

Media

Most people would agree that in their coverage of crime and criminal justice, the news media have an important role to play as a public watchdog. But how effective are they? The question can be answered in three general areas: the presentation of crime in the news media, the authorities and officials who shape the presentation of crime news, and the significance of sensational cases and moral panics.

One of the unfortunate characteristics of formal processing of offenders in the United States is that many of the criminal justice system's decisions—and more important, its decision-making processes—are invisible. The police are the system's primary public agent, patrolling neighborhoods and answering frequent calls for service. Responding to violations of the law is central to the police mandate, but how the police respond is generally handled outside the public's view. An offender may be arrested in public, but interrogation procedures, police processing decisions, and investigative strategies are not accessible to the public. Police decisions to not enforce the law are hard to explain, because discretion is not formally documented. Court decision making is even less accessible. Many court procedures are open to the public, but most decisions happen outside of court as defense attorneys, prosecutors, and judges informally negotiate resolutions. The public has access to the end products of court decision making, but is unable to fully understand the influence of a court's legal culture. Probably the most significant symbolic institution of the criminal justice system is the prison. Prisons are powerful reminders of the authority and legitimacy of the state, but the public must admire these institutions vicariously. It has limited access to the prison culture in any direct way, relying instead on myths, rumors, fictional representations, and a few scholarly publications when an academic or an investigative commission achieves significant access.

Because criminal justice decision-making processes are invisible, it is important for the public to be represented by a surrogate who can monitor and critique the decisions made behind closed doors. The criminal justice system is not without checks and balances, but the organizations that comprise this system are often ineffective, and inquiries are narrowly focused because resources are far outpaced by needs. For example, investigations of police corruption typically focus on one event or series of events, but broader internal inquiries are rare and are usually only the result of action by external forces. Academics often critique the criminal justice system or criminal justice policy, but the pace of research is often too slow and cumbersome for academics to be effective agents of change.

The news media certainly have the potential to be an important external watchdog for several reasons. First, they have a vital role in providing information and ideas for public conversation. Because of the omnipresence of the news, it can significantly shape what issues get discussed and how. Second, news media have the opportunity to monitor public bureau-cracies because—thanks mainly to the Freedom of Information Act—they can see documents, policy memoranda, and internal working processes that are not visible to the public. Third, the news media have inherited an expectation that they will be the public's watchdog, operating on its behalf and



A London "bobby" reads about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in the November 22, 1963 issue of the Daily Sketch.

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in its best interests. The public may want to be entertained by the news, but it also expects that the media will help monitor, expose, and reform public agencies.

CRIME AND NEWS

The news media are curious about the activities of criminal justice agencies because crime is highly valued as a news topic, especially when packaged in interesting and entertaining ways. Crime as a marketable news product is nothing new. In the late nineteenth century, for example, when Joseph Pulitzer took over the struggling *New York World* and shifted its emphasis to crime and justice news, circulation skyrocketed. The tabloidlike presentation of crime, competing newspapers using crime to capture the largest portion of the market share, and having a multitude of crime events readily available that can be sculpted into intriguing moral and ethical dilemmas persists today.

One of the consistent findings of media research is that crime is an important news topic. Researchers analyzing a variety of different types of media and media markets have found that crime accounts for between 20 and 50 percent of the total space available for news. But the media cover a narrow range of topics, emphasizing incidents and ignoring criminal justice policy issues. Most crime coverage describes an independent event, and these events are not linked together to describe larger patterns, consistencies, or causes of crime. Few news organizations provide adequate resources to fully explore the costs and benefits of criminal justice policy decisions.

News media rarely engage in important political debates about criminal justice decisions, except in those rare instances where an issue is distorted by a celebrated event, forcing policymakers to hastily respond to a public concern. A high-profile shooting might push gun control into the political arena, for example. News organizations typically report on these policy activities, but they seldom critique the impact and effectiveness of the passed legislation, and reporters and editors typically consider a very narrow range of policy options.

Research also shows that the types of crime presented in the news do not accurately represent the realities of crime. Sex and violence are priority news topics, and editors generally emphasize the most serious, heinous, and rare crimes that involve them. Murder, rape, and other serious personal crimes are disproportionately emphasized, while white-collar, property, and environmental crimes are ignored. And news personnel do not provide an accurate summary of the known official counts of crime. Researchers find that the crimes that are the least likely to occur are most likely to be presented in the news.

