fear of crime is influenced by a range of social and demographic variables – perceptions of risk and vulnerability, age, social class, geographical location, ethnicity, and experience of criminal victimisation (Box et al., 1988; Davis, 1994; Hale, 1996). Media representations, though enormously diverse, are only one possible influence among many. As such, their significance remains a matter for debate.

Probably the best known research in this area is Gerbner et al.'s 'cultivation analysis', which over several decades has employed content analyses and survey questionnaires to assess quantitatively the influence of violence on prime-time US television (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1994). The central finding is that 'heavy' television viewers (those who watch most TV – more than four hours per day in Gerbner's studies) cultivate a world-view which more closely resembles the 'television message' than 'light' television viewers (those who watch less than two

hours per day). Because television overstates both the seriousness and risk of criminal victimisation, portraying the world as 'mean and scary', heavy viewing is said to cultivate higher fear of crime.

While supported in some studies (Hawkins and Pingree, 1980; Morgan, 1983), others have failed to replicate the cultivation effect (Gunter, 1987; Cumberbatch, 1989), and a number of empirical and theoretical weaknesses have been identified. It does not necessarily follow, for example, that people who watch the most television watch the most crime. An exaggerated sense of the risk of crime is not the same as fear of crime, yet these distinct concepts are easily confused. And many of the limitations of quantitative content analyses more generally – the distinction between forms of violence, the subjective definition of what violence is, the direction of influence, the relative importance of non-media factors – apply equally to cultivation studies of fear of crime.

In an attempt to address these weaknesses, more recent studies, including revised work by Gerbner and colleagues, have paid greater attention to the nature, form and context of crime and violence in the media. While earlier studies considered violent incidents as decontextualised units, recent work considers the complete scene, in which the consequences of violence are also shown, or the entire programme, in which the *overall* message may be one of restored order and reassurance, rather than dread and fear (Potter et al., 1995, 1997). The extent to which images of crime and violence resonate with consumers' lives may be crucial to their impact. Schlesinger et al. (1992), for example, found that women may be particularly sensitive to images of interpersonal attacks. Partly on this basis, concerns have been

expressed that the highly unrepresentative focus on 'real' violent and sexual interpersonal crimes in the BBC's long running reality show *Crimewatch UK* may increase levels of fear in sections of the viewing audience (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1993; Kidd-Hewitt, 1995; Jewkes, 2004a).

The proximity (spatial and cultural nearness) of crime may also be significant. Recent research on US television news concluded that local crime coverage generates more fear than national coverage, particularly within individuals who have experienced victimisation and perceive television accounts to be realistic (Chiricos et al., 2000; see also Eschholz et al., 2003). The purely quantitative approach limits any explanation of these findings, though they are supported in studies on US newspaper readership (Heath, 1984). A recent UK study, however, suggests that local newspaper reporting has no bearing at all on fear of crime. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, participants kept diaries charting their daily fears and anxieties about crime, and related these directly to press coverage. Local crime reporting was perceived as 'background noise' which had little impact on participants' lives (Roberts, 2001: 12). National crime coverage, by contrast, was actually found to reduce fear of crime by reassuring news consumers that their communities are comparatively safe (see also Heath and Petraitis, 1987).

Aside from illustrating the contradictory nature of the research findings, these examples further demonstrate the usefulness of developing qualitative research approaches which consider the everyday contexts within which media images are consumed, and help not only to describe the relationships between media and fear of

crime, but also to explain and understand them. While the relationship between media images and fear of crime has proved difficult to demonstrate conclusively, it is beyond doubt that media can have a profound influence on sections of the population at certain times. It is with this in mind that the next section considers the sociological theory of moral panic.

### *Moral Panics and Multi-Mediated Societies*

The term 'moral panic' refers to the disproportionate and hostile social reaction to a group or condition perceived as a threat to societal values. It involves sensational and stereotypical media coverage, public outcry and demands for tougher controls. As the name suggests, the panic may subside as rapidly as it erupted (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Murji, 2001). Moral panics have most often emerged around youth-related issues, particularly subcultural forms of youth expression and identity – for example, punk, acid house, rave and the wider drugs culture – but football hooliganism, satanic child abuse, and the re-housing of child sex offenders in the community have also been the source of recent panic (Best, 1990; Jenkins, 1992; Silverman and Wilson, 2002).

