

Media influences on publics fear of crime media essay



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Fear of Crime, Violent Behavior And Policy Changes. Mass media is obsessed with crime. Today in our society, as well as other western societies, crime seems to be a topic of fascination. The criminal justice system appears throughout the mass media. From television shows and films to books, newspapers and magazines, crime turns up for everyone to see. By the 1970s the crime or police drama had replaced the western for the most prevalent prime-time television fare (Doyle, 2006). The boundary between crime entertainment and crime information has been blurred progressively more in the past years (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). Roughly half of the newspapers and television items people come into contact with are concerned with crime, justice or deviance (Doyle, 2006). With the bombardment of criminal images surrounding people every day, the mass media often influences how people look at crime. The picture presented in the media of crime differs from the picture by official and other statistics (Doyle, 2006). How the public fears crime, the violent behavior associated with it and even some policy changes are all thought to be influenced by the media. While there is some debate as to how much influence the media actually has on these things, there is some evidence to suggest there is some connection.

The study of media influences on crime has increased substantially throughout the years. In more than 30 years the interest and diversity of the field has expanded substantially, along with our knowledge about the interplay between the media and crime. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s Gerbner et al (1980) works expanded the knowledge about the relationship between the consumption of various media sources, mainly

television, and the fear of crime. Heath and Gilbert's (1996) works on how audience traits affects and Liska and Baccaglini (1990) works on direct experience expand the understanding of how different characteristics could affect the media's influence on the fear of crime.

When people interact with the mass media, they are often showered with criminal images. It is suggested by many that this bombardment of criminal images people experience can lead to a higher fear of crime. Since many of these images are violent or include violence in some way, they can cause the public to overestimate how much crime there is. Throughout the years, more and more crime has been mentioned in the media. There is a highly skewed presentation of crime highlight stories of select forms of crime (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). It seems the old adage "if it bleeds, it leads" is true when it comes to news stories. The most serious and violent crimes are given the best entertaining angles and are presented as hard news, even if the facts are distorted and misrepresented (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). Often times crime in the media is stylized as "infotainment", that is it is presented in a way that is edited, stylized and formatted in a way that is camouflaged as realistic and informative (Surrette, 2006). People associate the information they see on the television to real life. If the television shows elevated crime rates, real life must also. The line between media crime and real life crime has become blurred.

For example, studies in Canada have found that despite significantly lower crime rates, Canadians are more afraid of crime than their American counterparts (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). It is not quite known why this is the case since both countries enjoy much of the same viewing habits. It

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seems that maybe the line between reality and media portrayals of crime have blurred even more for Canadians than for Americans. This could lead to potentially remarkable analyses of how people filter news, reality shows and drama to construct their ideas about crime (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). In addition, television series and movies have seemed to make the move towards criminal themes. These criminal justice themes run throughout many American television shows, each showing a skewed view of justice in which the public absorbs.

There is some debate among researchers as to whether or not the mass media actually influences the public's fear of crime. In an earlier study, Gerbner et al (1980) found that individuals who watch mass amounts of television show a higher rate of fear towards their environment than those who watch a less television. A later study conducted in the 2000s seemed to partially reinforce Gerbner's early results. Even when controlling for age, gender, race, income, education and marital status, people who watched crime shows regularly showed a significantly higher rate of being fearful of crime (Dowler K. , 2003). On the other hand, the hours of television as the primary source of crime news was not significantly related to the fear of crime (Dowler K. , 2003). The crime portrayed on the television is more violent, haphazard and hazardous than the crime in reality. Those who are exposed to it more internalize these images and develop a mean world view (Dowler K. , 2003). Crime show viewers were more likely to worry about being sexually assaulted, shot or stabbed and getting killed. On the other hand, Rice and Anderson found a weak association between television viewing and the fear of crime (Dowler K. , 2003). While Dowler himself found

that there was a statistically significant relationship between the watching of crime shows regularly and the fear of crime, he also found that it was not a strong relationship (Dowler K. , 2003).

Who is viewing the stories and where the person is located influences how much influence the media has on the fear of crime. Heath and Gilbert (1996) suggest that the relationship between the mass media and the fear of crime is contingent on the audience and the message. Large amounts of local crime news increased fear among those who lived in the area while large amounts of non-local crime had the opposite effect (Dowler K. , 2003).

Chiricos et al (2000) also found that local and national news affected the fear of crime. They found that the effect of local news was greater for residents of high crime neighborhoods. Also, those who live in high crime areas and watch large amounts of television were more likely to be fearful of crime (Dowler K. , 2003).

Other factors, like experience and demographics, influence whether or not media consumption affects the fear of crime. For instance, when a person has a direct experience with a particular crime in a story, he or she is less likely to be influenced by that story. It is when direct experience is lacking that the media influences the fear of crime the most (Liska & Baccaglini, 1990). Gerbner et al (1980) found that the relationship between the fear of crime and the amount of television watched was greatest for females and whites. Another researcher also found that the females, whites and the elderly were more likely to be fearful of crime even though they had a lower risk of being victimized (Dowler K. , 2003).

