Examining media discourse and the amounts of crime criminology essay

Media discourse is sutured with crime. Crime consumes an enormous amount of media space as both entertainment and news. Much of our information about the nature and extend of crime comes to us via the secondary source of media. We should expect then, that as distributors of social knowledge, they play a significant role in our perception and understanding of the boundaries between order and disorder. (Surette, 1998: 11) Because of the importance of media in everyday life, the study of crime and the media becomes a vital concern of sociology and media studies.

Since media has the ability to interpret and give meaning to events through dramatization, this places it at the pinnacle of all social institutions in its ability to shape perception and reactions of its readership. It has been criticized over years by enormous sociologist that media is responsible for fomenting moral sensibilities and anxieties about crime and disorder. (Cohen, 1963; Young, 1971; Hall, 1978; Reiner, 1997; Munice: 2001) The media manufactured of news (Cohen and Young, 1973/1981), created moral panics (Cohen, 1973) and fear of crime (Gerbner et al: 1980; Carlson: 1985) about folk devils, stigmatized outsiders, and amplified their deviance (Young, 1971) thus legitimating the drift to a law and order society (Hall et al, 1978) and a more authoritarian style of policing the crisis. (ibid.) In this assignment, I will discuss how and why these consequences of representation of crime are develop, and how they will affect the society.

Fear of crime:

In recent years policy debates have focused increasingly on fear of crime as an issue as serious s crime itself. As Home Office working party noted that '

fear of crime as an issue of social concern; it has to be taken as seriously as crime prevention and reduction'. (Home Office, 1989: ii)

When the media representation of crime is compared to real world crime as measured by official crime statistics, it appears that the media images exaggerate the probability of danger. This is said to cultivate a misleading view of the world based on unnecessary anxiety about levels of risk form violent crime. According to the BCS 1983, people are concerned most about those crimes which they are least likely to experience. (Hough and Mayhew 1983: 23) The BCS data show a discrepancy between people's fear of being a victim and their chances of being that victim. (Reiner 1997: 210; Munice, 2001: 59; Hewitt, 1995: 19) This has engendered a debate about why there should be such a disparity between the perception of risk and the ' actual' risk.

Most commonly, the media are accused of exaggerating the risk of crime, representing an image of the world which is scary and mean, (Carlson 1985) (Sparks 1992: Chapter 1) which lead to public's fear of crime in an ' unreasonable' fashion. (Reiner 1997: 199) Most analyses of newspaper crime reporting have been concerned with the potentially distorted impression is created by the high proportion of reports of violent crimes. Ditton and Duffy (1983) analyzed the crime content of three Scottish newspapers concludes that the proportion of violent and sexual crimes are far more than those reported in the official statistics. (Ditton and Duffy, 1983) Many British studies also showed the same pattern of over representation of violent and interpersonal crimes. The risks of crime as portrayed by the media are both

quantitatively and qualitatively more serious than the official statistically recorded picture.[1]

Although media representation of crime is biased and they present crime in an exaggerated way, we cannot simply conclude that fear of crime is associated with media presentation of crime. The reason why people can be easily influenced by media is because they are lack of knowledge about crime. It is rare for people to experience or witness crime. Therefore, they need to rely on media as source of information to understand crime and use it as a guideline in assessing probability of being a victim. Furthermore, people are tended to use a simplistic way and the most available information to make assessment without reviewing other alternative source before they make judgment, this can lead to people use newspaper and television as source of information to understand crime and construct perceptions of crime. (Williams and Dickinson, 1993: 36) Base on these assumptions, it is sensible to say that media's representation of crime do have influence people's perception about crime.

The media biases associated with public misperceptions argument is confirmed by the study of relationship between newspaper crime reporting and fear of crime by Williams and Dickinson and 1996 BCS. According to Williams and Dickinson, there was a significant relationship between reading newspapers with more emphasis on violence crime and measure of fearfulness expressed in a survey. This association survived control by a number of demographical variables. (William and Dickinson, 1993) Thus, the research concludes that readers of those newspapers that report crime in the most dramatic and salient fashion have the highest levels of fear of

crime. (William and Dickinson, 1993) Moreover, in the 1996 British Crime Survey, Hough and Roberts also concluded that there are some strong associations have been found between media biases representation and public misperceptions. (Hough and Roberts, 1996) These study both evident the media have direct influence on constructing fear of crime.