In the original analysis, Cohen (1972) queried the social reaction to the Mods and Rockers disturbances in 1964, when boredom and bad weather one Bank Holiday resulted in a few fights, lots of noise and some windows being smashed. Though the damage was minor, the national press exaggerated and sensationalised the disturbances using phrases like 'day of terror' and 'hell-bent on destruction'. News reports predicted further violence, demanded tighter controls, and portrayed

Mods and Rockers as 'folk devils' – a symbol not just of youth delinquency, but of wider permissiveness and social decline. Cohen (1972) demonstrates how the labelling and marginalisation of Mods and Rockers, and the emphasis on mutual antagonism, created a 'deviancy amplification spiral' in which future disturbances were virtually guaranteed. These disturbances seemed to justify initial fears, resulting in more media coverage, more public outcry, more policing, and thus the spiral of reaction continued. The moral panic occurred at a time of rapid social change. In particular, the increase in youth spending power and sexual freedom, which blurred moral and class boundaries and challenged the traditional ethics of hard work and sobriety, generated uncertainty and hostility among 'respectable society'. The 'creation' of Mods and Rockers, then, provided scapegoats or 'folk devils' – a deviant minority against whom the conforming (nostalgically reactionary adult) majority could unite at a time of conflict and change.

In a radical, Gramscian analysis of 'hegemonic crisis' at a time of economic recession, political decline and class unrest in the 1970s, Hall et al. (1978) argue that the state orchestrated a moral panic around 'mugging', casting in the central role the image of the black street criminal. The creation of this 'folk devil', again against which all 'respectable citizens' could unite, tapped into escalating fears around crime, race and social decline, and allowed the state to reassert and relegitimize itself – 'policing the crisis', crucially with the consent of the people, by stamping down hard on the problem from above.

Critics of moral panic theory have questioned the attribution of 'disproportionality' to social reaction because this assumes some superior

knowledge of the objective reality of the issue, against which the reaction can be measured, and a tacit assumption about what a 'proportionate' reaction would look like (Waddington, 1986). Left realists, in particular, have committed to 'take crime seriously' and insist that crime and fear of crime cannot simply be dismissed as groundless media-induced hysteria (Matthews and Young, 1992). Others have gone further, suggesting that in multi-mediated societies the concept of moral panic needs to be reformulated (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995; Ungar, 2001). While folk devils were once helpless against their demonisation, they may now find themselves being vociferously supported in the same mass media that castigate them. They may also provide counter-definitions and explanations in any number of alternative media outlets. While moral panics were once rare, they are now commonplace, and even commercially desirable. One of the best ways of promoting (and selling) records, clothes, books, films – most popular cultural commodities, in fact – is to actively court controversy and generate a little 'panic'. Few things get in the way of commercial success, particularly of youth-oriented products, more than 'conventional approval'.

### *Review Questions*

1. What does the 'effects' model propose, and how has effects research been criticised?
2. Compile a list of factors, other than media representations, which might influence fear of crime. Which of these do you think are most / least important?

3. Can you think of any recent moral panics? On what basis would you say that the term 'moral panic' is justified?

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has provided an overview of some of the main issues and debates which continue to inform the scholarly investigation of crime and the media. You should now have a sense of the nature and extent of crime, violence and control in media content, an understanding of some of the dominant theoretical and conceptual tools used to explain and understand media representations, and a working knowledge of the evidence for, and against, media effects. Equipped with this knowledge and insight, you can now explore in greater detail any issues which have challenged your assumptions, tested your critical faculties, or stimulated your imagination.