As mass media grew in size and number, the fear that the violent images seen on television caused violent behavior seemed to increase as well. From research on video games to violent television shows, trying to understand whether or not violence in the media causes violent behavior has been a topic of vast discussion. For centuries people have been concerned with the corrupting nature of media, dating back to at least ancient Greek and Roman times. Plato cautioned that plays and poetry may have detrimental effects on youth and should be burned (Ferguson, 2010). Throughout history, people have been arguing that violent media could lead to violent or unwanted behavior from those who are exposed to it. In the 1930s social research on the matter began and the Payne Fund studies were released which suggested a link between movie watching and aggressive behavior (Ferguson, 2010). Setting the stage for the debate that was to come, critics noticed a lack of control groups and difficulty measuring aggression (Ferguson, 2010). Several decades later the debate would really begin to take off with the introduction of the television into society and a few decades later moral crusaders began to link crime waves with the mass production of the device. Violent crime spiked in the late 1970s to the 1980s but even though the rates were comparable to those before 1930, a link was established by looking only at a slice of America's crime patterns (Ferguson, 2010).

In the 1970s video games came onto the market with the launch of first game console. Almost immediately debate as to whether violent video games could have an adverse effect on children's development started. This concern for the violence developing because of the video games at the time

was founded since according to the American Psychology Association's pamphlet violent behavior is learned, not genetic (Ferguson, 2010).

When Grand Theft Auto was introduced to the market, the debate really began to take off. David Grossman, a respected activist, claims video games desensitize youth to killing because they simulate the real thing. His main argument claims these killing, violent video games mimic combat and the US military actually uses similar devices to desensitize soldiers so they will be more willing to kill an enemy combatant (Ferguson, 2010). He argues that since the military began to use simulators, soldiers in combat are more likely to shoot and kill an enemy soldier than a WWII soldier (Ferguson, 2010). He also claims that exposure to violent media and specifically violent video games can be a predictor of youth violence (Ferguson, 2010). In an extensive meta-analysis study conducted by Anderson et al (2010), they found that violent video games stimulate aggression in players and increase violent behavior later in life. After playing for a short while, Anderson showed that mild aggressive behavior increased in youth for a short while. After repeated, habitual exposure to the violent game, the youth's aggressive behavior became worse and even became physical on occasion.

On the other hand, while some researchers have found some positive relationships between violent video games and violent behavior, others have found no relationship or a negative one. Others who have found effects, when looked at closer by critics the relationship disappears when certain factors are accounted for. It is also said that meta-analysis of violent video games produce inconsistent and weak results (Ferguson, 2010). Sherry (2007) found that a meta-analysis on video games produced weak effects <https://assignbuster.com/media-influences-on-publics-fear-of-crime-media-essay/>

and the results were even weaker than for the television (Sherry, 2001).

Numerous other researchers produced similar results that violent video games did not have an effect on the violent or aggressive behavior of children and youth. Even with their interactive nature, video games do not produce more of an effect on violent behavior than television or anything else.

In the case of television, there is much debate as to whether or not there is a relationship between violent media and violent behavior. While some research has shown that violent television and media have an effect on violent behavior others do not. In a two year longitudinal study done by Hopf and associates, they found that the more frequently children view horror and violent films and the more frequently they play violent video games at the beginning of teenage years, the higher their violence and aggression rates will be at the age of 14 (Hopf, Huber, & Weiß, 2008). Other research by Anderson and associates found that exposure to any kind of violent media, whether it is television or video games, increases the risk of violent or aggressive behavior in both immediate and long term contexts (Anderson, et al., 2003). Short-term exposure to violent media increases aggressive thoughts, behavior and emotions (Anderson, et al., 2003). Earlier research results tended to show that short term exposure could increase aggression in people (Drabman & Thomas, 1974). Many of the studies done throughout the years have shown that exposure to violence on television through film and series increases people's aggressive and violent behavior but there are a few critics out there claiming the effect is small and/or weak.

Political policy changes are also thought to be influenced by the media. Since we are contently surrounded by media texts, it is reasonable to conclude that the media would have some influence on policy. Particularly gruesome, heinous crimes have tremendous appeal to the media. Since these stories sell and are attractive to both consumers and the producers, these types of crimes often saturate the airwaves and print material. The media can construct a new crime problem or can construct a moral panic around a particular crime by twisting and relaying facts. By creating a moral panic or by creating fear and anxiety around a crime, public pressure for solutions to problems are put on political figures. Some researchers found that the presentations of crime news increases pubic pressure for more effective policing and more punitive responses to crime (Dowler K. , 2003). Dowler (2003) also found that those with a college education were more likely to hold non-punitive attitudes. It was suggested that these people were more likely to recognize the inequality of the justice system (Dowler K. , 2003). Crime news has been long understood to have influence in moving society towards law and order campaigns, increasing social control and punitive responses to criminal conduct (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). Research has indicated a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between the media and policy (Dowler, Fleming, & Muzzatti, 2006). The message from the media outlets is clear: there is a strong support for more critiques of police efforts, harsher measures, stronger laws and/or an increase prison sentences.