The news media may constitute biased perception of crime, however, some scholars have a controversial view on the association between media representations and its effects. Increasingly, it is acknowledged that media representations are unlikely to be received passively, but rather interpreted by an ' active audiences' but as one element in their lived experience. (Ericson, 1991; Livingstone, 1996, Reiner, 1997) Many studies show that the media is not the crucial agent in accounting for fear of crime, increasingly, it is more widely accepted that demographic factors such as age, sex, class, background, level of education, area of residence are significant determinants of anxiety about crime and violence. (Gunter, 1987; Sparks, 1992; Ericson, 1991: 287; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 188) Crawford and his fellows (1990) also support such argument that fear does indeed accord to people's real life circumstances. It may be generated by any number of personal, cultural or environmental factors. Box et al also concur with Crawford's opinion, he further suggested that fear of crime depends on an interactive complex of vulnerability, environmental conditions, personal knowledge of crime, confidence (or lack of) confidence in the police. (Munice, 2001: 59) Since there are many factors can affect the perception of crime, we should bear in mind that fear of crime is extraneous, generated by social and personal factors other than risk of crime per se. Moreover, we

should remain alive to ability of the public to differentiate and interpret the information they receive. Though there is evidence concerning media partiality and distortion, it cannot by any mean be assumed that media representation are always received uncritically. (Munice, 2001: 62)

The issue of media effect on perceptions of crime remains controversial. It is because of the difficulties in rigorously establishing straightforward casual relationships between images and effects. (Reiner, 1997: 191) Since the association between tow factors are remain unknown, it is plausible to conclude that media may have influence on perception of crime. What is more important about the issue of fear of crime is not whether it has any rational basis or it is solely cultivated by media, but rather how far its emotiveness as a topic can be used for ulterior and political motives. (Munice, 2001: 62)

Moral Panic:

During the 60's to 70's, the British public was riveted by magnified coverage of highly unusual crime stories of violence crime committed by youth that turned into what some news outlets described as an " all too familiar story." Rather than providing context, the media's labeling of these youth violence as " symptom of social decline" has tended to exacerbate people's moral sensibilities about youth violence. The result is that misdirected public policy is being generated to increase social control, even though the real threat is minimal.

Study of Mod and Rockers by Cohen:

The first systematic empirical study of a moral panic in the UK was Stanley Cohen's research on the social reaction to the Mod and Rockers disturbance of 1964. (Cohen 1973b) (Munice, 2001: 50) A group of youths broke out sabotage in the seaside resort of Clacton over the Easter bank holiday in 1964. The events were to receive front page outrage in the national press. The media spoke out of ' a day of terror' of youngsters who ' beat up' entire town. Youth were described as organized gangs who deliberately caused trouble by acting aggressively towards local residents and destroyed a great deal of public property. In Cohen's research, however, found no evidence of any structured gangs within that area, thus, the total amount of serious violence and vandalism was not as great as media described. (Cohen, 1973)

According to the Cohen's analyses, it is obvious that media have exaggerated the seriousness of the Clacton event, in terms of criteria such as the number taking part, the number involved in violence and the amount and effects of any damage or violence. Such distortion took place primarily in terms of the mode and style of presentation characteristics of most crime reporting: the sensational headlines, the melodramatic vocabulary and the deliberate heightening of those elements in the story considered as news. (Cohen, 1973) The frequent use of misleading headlines and vocabulary like ' riot', ' beat up the town', ' attack', ' screaming mob' which were discrepant with the actual story and left an image of a besieged town from which innocent holidaymakers were fleeing to escape a marauding mob.