Another way to support the conclusion that the news media distort crime is to examine how crime is presented over time. It is interesting that crime coverage did not change dramatically in the 1990s compared with earlier decades; murder, rape, and violent crime continued to account for similar percentages of the total news coverage. This finding is intriguing because all national crime statistics show significant reductions in the total number of crimes and the incidence of violent crime. The media's consistent emphasis on violence despite these declines would again support the importance of the unique crime event as a priority news item.

The characteristics of victims and defendants presented in the news have the potential to influence the extent of news coverage given to crime events. "Good victims" and "good defendants" can help turn an ordinary homicide into a front-page story, or they might make an event that is typically ignored in a large city—such as motor vehicle theft—worthy of coverage. Also, news media do not treat all victims and defendants equally. Research indicates that race affects news coverage, especially when the victim is African American. Consistent with sentencing and death penalty research, media research indicates that news media devalue minority crime victims. African American and Hispanic homicide victims are less likely to get news coverage and are given less space or time than murders involving whites. Other important demographic characteristics that influence news decision making include age, occupation, gender, and socioeconomic status.

CRIME AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEWS

The news media have become an important tool used by police officers, prosecutors, politicians, and policy advocates, to further their individual, organizational, or philosophical mandates. A very large body of research examining the sources and the institutions represented in crime and deviance news indicates that representatives of official organizations are disproportionately cited in news stories about crime. For example, studies that examine stories about the beginning stages of the criminal justice process find that the police—usually a high-ranking official—account for between 30 and 50 percent of the sources named in arrest and investigation stories. Prosecutors dominate court news, and politicians are often called on to defend a policy position when such stories are covered. The individuals who are part of the larger social control apparatus of the community are considered “insiders,” and the media turn to them because they have access to the information necessary to construct crime news stories. Other potential sources, like crime victims, defendants, citizens, and academics are considered “outsiders,” and are rarely able to significantly influence how a story is framed for public consumption.

The media's reliance on insider sources gives these insider organizations opportunities to shape the presentation of crime in a way that benefits them. Social control organizations have developed specific strategies in order to maximize the benefits of being involved in story construction. Most public bureaucracies, for example, have developed media policy rules, defining the parameters about what information should be provided to reporters. Some organizations strictly prohibit line officers from talking with reporters. Many organizations appoint and train spokespeople to be an organization's primary conduit to media reporters. Research indicates that large city police organizations will be contacted by ten different newspaper and television news organizations a week, and four to six reporters every day. Police forces manage this demand by appointing one or two high-ranking individuals to interact and decide what types of information should be provided.

The relationship between media personnel and public organization representatives is constantly evolving and reacting to circumstances and developments that result from crime coverage. In general, this relationship is cordial, because the media need access to documents, reports, and individuals within the organization in order to meet daily news processing demands. The media cover criminal justice events such as the introduction of a new prosecutorial program, police awards ceremonies, and police or prosecutorial promotions ceremonies, in exchange for organizational access. These stories are of low priority, but the coverage helps the news organization receive a steady flow of information. For the same reason, news personnel resist criticizing these organizations. The media sometimes expose a problem within one of these organizations, but such a critique usually focuses on a specific problem or a rotten apple, and the coverage and criticism are usually isolated.

CELEBRATED CASES AND MORAL PANICS

The process used to create news about crime is extraordinarily routine. Reporters peruse a list of new crime events and decide what incidents are most consistent with accepted media frames. They then construct stories by contacting key institutional representatives who can provide reporters with additional information and quotes. Reporters may contact additional sources, but in general these sources are less accessible and are unfamiliar with the demands of news personnel. Jack Katz (1987: 47) discusses the consistent patterns of crime news stories, describing how many crime stories differ only in the details of place, time, and names of the parties involved, but the formats, frames, and content remain the same from day to day.

However, there are significant exceptions to the routine construction of news events. A serial murder suspect, a famous athlete arrested for a serious crime, or the stalking and murder of a well-known celebrity can change media processing significantly. The investigation, arrest, trial, and acquittal of O. J. Simpson—a Hall of Fame football player and media personality—for a double homicide is an example of a celebrated crime event. His trial received unprecedented media coverage throughout the world. Major news magazines gave the event top priority, newspapers and wire services explored every possible angle to the story, and television stations provided full coverage of the trial.

Representatives from all types of media organizations flock to the location of a celebrated case to satisfy the cravings for information. Unlike the one or two stories that may be presented about most crime events, multiple stories about celebrated cases appear daily. Television reporters, newspapers, and other media personnel search for new angles, digging deep into past activities of the participants, analyzing criminal justice decision making, and debating how the event could have been prevented. The standard sources typically used to construct stories are brought in for comment, but other officials, experts, and a more diverse range of individuals are also questioned.