Although the debate rages on as to whether or not the media actually influence the fear of crime, violent behavior and policy changes, there are

some things that future research needs to consider. First of all, one should be careful not to make associations prematurely. Assumptions should be made carefully about the production or reception of media products when the analyses based on the media products themselves (Doyle, 2006).

Numerous researchers use the media texts themselves to make assumptions about the production and reception of different forms of media. Many times it is also assumed that the audience taking in the various media forms conforms to a dominant ideology the same way. While this may work for some research, work rooted in various critical theories should avoid this mistake and not assume a homogeneous public (Doyle, 2006).

Secondly, one should acknowledge the considerable diversity and complexity in media organizations, production, formats and audiences (Doyle, 2006).

Media and crime are both complex entities which researchers need to take into account. Crime in the media is a diverse phenomenon that needs to be accounted for. It shouldn't be oversimplified and unified. It is assumed that crime in the media isn't as varied and complex as other social phenomena. Often times the media reports have a pack mentality in which they try to appeal to a wide population. On the surface this may make it seem as though it is a homogeneous entity but in reality it is more complex. One key flaw in academic and other accounts of crime in the media a unitary, reductionist reading in terms (Doyle, 2006). This flaw should be changed by accounting for the fragments and recognizing that neither the audience nor the media texts themselves are homogeneous. More complex, specific, and contingent way of thinking about crime is needed when thinking about how it is represented in the media (Doyle, 2006).

In order to explore effects or influences has been to move away from the construct of a homogenous audience and look directly at the repercussions of representations of crime in the news media in particular political and institutional contexts (Doyle, 2006). Specific media coverage could provide some insight into how the media actually influences the criminal justice system and the public. Political consequences should be considered when looking at influences and effects. It could prove to be easier to analyze effects directly on political events and other institutional contexts. Case studies should be used to show the political effects on political episodes of media coverage in a more specific, localized way (Doyle, 2006). For example, in New York, police and politicians used the media to manufacture a crime wave which served their own ends by resulting in more police resources and tougher laws. Analyzing more direct political and institutional effects of crime and the medial represent an advance (Doyle, 2006). It offers perhaps the best way of approaching the question of how news-media coverage contributes to the politics of law and order (Doyle, 2006). It also opens up more questions about the place of crime stories in the lives of individuals, questions that cannot effectively be answered by “ the fear of crime” topics (Doyle, 2006).

Lastly, researchers should give more attention to the very substantial interplay between crime news and crime fiction (Doyle, 2006). Most researchers only consider one subject, even though there is often similar and intersecting public concern. These common approaches ignore the fact that these two aspects could be intertwined. Both news and entertainment media texts interact, shape and are shaped by frames of meaning about crime and

punishment (Doyle, 2006). Sometimes fictional television shows take their stories from news headlines. These shows incorporate the story of real life and when seen by the public it is often interpreted in that context. Both of these factors seem to be interpreted together by the public as a package. Since these items are absorbed together and not separately from each other, they should also be studied as such.

There have been lots of efforts and difficulty to try and isolate and measure influences of the media on crime. For example, many critics have come forward questioning whether or not the media actually influences the fear of crime. It has been widely criticized for the way it operationalizes key concepts, like simply counting the number of hours people watch television and contrasting the attitudes of high viewers and low viewers (Doyle, 2006). Other factors need to be taken into account in order to make sure there is an actual relationship. For example, while it could be suggested that watching lots of television causes fear of crime, it could be that those who are fearful of crime tend to watch lots of television (Doyle, 2006). It is not clear which factor causes the other. While lots of research has been done to try and figure out which way the causation goes, it is more likely that fear and media consumption reinforce each other (Doyle, 2006).

In an effort to isolate causality in the media more control has been imposed through the creation of experimental situations (Doyle, 2006). This has mostly been used in violent behavior and television violence relation studies. One key problem with this study is external validity: it becomes difficult to judge how the artificial environment generalizes to the outside world (Doyle, 2006).

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There is much debate as to whether or not media actually influences crime and criminal behavior. While some researchers contend that the effect of media influence is significant, others claim it is weak, if not nonexistent. Even if we are not influenced by them as strongly as some believe, they are still all around us. Crime is ever present while the lines between reality and the media continue to be blurred. No matter what one believes, one thing is for sure: we are and will continue to be bombarded with media images.