

# Do the media inform or misinform the public about the nature

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



There is continuous debate on the effectiveness of media reporting with regards to informing the public about crime. The media have motive, methods by, which they distort information, and evidence of the affects of their misinforming the public. However the media do inform the public with regards to problems in our society, without the media we would know nothing. The public also need to be thought of when trying to decipher whether the media does in fact misinform them.

There are certain motives, which may suggest that the media do in fact misinform the public with regards to the nature and extent of crime. The Marxist 'mass manipulation' models suggest that the excess of crime stories are there as a way to divert attention away from the real problems in a capitalist society. They see media manipulation and distortion as a way in, which the upper classes control and extend their power out over the lower or working classes. Through diverting attention away from central issues the upper classes are able to retain their power and the established social hierarchy.

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it'<sup>1</sup>. The Marxist 'mass manipulation' model also proposed the idea that the media orchestrate moral panics in order to legitimise the introduction of greater social control measures. So Marxist theorists therefore felt that the media misinforms the public with regards to the nature and extent of crime in order to secure their social position.

However can we really draw such a distinct line between the media/upper class and the public/lower class? Surely it is the working class that are producing, writing and developing the media, for as the label suggests, they are working. So how can it be proposed that the media misinforms the public, when those that produce the media are in fact, the public? It could be said that the media therefore is an opinion, and how can an opinion be misinforming, it is not fact it is merely an interpretation of an event expressed by the public for the public.

In spite of this there is another motive for the media to need to distort information and therefore misinform the public is the competition between media sources. McManus (1992) did a study of a Scottish television station he found that; " 18 of the 32 stories analysed -- 56 percent -- were inaccurate or misleading. " McManus also found a pattern to the miss-coverage: " There is an economic logic to these distortions and inaccuracies. All but one... were likely to increase the story's appeal, help cut down the cost of reporting or oversimplify a story so it could be told in two minutes.

As the Marxist theory proposes, we live in a capitalist society, where the social structure is determined by those with money and therefore power. Consequently the media wish to secure as many sales as possible and make the highest profit. To do this they often distort information as to promote its interest and subsequent sales. Leading to the public being misinformed with regards to the nature and extent of many crime stories as a way to promote sales. A way in, which the media distort information and mislead the public is through sensationalism.

This is where media sources such as the papers sensationalise events with shock headlines, and present the story as good threatened by evil. Reports are presented in a dramatic and unusual way so as to capture the readers imagination; for example, reporting of rape focuses on dramatic attacks by strangers in public places, whereas women are more likely to be raped in private by someone they know<sup>2</sup> Also once a criminal is convicted, the papers often print sensational information: irrespective of its accuracy: as often the criminal has no reputation to be protected and so the papers need not fear prosecution.

For example Schlesinger and Tumber<sup>3</sup> studying press coverage of a conviction in a sex murder case, show how the popular press used such headings as, 'weirdo's sick lust' and, 'he should never have existed'. So through media sensationalism the public is presented with a distorted view of reality. Criminals and situations are often presented as far worse than they actually are, misleading the public as to the nature and extent of the crime committed. Another way in, which the media distort information in order to gain the publics attention, is through selective reporting or media bias.

The media are obviously unable to print every story and so they select only the stories, which they deem 'news worthy'. Jock Young (1974) claimed that the media 'select events that are atypical, present them in a stereotypical fashion and contrast them against a backcloth of normality, which is over-typical'. Reporters are not interested in the most common crimes, involving the most usual victims of crime. They instead concentrate on the on the

more serious crimes, or the ones where the victim is particularly vulnerable, or 'newsworthy'. Steven Chibnall (1977)<sup>4</sup> noted five items, which enhance the likelihood of a story being reported.

If it was a 'visible or spectacular act', if it included 'political or sexual connotations', 'graphic presentation', 'individual pathology,' or if it contained any traces of 'deterrence or repression'. So an item is most likely to be reported if it includes an act of public violence, to a seemingly innocent stranger, preferable containing political or sexual connotations. Also if the victim is particularly vulnerable, such as old, very young or female (especially if attractive) there is an even higher likelihood of the incident being reported.

This media bias leads to certain items receiving far more press coverage than others. Box (1981) claimed that: " 90% of media space devoted to the reporting of crimes concentrates on serious crimes such as wilful homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary and theft and crimes currently fanning social hysteria such as drug trafficking and abuse" <sup>5</sup>. This statement is supported by a variety of studies; Susan Smith (1984)<sup>6</sup> did a survey of local Birmingham newspapers.

She found that 'personal offences, including robbery and assault with intent to rob, occupied 52. % of the space allocated to crime stories in newspapers, but represented less than 6% of recorded crimes, whereas theft not involving direct contact only occupied 3. 8% of the allotted space, but represented 89. 9% of recorded offences'<sup>7</sup>. She concluded that more emotive crimes were

played up, but less exciting crimes were played down. So the media exaggerates certain stories in order to attract more public attention, however this leads to the public being misinformed as to the nature and especially the extent of many criminal offences.