The intense, overwhelming, and sensational coverage of these events is significant because of the potential impact it has on the public and policymakers. The public cannot avoid these events, and thus is forced to develop opinions and reactions to the event. Depending on the circumstances of the event, the public might be angered, disappointed, saddened, or intrigued. For example, one of the most significant media events of 1999 was the attack on Columbine High School. Seniors Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris brought an arsenal of weapons into the school and opened fire, killing thirteen and wounding twenty-six. This event received an incredible amount of publicity, and the public reacted in a number of different ways to the tragedy. Students across the country feared that a similar event might occur at their school. Members of the public sent letters and cards of sympathy, hope, and sadness. Some people reacted in more menacing ways, threatening to commit similar crimes in other schools.

It is important to note that these celebrated events also have the potential to force policymakers and criminal justice personnel to respond immediately by prioritizing a policy-related issue that can be linked to the event. Celebrated cases can create new policy agenda items, force legislators to reshuffle their priorities, or spur further inquiries into the issue. For example, celebrated news coverage is one of the key factors that can bring about a congressional hearing about a criminal justice policy issue. Once the policymaking process ignites, and interested claimsmakers attempt to benefit from the heightened attention, these events take on a new level of importance, evolving into moral crusades or moral panics.

In an analysis of the panic surrounding several disturbances involving Britain's Mods and Rockers, two youth gangs, Stanley Cohen (1972: 9) described these moral panics this way: "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panics. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes less visible."

Cohen's description and research published since his analysis of the Mods and Rockers disturbances have identified several common characteristics of moral panics. First, moral panics refer to a type of collective behavior that occurs in response to concern about a new threat. Second, public concern is often fueled by extreme events and other unsubstantiated claims about the extent of the problem. Third, the concern about a specific type of behavior appears suddenly, and often disappears as quickly as it erupted. Fourth, the majority of the public believes that this threat is real and it becomes intensively hostile toward the group targeted in the panic. Fifth, the panic often ignites other political, legal, and social control processes. Sixth, it is eventually discovered that the actual threat was much less than the perceived threat.

ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

The news media certainly have great potential as the public's watchdog. The technological revolution has created an immense public sphere, and the technological divide separating socioeconomic classes is slowly, but steadily, disappearing. There are television sets and radios in 98 percent of American households, and computers and access to the Internet will eventually reach a similar level. The media can play a central role in engaging the public in the democratic process by providing information, data, alternative viewpoints, and multiple solutions to

important social problems. Access to the public is a powerful resource, one that could be used to improve the efficacy and efficiency of public social control organizations. Although the media might be considered one of the most important institutions of reform in a modern democracy, there are some significant hurdles that minimize their influence.

First, it is apparent that the entertainment concerns of media organizations are more important than other goals of news production. News organizations certainly do not provide a representative picture of the amount and types of crime that occur in society. They overemphasize rare events, do not provide a broad context in order to appreciate the significance of these events, and frame stories in such a way that is supportive of the existing social control structure. It is, however, clear that media organizations believe crime can be profitable by attracting readers. This profit potential is evidenced by the way crime is emphasized in both news and entertainment media sources.

Second, media organizations are private businesses, trying to maximize profits and minimize expenses. The constant pressure to produce a final summary of the day's events forces many media organizations to develop a standardized way of constructing news stories. This includes building relationships with key institutional representatives and relying on easily accessible documents and reports. These reports and the individuals and organizations that provide access to them do not provide full disclosures of the events of interest, so the process of news construction is biased toward affirming rather than questioning the status quo.

Moreover, media organizations emphasize criminal justice outputs. Stories about arrests, grand jury decisions, plea bargain results, and sentencing hearings get top priority. The media are not especially interested in what occurs after sentencing, unless an inmate escapes or is about to be released. The only exposure to punishment the public receives in the news is when the results of a court sentencing proceeding are presented. The important point is that the media emphasize the successes of the criminal justice system and not its failures. In addition, the decision-making processes that occur between these stages are ignored.

Finally, the media sensationalize celebrated cases. These events can significantly shape how the public and policymakers think about crime and what should be done about it. Research on moral panics show that the media are a key instigator in promoting certain issues to celebrity status, and have the power to force policymakers and criminal justice professionals to respond. This research also indicates that the perceived threat regarding a problem is far more significant than the actual one, so policy decisions are made and resources are distributed based on inaccurate data. The public does not appreciate or fully understand the nature of the problem because of the distorted viewpoint promoted in the news media, and thus is willing to support programs and policy solutions that have little chance for success.

—Steven Chermak

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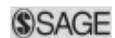
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