Media's distorted reporting not only exaggerated the seriousness of the initial events in 1964 but also amplified the youth deviance. The incessant news coverage of Mod and Rockers initiated a wider public concern, youth

are labeled as a symptom of social decline. They are portrayed as being outside the central core values of our consensual society and as posing a particular threat to society. (Cohen, 1981: 273) Once youths have been identified with negative labeling, they will believe themselves to be more deviant and segregating out from the community, which will create a greater risk of long term social disorder. Thus, overreaction of the police and general public will contribute to further polarization between youth and the society. As a result, more crime would be committed by stigmatize group and lead to less tolerance of deviants by conforming groups.(McRobbie and Thornton, 1995: 561) (Munice, 2001: 52)

As Cohen shows in Mod and Rocker study, The continuing disturbance attracted more news coverage would increase police activity and further public concern. Media exaggerate the problem can give rise to local events seem ones of pressing national concern, and an index of decline of morality standards, which obliged the police to step up their surveillance. Consequently, the stepping up of controls lead to further marginalization and stigmatization of deviants which, in turn, lead to more calls for police action and into a deviancy amplification spiral. (McLaughlin, 2001: 176)

Study of Mugging by Hall et al

Hall et al (1978) reused the concept the moral panic in identifying a series of ' major social problems' to do with permissiveness, vandals, student radicals and so on, culminating with the moral panic of mugging. Hall and others revealed that the media make use of moral panics to both define and distort

social problems was fleshed out into a general critique of the media's construction of social reality. (Munice, 2001: 52)

In Hall's ' study of mugging' in Policing the crisis, the media regarded mugging not as a particular type of robbery but rather ' a general social crisis and rising crime'. (Hall et al., 1978: 66) The media presented mugging as a new and rapidly growing phenomenon. In fact, the crime was not new, only the label was, and official statistics did not support the view that it was growing rapidly, however, with a name for the crime now in existence old offenses were categorized as such, creating the impression of growth. The media's generated " new" category of crime created the impression of a crime wave, it further whipped up a moral panic around the issue which served to legitimate an increase in punitive measures; they conclude that the media played a key role in developing and maintaining the pressure for law and order measures-for example, police ' mugging squads' and heavy sentences. (Munice, 2001: 52-53) (Hewitt, 1995: 17) In this regard, moral panic can strengthen the powers of state control and enabling law and order to be promoted without cognizance of the social divisions and conflicts which produce deviance and political dissent. (Munice, 2001: 55)

It is not just a new category of crime has been defined by media, the media misrepresentation of crime also stigmatize the black youth as the cause of mugging without further explaining the structural reason of the crime, like poverty, social deprivation and class and racial inequality. (Munice, 2001: 53) This ready application of stereotypes in ' mugging' crime reporting portray crime in a way to be depicted in terms of a basic confrontation between the symbolic forces of good and evil. The process of deprivation and modes of

social organization are rarely provided. (Chibnall, 1977: 79) As Hall concluded, crime reports tend to undo the complexities of crime by constructing a number of easy categories into which each type of crime can be placed. (Hall et al, 1978: 13-15) (Munice, 2001: 47)

After the analyses of issue of moral panic or fear of crime, there is one common element between two consequences of media representation of crime-both are generated by the media biased representation of crime. In order to investigate cases of apparent moral panic and fear of crime, it is necessary to understand how news is developed and the structural relationship between media and source of crime stories.

The element of newsworthiness:

The media appear to be involve in a continual search for the " new' unusual and dramatic. This is what makes the news. Under the market model (Cohen and Young, 1981), because of the business concern, news content needs to be generated and filtered primarily through reporter' sense of newsworthiness to produce what makes a good story that their audience wants to know about in order to engage audiences and increase readership. The core elements of these are immediacy, dramatization, personalization, titillation and novertly. (Chibnall, 1977: 22-45; Hall et al., 1978; Ericson et al., 1991) Thus, there are five sets of informal rules[2]of relevancy which govern the professional imperatives of popular journalism: these are visible and spectacular acts, sexual or political connotations, graphic presentation, individual pathology and deterrence and repression. (Chibnall, 1977: 77-79)

These rules help us to understand how news values are structured and explain why there is a predominant emphasis on violent offences.

