


Crime coverage: Information or influence?

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Abstract---In the contemporary media landscape, crime-related reporting has become a leading theme. Although the media's primary role is to inform the public, there is growing evidence that crime stories influence public perceptions, fears, and moral judgments. This article examines how the media contributes to the selective representation of crime and the decisive role of sensationalist styles. It also explores how such portrayals affect different social groups.

Keywords---media, crime, public perception, informational influence, criminology, social construction.

Today, the media not only functions as a channel of communication, but also as an instrument of influence. It plays an active role in shaping public perceptions and values. Crime reporting remains one of the most dominant and powerful themes in the media. It provokes emotional responses from audiences and contributes to the creation of moral panics, social stigmas, and exaggerated perceptions of threat.

This raises a critical question: Is crime coverage merely a process of information transmission, or does it function as a tool of influence?

The significance of crime coverage in the media can be evaluated from positive and negative perspectives. On the one hand, the media can contribute to crime prevention, raise public awareness, and support a fair justice system. On the other hand, crime-related media content may generate panic, fear, and distorted perceptions of reality.

According to Australian researchers Katrina Clifford and Rob White, who have studied the relationship between the media and crime, "the media not only reflects crime, it also creates it, shaping public perception and influencing justice policy."

Media and communication theorist Denis McQuail emphasizes that "the media has become one of the main instruments of social control in contemporary society."

McQuail argues that the media serves several key social functions. First, the media serves as a channel of communication through which information and ideas are exchanged. Second, the media performs a surveillance function by monitoring the social environment and informing the public about significant events and developments.

From the perspective of public information, crime coverage is one of the most sensitive areas because, when reporting on crime, the media transmits information, shapes public opinion, and contributes to the establishment of legal and social order. Several media functions can be identified in this process: informational, social control, preventive, educational, justice advocacy, and public awareness.

In the context of crime reporting, the media's informational function involves communicating personal safety risks to the public. According to cultivation theory, individuals who are heavily exposed to crime-related content may perceive their living

environment as more dangerous than it actually is. Furthermore, extensive television coverage of crime can instill a sense of vulnerability and fear of becoming a victim. Criminology researchers Cynthia Silva and Inês Guedes note that this fear is especially heightened when the victim or perpetrator is familiar to the viewer or when the crime scene is geographically close.

Media coverage of crime is most commonly associated with negative public expectations, heightened fear, and a sense of insecurity. Nevertheless, the media can also serve as an important actor and instrument for enhancing public safety, not only as a source of fear.

By informing the public about crime, the media assumes a dual role of warning and encouraging preventive behavior. The preventive function of crime coverage mobilizes society through information, promoting caution among citizens, deterring potential offenders, and reducing the risk of criminal activity. Through the media, the public becomes aware of where and what types of crimes are occurring, the tactics likely used by offenders, and the actions taken by the authorities. This information enables individuals to adopt preventive measures and make more informed decisions regarding their personal safety.

However, the preventive impact of crime coverage largely depends on the media's reporting style and sense of responsibility. Only responsible media outlets can foster critical thinking and promote active public engagement in preventive initiatives.

According to criminology and public safety scholars Jean Scaramella and Adel Newman, engaging society in the fight against crime begins with educating its members and raising awareness. This involves teaching them how to respond effectively when law enforcement strategies are inadequate or fail to deliver proper crime prevention and control. In such cases, the media can act as a catalyst for civic activism.

To understand the importance of crime reporting, it is necessary to recognize the role of the media in supporting justice. The media can serve as a balancing force against power structures. When media outlets expose misconduct by law enforcement or unjust legal proceedings, they act as civic watchdogs. As a result, cases may be reopened or reinvestigated, and legal reforms may be initiated or accelerated.

Furthermore, the media can empower witnesses and victims by encouraging them to speak out and participate more actively in the pursuit of justice. This function has become more visible in the digital era, where new spaces have emerged for advocating social justice. Victims and other concerned individuals now have the opportunity to share information that would not have been published by traditional media outlets.

At the same time, the dissemination of crime-related information through online news websites and other digital platforms has become more widespread and immediate. Often, crime-related reports first appear on social media before being picked up by mainstream outlets. Citizens now have the capacity to record, document, and distribute evidence of criminal activity themselves. However, this shift has also increased the risk of misinformation and manipulation.

In the modern world, the media is one of the most powerful tools, significantly influencing people's lives. It has the capacity to elevate someone to fame or destroy their reputation in an instant. Media has become so integrated into our daily lives that it shapes our thinking, alters our genuine attitudes toward social problems, and blurs the line between our personal beliefs and media-constructed perceptions. As a result, many people today have multiple identities, some of which are shaped by media representations.

