

To what extent can it
be claimed that the
media portrayals
assignment



Most individuals would agree that the media has an influence on us, although they themselves claim to not be influenced by its effects. The representation of crime and criminals has provoked consternation. It has been suggested that such representations inflate our fear of crime far beyond our actual risks of becoming victims. Those who are least at risk of being a victim of crime, old people and females, are those who live in most fear because it is young men that are more likely to be victims of crime (Hough and Mayhem, 1983; cited in Muncie 1996, p. 6). Moral panics are also a topic worthy of discussion as some, such as Stan Cohen, suggest that their origins are within the media and are the root of our fear of crime. There is no doubt that the media over represents many crimes that are seen as 'newsworthy, with 45.8 per cent of the space in news for crime being designated to crimes in which have a violent or sexual nature (Dutton and Duffy 1983, cited in Muncie 1996 p. 44).

This means that the viewers are receiving a disproportionate representation of what is taking place in society and in turn leading them to believe these serious crimes are more common than what they actually are. In fact the amount of violent crimes committed has decreased by 47% as to what it was in 1995 (British Crime Survey, 2011 p. 57) and so suggests that the media does play a part in public fear of crime. It is not simply that crime is over represented in the news that creates fear among the public, but the way the news presents it to us.

We are often shown the two opposing opposites, "good threatened by evil or law and order threatened by crime and chaos" (William, 2008, p. 46). This means that the media portrays crime in such a way that we cannot see how

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the perpetrator could possibly be anything other than “ a lenient, immoral and a threat” (Muncie J, 1996, p. 44). Not only this, but by portraying this image of the criminal it suggests to the public that this is the common behavior for all criminals (William, 2008), and thus ignoring crimes which take place more often and are less serious.

Things such as petty theft and being a nuisance are more widespread crimes but are often looked over as they are not ‘ newsworthy. It is not only the criminal that is portrayed in such a way as to amplify our fear of crime, but also the victim. The media emphasizes the goodness and vulnerability in the victim as to make it seem more dramatic about how anyone could possibly want to harm them. As William states, the media focuses on crimes “ whose victims are particularly vulnerable or ‘ newsworthy” (2008, p. 46).

Not only are the public shocked and appalled by this, but fear is heightened due to seeing it as a potential threat to their own vulnerabilities. This means that not only does the way the media portray present the people involved. Moral panics and folk devils are thought to some as repercussions of the media’s over imaginative ways of becoming successful. Others see them as simply reinforcing what we already believe; either way the public find themselves at risk of living in fear and being discriminative towards these groups labeled as folk devils’.

The term ‘ Folk Devils’, from which moral panics followed, was famously used by ex-prime minister Edward Heath and since then the list has been added to. After the 9/11 attacks terrorists have been the base of a new moral panic that is still prevalent even today. Some say that moral panics are simply

media constructions, as is demonstrated in Cone's study of the moods and rockers. Cohen found that the groups at the time were not at all popularized, but the media played on the idea of 'moods and rockers' and so creating two new gangs which set up public fear of youth subcultures. Muncie (1987, p. 3) describes this in terms of labeling, "they had been singled out as society's folk devils' and acted out their role accordingly in subsequent years". However not all agree that these moral panics are the cause of the media's influence on our fear of crime, but simply as reinforcing what people already know (Crawford et al 1990, cited in Muncie 1996 p. 57). However, the moods and rockers behavior was too new as Person's study on Hooliganism found similar behavior to Teddy boys being played out here; yet the moods and rockers were the only group up to this point to reach the headlines.

The way in which the media presented this story must have had an impact otherwise it would've been treated the same as the Teddy boys, and so shows that the way the media portrays criminal acts does influence public fear of crime. Stranger danger is another area in which media coverage has led to public fear. Strokes (2009, p. 16) suggests that it is already a feared element of society in which the media inflates and communicates to the public. The case of Jamie Bugler is particularly considered to be key here.

The young boy was abducted from a shopping centre in Liverpool and was murdered. Since then many other cases have arisen, with Sarah Payne in 2000, and more recently Madeleine McCann being both well known to the public. All these cases were, and still are sometimes, emphasized in the media. The term stranger danger itself promotes fear without the media
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needing to act upon it, and so in doing so they feed on the fear that is already there. From the examples above we can see that the way the media portrays criminal acts leads to us drawing conclusions and so suggests it does influence us.

We need to remember that the public have their own minds and can “interpret the information they receive” (Rosier 1973, cited in Muncie 1996, p. 50); the audience of the media is not passive, but very much active and can decide what to make of what they consume. However, although very simplistic to suggest the entire public is passive, theorists such as Marx make relevant points that the media is to serve the interests of the ruling class, those who own the media.