Organizational pressures:

Besides the element of newsworthiness, there are a variety of concrete organizational pressures, for example, the periodicity, or timing, of the events and how they match the scheduling needs of the agency, cost effectiveness and efficiency, all these factors not only determine what is reported, they also lead to an unintended consequences- that is bolstering the law and order. (Reiner, 1997: 142) For example, numerous police personnel are available and willing to provide comments about an incident, which resulting in frequent citation of police sources in all types of crime stories. (Chermak, 1995: 38) Thus, court cases are frequently used by media, because lots of newsworthy cases are expected to recur regularly, therefore, court cases are an economic use of reporting resources. (Reiner, 1997: 221) Because police and courts' resources are easily accessible and constantly available, media become more habitually rely on them as the main source of news information, and over time, the structural dependence of media on between criminal justice bureaucracies will be established, which permits the institutional definers to establish the primary interpretation of the topic in question. (Hall et al, 1978: 58; Chibnall 1977: chaps. 3, 6; Schlesinger and Tumber 1993)

The notion of impartiality and the use of accredited source:

The notion of impartiality and the news source used by journalists are the crucial reason to explain media biased representation of crime and the

tendency towards institutional definers' ideology. (Hall, 1981: 341-343) The media reporting is underwritten by the notions of impartiality, balance and objectivity. (Hall et al., 1981: 341) The practical pressures of constantly working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and credibility resulted in constant use of accredited representative of major criminal justice institutions- the police, the courts and the Home Office as the main source of news. These institutional representative agents are " accredited" because they are in a position to provide initial definitions or primary interpretation of crime and locate them within the context of a continuing crime problem. Because they control over material and mental resources, which news media have little direct access to, and their domination of the major institutions of society, this class's definitions of the social world provide the basic rationale for those institutions which protect and reproduce their way of life. This control of mental resources ensures that theirs are the most powerful and universal of the available definitions of the social world. (Hall, 1981: 343) As a result, these rules which are originally aim to preserve the impartiality of media turn media as an apparatus to reproduce the definitions and ideology of primary definers.

The study of Crimewatch UK-case illustration of relationship between Media and source of crime news

The study of ' Crimewatch UK' by Schlesinger and Tumber (1993) is a modern example to illustrate the above argument. The production team of Crimewatch UK has heavily used the information provided by the criminal justice institutions as the main source of crime stories. It is partly because of the notion of cost effectiveness, more importantly, it is because they want to

make the program as ' documentary reconstruction' rather than merely a crime drama without a realistic and documentary basis. (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1993: 24) However, the police as the source of crime stories broadly define the terms of reference within which Crimewatch UK may operate. It can be shown by the ' two basic ground rules' of productions requested by the police in exchange for information: first, anything filmed would be embargoed and could not be used again unless the force involved gave its permission, and second, the police must reveal all the known facts and their suspicions to the Crimewatch team. (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1993: 23) Although the production team exercise editorial judgment over how the cases that they reconstruct are to be presented in television terms in order to maintain their impartiality, it is inevitable that their decisions are still within the criminal justice bureaucracies' defined framework. (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1993: 30) From the above analyses, we can see how the notion of impartiality lead to the use of accredited source, and how the source provider- the criminal justice institutions turn a documentary program into the police's public relations program to reproduce the definitions of primary definers.

Furthermore, this study also demonstrated the asymmetrical relationship between the news and source of information. Journalists are always in an inferior negotiating position in the negotiation process regarding to the definition and presentation of crime. News media are constrained to sacrifice their relationship with the police personnel because they fear losing information access. Reporters rarely challenge the police' perspective because of the information police can provide. As what Chibnall described, '

The reporter who cannot get information is out of a job, whereas the policeman who retains it is not'. (Chibnall, 1977: 155) This asymmetrical relationship between media and the source is evidently demonstrated in the case of Crimewatch study. Since the production team is heavily dependent upon the police to provide information of crime cases, they realize that if the police do not provide such information, the program can never be successfully produced. Therefore, editorial judgment is limited and the presentation of crime stories are constrained within the police's basic grounded rules and their defined framework.