The themes developed in this chapter should not be considered in isolation, but as part of a much wider criminological enterprise which seeks to 'make sense' of our social world and to understand matters of crime, deviance and control from a diversity of perspectives. Some of the chapters in this volume deal with the related matters of, for example, theory, youth, policing and social control. Others describe new movements and orientations within criminology, borne out of the increasing popular, political and intellectual fascination with deviance and disorder. Cultural criminology, in particular, is highly sensitised to the significance of media, image, style and representation to the processes of criminalisation, control, resistance and

identity (see Ferrell, this volume; see also *Theoretical Criminology*, special issue on Cultural Criminology, 2004).

Today, image and representation penetrate all areas of social existence. Political and media processes have become inseparable (Manning, 2001). To stand any chance of winning public hearts and minds, political parties and other interest groups must at least appear capable of addressing the problem of crime. One of the most effective ways of achieving this is by advancing claims in the media, and rebutting the claims of others (Beckett, 1997). The media thus constitute a fiercely contested terrain on which a diversity of groups, interests and ideologies compete to appear the most knowledgeable, credible, legitimate – the experts in the field; for with ‘expert status’ comes media access, definitional influence and, ultimately, political power.

Crime and justice events are reported as they happen, high-profile ‘celebrity’ trials are broadcast live, and the growth in ‘reality’ programming continues to erode the boundaries between news and entertainment, fact and fiction (Fishman and Cavender, 1998). Initiatives of crime prevention and social control increasingly rely on surveillance technologies like CCTV to monitor and regulate public space (McCahill, 2002). Media are also increasingly used by offenders, as recent scares about ‘cyberstalking’ and paedophiles’ use of the Internet to ‘groom’ children clearly illustrate (Jewkes, 2003). Global acts of terrorism are designed with maximum media visibility in mind. The destruction of New York’s twin towers on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 was also an exercise in media politics (Castells, 2004). Global live coverage of the horror served both as the ultimate humiliation of the imperial power of the US



and a calling to like-minded individuals to share in the struggle. These are just some of the issues underpinning current and future interest in crime and the media research.

**NB: Image 3 - Twin Towers - around here**

Media representations tap into and reinforce social and political concerns. They help shape public sensibilities, fears, anxieties and appetites. They provoke public outcry and, at times, generate moral panics. They serve as ideological weapons in the ongoing struggle for hegemony. They impart important, but often mixed, messages about the nature and extent of 'the crime problem', how we should think and feel about it, who is most at risk, and what is to be done. They indicate, however inaccurately, the state of the nation. But they also entertain. 'Crime talk' (Sasson, 1995), in whatever form, simultaneously elicits fear and fascination; it is a major source of concern, but also of distraction, escapism, and moral reassurance (Sparks, 1992; Greer and Jewkes, 2005). Crime sells. It always has.

Whether as news, fiction, or that expanding cultural form that lies somewhere in between, the sheer quantity of crime in the media illustrates that we have an insatiable appetite for narratives of deviance and control. And there is evidence to suggest we are growing hungrier (Reiner et al., 2000a). Given the close interrelationship between the political, commercial and cultural significance of crime and disorder, it is small wonder it features so prominently across all media and markets. As the boundaries between fact and fiction (the represented and the real)

become increasingly diffuse and uncertain, so the importance of understanding the connections between crime and the media becomes more concrete.

### *Exercises and Questions for Discussion*

1. Design and conduct your own content analysis of newspaper crime reporting. Make sure you include both quantitative and qualitative considerations.
2. Compare coverage of the same crime or justice event in at least three different media forms (newspaper, Internet, television, radio). How and why does representation differ between media forms and organisations?
3. Watch an episode of your favourite crime drama or a recent film and note the portrayal of policing and criminal justice. Are the representations favourable or critical?
4. Re-read the article “Seeing is believing” by Professor Robert Winston (Figure 2). What are Professor Winston’s main claims and, based on your understanding of effects research, how might they be challenged or supported?
5. Keep a ‘crime diary’ for a week and record your thoughts and feelings about crime and personal safety. Do media representations have any impact on your fear of crime?