The media plays a central role in shaping public opinion. This influence is particularly evident in crime reporting, where the public perceives the world as more dangerous than it actually is. This is especially the case when media coverage focuses on sensational, violent, and rare events, which reinforces a sense of threat.

One of the key theoretical frameworks used in this analysis is cultivation theory, which describes the media's influence on societal perceptions. According to its originator, mass communication scholar *George Gerbner*, television profoundly affects how viewers perceive reality by transmitting crime-related content. He argues that individuals who consume large amounts of television content tend to view the world as far more dangerous than it truly is.

Similarly, British sociologist and media scholar *Chris Critcher* notes: "When the media reports on crime, it rarely does so neutrally. It dramatizes, exaggerates, and selectively constructs narratives that can lead to public fear and panic."

American sociologist *Howard Becker*, writing on the media's role in shaping public opinion, argues that social problems are not objective realities but are constructed by particular groups, including the media. In his influential book *Outsiders, Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Becker states:

"Social problems do not materialize by themselves. They attain that status only when defined as such by individuals and groups who shape public opinion—most notably, journalists."

A distinct field of criminology has emerged that studies media representations of crime. American criminologist Professor *Gregg Barak* developed the concept of

newsmaking criminology based on his research into this phenomenon. According to Barak, media representations of crime are often distorted, primarily due to the media's imperative to attract audience attention.

"The media does not present reality as it is. It creates a reality designed to capture and retain public attention."

Barak urges criminologists to engage in dialogue with media professionals to ensure more realistic and evidence-based representations of crime. The media's tendency to present information in a sensational and dramatic manner significantly influences public attitudes toward crime. This can lead to the spread of moral panic and prompt governments to revise criminal justice policies.

Criminologists and media scholars argue that the media prioritizes covering crimes that evoke fear and sensationalism, factors that shape public opinion. Yvonne Jewkes, a British criminologist and leading expert in the field of media and crime, emphasizes that the media plays a fundamental role in the social construction of crime.

"The media is not merely a disseminator of information. It is actively involved in defining crime. It provides frameworks for understanding criminal behavior by choosing what to report and how to report it."

The term "moral panic" is most frequently employed to describe the media's influence on public perceptions of crime. British sociologist and criminologist Stanley Cohen was the first scholar to introduce this concept in his seminal work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), in which he analyzed the deviant behavior of certain youth subcultures in 1960s Britain. According to Cohen, the media plays a significant role in stigmatizing specific groups by portraying them as threats to societal order.

Yvonne Jewkes further examines moral panic and offender stigmatization as mechanisms of media influence and argues that media coverage of crime is rarely neutral. Instead, it often contributes to stigmatization and marginalization by creating polarized images of individuals—some as heroes and others as villains or dangerous criminals. This effect is especially potent when narratives are exaggerated or dramatized. As Jewkes notes: "Media coverage of crime is rarely neutral or objective. It is often selective, emotionally charged, and saturated with moral overtones."

American sociologist Erving Goffman emphasizes the power of stigmatization, particularly in relation to crime. In his influential work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman notes that the media portrays crime in a

manner that fosters degrading and prejudiced attitudes toward specific social groups.

"Crime-related stigma leads to the moral discrediting of individuals. Such information devalues and diminishes particular groups in the eyes of others."

When studying moral panic, many researchers highlight the commercial and ideological motives behind media behavior. They argue that moral panics are not spontaneous responses to ordinary events but are shaped by the style and intensity of media coverage. Prominent sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, known for developing and systematizing moral panic theory, argue in their book *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, that the media is not simply a passive reflector of events. Rather, it plays an active role in amplifying deviance and escalating moral panic.

They write, "The media not only reports on crime and deviant behavior—it amplifies it through its framing and coverage style, and in some cases, becomes the driving force behind the emergence and escalation of moral panic."

In the era of social media, the dynamics of moral panic have intensified. Emotional reactions are stronger, and panic can spread more rapidly. Unlike traditional media, social media enables ordinary users to disseminate crime-related content in real time on a large scale, further complicating the relationship between information, perception, and panic.

Conclusion

The public's fear, sense of insecurity, and broader perception of crime are heavily influenced by how crime is portrayed in the media. This influence persists across cultural and international contexts but manifests differently depending on local media ethics and professional standards. For example, research indicates that public perceptions of crime vary significantly in countries such as Georgia, Norway, and Italy, largely due to differences in how their media systems operate and report crime.

Ultimately, crime reporting in the media extends far beyond its informational function. As a constructor of social reality, the media has the power to enlighten or mislead, raise awareness or stigmatize. Therefore, the media bears profound ethical and professional responsibilities. It must strive to balance facts and narratives in a way that promotes public understanding rather than fear and engagement rather than panic.

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