Representation of crime and definition of criminal justice bureaucracies

Most commonly, the media are accused of exaggerating the risk of crime, representing an image of the world which is scary and mean, creating crime waves in order to cultivate moral sensibilities and fear among the society. However, such argument ignores the significant influence of the source of crime and overestimates the representation power of the media. It is important to understand that the power to construct social reality rests not merely with media, but also with those who can control the media's raw materials for news-the criminal justice institutions. (Fishman, 1981: 136) Crime news is mutually determined by journalists, whose image of crime is shaped by police concerns and by police, whose concerns with crime are influenced by media practices. However, if criminal justice bureaucracies are not cooperative in providing relevant information as requested by media, media would not have sufficient resource to form crime waves and representation of crime will be changed. In this regard, criminal justice institutions are the crucial determinant to define what is produced and

presented. Journalists convey an image of crime wholly accord with the police department's notion of serious crime and social order as orchestrating with criminal justice institutions. Therefore, as long as the routine source for crime news is criminal justice institutions, the presses are inevitable to reinforce the crime definition from criminal justice institutions.

Representation of crime and social control

According to hegemony theorists, media are regarded as a secondary definer to orchestrate with dominants' consent by actively intervening in the space of public opinion and social consciousness through the use of highly emotive and rhetorical language. This exaggerated way of presentation has a effect of requiring that ' something has to be done about it'. Thus, the " impartiality notions" of media can be served to ' objectify' a public issue. That is, the publicizing of an issue in the media can serve as an independent opinion to a real issue of public concern rather than merely official information or a direct projection of the government's ideology. In this regard, media can be leveraged as a public agenda setting function to translate primary definer's definition of crime into a public issue. (Hall et al., 1981: 346) Once the prolonged public agenda concern in particular crime is formed, moral sensibilities and anxiety are cultivated among society, the press can help to legitimate and reinforce the actions of the primary definer by bringing their own independent arguments to bear on the public in support of the actions proposed; or it can bring pressure to bear on the primary definers by summoning up public opinion in support of its own views that ' stronger measures' are needed. (Hall et al., 1981: 348)

In late 1976, a great deal of publicity and anxiety was generated over an apparent ' crime wave against the elderly' in New York, which led to the setup of a police sponsored community deference program. However, the official statistics did not support the view that violent crime against elderly was rapidly growing at the same time as the media were reporting a crime surge. The US sociologist Mark Fishman used this example to demonstrate the above argument. According to Fishman, the police do play a crucial role in reinforcing journalistically to produce concern about crime waves by selecting further incidents for reporters based on what has been covered before. Furthermore, the police are in a position to intimate perceptions of a crime wave themselves by the way in which they select crime incidents for their press release. (Fishman, 1981) In this regard, media play an orchestrating role to present what is defined by the police in order to create crime wave, the widespread of news coverage cultivated anxiety among society, as a result, like what we have concluded above, media in respond to public opinion to pressure the police in order to increase social control by forming the deference program. In this case, the initiation of social control can be legitimated as the reaction of the criminal justice institutions to the public opinion

Newspaper reports are disproportionately concentrated on violent crimes, even it seems they are not deliberately focus on this particular category of crime due to media's organizational pressures and code of practice, however, as what I have discussed above, without the source of news provided by criminal justice institutions, crime stories can never be formed. Therefore, the criminal justice institutions are also responsible to affect the