### **Guide to Further Reading**

For a book-length exposition of many of the issues and debates discussed here, students are enthusiastically directed towards Yvonne Jewkes’s *Media and Crime* (London: Sage, 2004). Written at a slightly more challenging level, this textbook

develops the complex relationships between crime and media forms and effects in late modernity. For a more condensed review, Robert Reiner's 'Media Made Criminality: The Representation of Crime in the Mass Media', in Mike Maguire, Rod Morgan and Robert Reiner's (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) is also excellent. The most useful edited collections include Stanley Cohen and Jock Young's (eds.) *The Manufacture of News: The Social Construction of Crime and Deviance*, (revised edition, London: Constable, 1981) and, more recently, David Kidd-Hewitt and Richard Osborne's (eds.) *Crime and the Media: The Post-Modern Spectacle* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), Richard Ericson's (ed.) *Crime and the Media* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1995) and Paul Mason's (ed.) *Criminal Visions: Representations of Crime and Justice*, (Cullompton: Willan, 2003). These books present accessible explorations of a comprehensive range of media-crime issues, written by key scholars in the field. Students should also look out for the new journal *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* (London: Sage Publications), edited by myself, Yvonne Jewkes and Jeff Ferrell. *Crime, Media, Culture* (CMC) provides a forum for debate for the increasing number of researchers working at the interface between criminology, media studies and cultural studies and, in addition to more conventional scholarly articles, includes photographic essays, international research think-pieces, and reviews of relevant crime-media material. Also, keep an eye on *Criminal Justice Matters* (London: CCJS), an extremely useful journal which should be compulsory reading on all introductory criminology courses. *Criminal Justice Matters* (CJM) regularly features short articles on media-related issues written by key figures, and has a number of special editions specifically on crime and the media.

## Useful Websites

<http://www.lexisnexis.com> - Lexis Nexis is probably the best resource for conducting online searches of news and other print media from around the world. Access requires a password, which most universities should be able to supply.

[www.jc2m.co.uk](http://www.jc2m.co.uk) - the Journal of Crime, Conflict and Media Culture is a recently launched e-journal, edited by Paul Mason, which contains high quality contributions from leading scholars in the areas of media culture, criminal justice and conflict.

[www.spiked-online.com](http://www.spiked-online.com) - Spiked is an independent online publication which offers an alternative and always critical take on the news stories of the day. Its self-stated priorities are liberty, enlightenment, experimentation and excellence.

<http://www.theory.org.uk> - Theory.Org.uk is a fun and accessible website maintained by David Gauntlett, which includes information on media effects, key social and cultural theorists, and plenty of links to other useful media-oriented sites.

<http://www.ccms-infobase.com> - the Communication, Cultural and Media Studies Infobase contains a wide range of salient links, definitions, and issues for debate - pitched at an introductory undergraduate level - which are easy to navigate.

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## Glossary of Terms

*Ethnography*: a qualitative research methodology concerned with studying subjects within their own natural environment, frequently involving detailed observation, and in depth interviews. Ethnographers seek to view the world through the eyes of their subjects.

*Hegemony*: the dominance of one particular group or ideology, resulting in the empowerment of particular values, beliefs and practices over others and frequently resulting in the naturalisation of those values, beliefs and practices throughout the social body.

*Liberal Pluralist Media Theory*: a selection of approaches which view the media, more or less, as serving in the interests of the majority by representing marginal views and holding the powerful to account, thus safeguarding the transparency and integrity of the democratic process.

*Media*: for the purposes of this chapter, any technological form of communication or expression designed to impart meaning (television, newspapers, Internet, radio, brochures, road signs, advertising billboards).

*Qualitative Analysis*: research methodologies concerned with understanding and exploring conditions and phenomena which cannot be readily measured and reduced to statistical data – for example, emotions and subjective interpretations of meaning.

*Quantitative Analysis*: research methodologies concerned with quantifying measurable aspects of social phenomena (crime, sentencing, victimisation), typically through some form of counting and subsequent statistical manipulation.

*Radical Media Theory*: a selection of approaches which view the media, to varying degrees, as representing the interests of an elite minority to a subordinate majority, comprising a crucial part of the process through which elite ideological **hegemony** can be secured, maintained or, indeed, overthrown.