The excessive reporting of more violent and 'emotive' acts may cause the public to have an exaggerated and misguided fear of these offences. The cultivation theory offers a similar perspective on the affects of the media. It proposes that the excessive amounts of violence portrayed by the media could lead to an exaggerated public fear of crime. It has been labelled the 'mean world syndrome', as people are said to begin to believe that the world is as mean and dangerous in real life as it is in the media. 'We are awash in a tide of violent representations unlike any the world has ever seen ....

Drenching every home with graphic senses of expertly choreographed brutality'<sup>8</sup>. The theory considers the idea that the excessive coverage of violence in the media, misleads the public into thinking that there is far more violence in real life than statistics show there is. Moral panics can be seen as evidence of the effects that media distortion can have on the public.

Exaggerated and distorted media coverage of events can cause moral panics, an issue first studied by Cohen (1972)<sup>9</sup>. He published his research in the book titled 'Folk devils and Moral Panics'.

He focused his research on the rivalry in the 1960's between two gangs, named the Mods and the Rockers. Who were famed for their violent confrontations, mainly occurring in British seaside resorts on bank holidays.

Cohen believed that the media exaggerated various aspects connected to these confrontations. He proposed that the media fabrication had not only misled the public but had also begun a series of interrelated responses. Due to the exaggerated media coverage the authorities (police etc) were obliged to step up their surveillance, the result of this were more arrests etc which appeared to validate the initial media reaction.

Also and more importantly by emphasising the antagonism between the two groups (Mods and Rockers) and by acknowledging stylistic differences youths were then forced to place themselves in one of the two groups. This polarisation cemented the original image and led to more trouble at further seaside resorts. Not only this but the continuing disturbances due to the polarisation created by the media meant more media coverage, increased police activity resulting in more public concern.

The media had in fact created a far worse situation through their misrepresentation of the original confrontation. Hence moral panics help identify instances of media exaggeration and distortion and Cohen's (1972) study of the Mods and Rockers demonstrates the affects that media distortion and misinforming can have on the public. However Cohen did note another possible explanation for the reaction of the public and society. He felt that it could have been a result of the changing times, it was the 'swinging sixties', a rise in youth spending power with the onslaught of new consumerism.

Cohen (1972) felt that the public would have felt anxiety and uncertainty due to the ensuing changes at the time and due to this they would resolve to identify certain groups as scapegoats or 'folk devils', and cause these to become the visual representation of what was wrong with society. The public was able to look at the symptoms rather than the causes of the social unrest. So the fact that the people were highly vulnerable at this time could also offer an explanation for what happened. However it must be acknowledged that despite how vulnerable people were, it was the media that misinformed them and caused the situation to become worse.

However it cannot be said that the media purely misinforms the public with regards to the nature and extent of crime. The media enables us to have contact with the outside world, and without it we would remain ignorant of occurrences outside of our own direct social groups. How could the general public around the world have known about the crash at the twin towers? The media is a vital informant and link to what is happening in the world, and in that respect informs us with regards to crime.

However it could be said that the media, although informing the public about crime, it could be argued that it in fact misinforms the public with regards to the nature and extent of the criminal act. Another way in, which the media can be seen to be informing the public about crime. Is through the public not allowing themselves to simply absorb the more fictional issues presented by the media. If the public is seen as passive recipients of the information being pumped out by the media, then yes it may well be said that the media misinforms the public.



But Jock Young (1974) identified three ways in, which the media can affect public opinion; by mass manipulation, by a commercial 'laissez faire', or by the 'consensual paradigm'<sup>10</sup>. The mass manipulation effect proposes that the media misinforms the public in order to retain power, seeing the public as passive sponges. So some people may well be misinformed or misguided by the media. However the idea of the public being informed by a commercial 'laissez faire' or by the 'consensual paradigm'.

Proposes the idea that the public are rational beings, able to sift through the information provided by the media and choose to believe such information that s/he views as most likely to portray the truth. So it could be said that although the media provide information that in theory could misinform the public, the public are capable of telling the fact from the fiction. This argument however can be challenged by the findings from Cohen's (1972) study of the Mods and Rockers, which showed that the public by and large do believe the media portrayals of such instances.

So it is unlikely that many people are able to be completely unaffected by the medias misrepresentations of crime. The media has been proved to be very influential and a powerful device in swaying public opinion. There is motive, method and evidence, which all suggest that the media do in fact purposefully misinform the public, with regards to the nature and extent of crime. However when taking the opinion that the media purely misinforms the public, one assumes that the public are passive recipients of information.

It also ignores the fact that it is in fact the working class that are working to produce the media. The conclusion can be drawn that the media do inform the public as to what is going on around the world, but due to the fierce competition and perhaps the lust to retain power. They use methods such as sensationalism and selective reporting, which do present a distorted perspective of an incident. However it is up to the public as to whether they choose to accept this version of events, or take it with 'a pinch of salt'.