media representation of crime by manipulating the source of information. Criminal justice institutions and media can generate fear by providing same kind of crimes persistently in " epidemic" proportions. For instance, media will suddenly focus on crimes that they had previously ignored and report them to the public. (E. g. mugging and violent crimes against elderly) (Fishman, 1976). In this regard, criminal justice institutions and media are both responsible for exaggerating the magnitude of the problem to sustain public attention for prolonged periods, as a result, fear and moral sensibilities can be instilled. What is important to recognition that moral panic and fear of crime are the first link in a spiral of events leading to the maintenance of law in society by legitimize rule through coercion and the general exercise of authority. The sudden defining and focusing of the historically recurring event of street crime have created the impression of a crime wave, this provides government with the justification to introduce repressive legislation in order to increase its control among the society. (Munice, 2001: 53) Since fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard line postures. They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities and other anxieties. (Signorielli 1990: 102) (Reiner, 1997: 217) Consequently, the report of crime waves will produce public pressure to call for tough authoritative institutional control, public support can be mustered to institute formal sanctions.

The study of ' Mod and Rocker' by Stanley Cohen and the study of ' muggers' by Stuart Hall and his fellows both demonstrate media's exaggeration of crime risks is claimed to increase political support for authoritarian solutions

to a crisis of law and order which is largely the creation of media misrepresentation of crime. Media act in a role to stigmatize young Afro-Caribbean as ' folk devils' and generate moral panic in order to created social conditions of consent for the construction of a society more focused towards law and order. The government uncontrollable and structural causes of social unrest can be overlooked, when the public gaze is fixed by stigmatizing young Afro-Caribbean as visual symbols of ' what was wrong in society', with the increase of social control measures initiated by the government. As a result, the threats of society seems to be eliminated by social and legislative action; the tough punitive measures can be legitimized to control the unstable social environment, the legitimacy of the government can be reassured by providing public a image of strong government and strong leadership. (Cohen, 1973; Munice, 2001: 52; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995: 562, Hewitt, 1995: 12-16)

The media not only exaggerate crimes, on the other hand, they portray the criminal justice bureaucracies, especially the police in a positive light. Routine news reporting about police and crime has a public relations function for police, promoting organizational and occupational ideologies. (Ericson, 1991: 224) The news media dramatize the police's routine works and give the police a ceremonial force. This has promotional value for the police, because it often shows them to be quite effective in fighting crime. (Marsh 1988) (Ericson, 1991: 224)

Several researchers have examined the relationship between news and police personnel (Chibnall, 1977; Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1989; Fishman, 1980; Hall et al., 1978) . Most ethnographic research concludes that the

police determine what is presented in the news, and describe news media as conduits for police ideology (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1980; Hall et al., 1978) Police frame crime stories in a self promoting way to exaggerate their effectiveness by compiling statistics on performance measures such as the number of offences as well as arrest data. Furthermore, the police can decide when story information should be released, limiting access to reports and diverting attentions from specific events, in order to manipulate media's representation of crime and criminal justice. The US sociologist Chermak's media contend analysis study (Chermak, 1995) and Roshier's study in the UK[3]both evident that (Schlesinger and Tumber, reading list: 186) criminal justice bureaucracies, especially the police can manipulate the media's representation of crime and criminal justice system by manipulating information in order to provide a favorable image of police and strengthen the state's legitimacy. Furthermore, it has been also suggested by Carlson (1985) that such biased representation of criminal justice bureaucracies can lead to support of more social control. He claims to show that heavier television viewers are comparatively ill-informed about legal process; they have a propensity to believe that the police are effective in combating crime and support. As a result, heavy viewers are tended to support more social control. (Sparks 1992, , Ericson, 1991: 283)

Criticism of hegemony and Hall's theory:

The theory of hegemony has been criticized by many scholars that it has paid inadequate attention to the communication process. They argued that the hegemony theory supporters have been characterized by a tendency to treat media as homogeneous, this largely ignores the distinctiveness of

particular media and the ways in which such media are internally

differentiated. (Schlesinger et al., 1990: 96-97; Ericson et al, 1991)

It has been suggested by Ericson et al that there are systematic variations

between the presentations of crime in different media and markets.(Ericson

et al, 1991) This is partly because of they have different variants to political

and professional journalistic ideology according to patterns of ownership and

perceived audience. There are interconnected with differences in

technological resources, budge