

Critically analyse the  
media's role in  
shaping public  
perceptions of crime  
essay ...



The media plays an extremely big role in how the public perceive, both crime in their local area or nationally. What most people think crime is and the definition used by Treadwell (2006) is "behaviour that breaks the criminal law." This is a very broad definition, whereas Tappan (1947: 100) describes crime to be "An intentional act in violation of the criminal law... committed without defence or excuse, and penalised by the state as a felony or misdemeanour. In studying the offender there can be no presumptions that... persons are criminals unless they also are held guilty beyond a reasonable doubt of a particular offence.

There are many ways in which the public can find out about crime and the most popular and most accessible of these are, television, newspapers or internet sites. However many of these sources use sensationalist language in their main headlines and content to gauge the public's attention. This is particularly common in tabloid newspapers, which write a shocking headline but write very little information on the actual crime, for example, the Daily Star newspaper covered a story on the 30th of October titled 'Ferry's officer left 3 boat pals to die. It then goes on to write four short paragraphs about the incident but uses only select details for maximum effect.

The Daily Mirror newspaper covered the same story using effectively the same format as the Daily Star but with the headline 'Yacht 3 died after ferry officer failed to raise alarm, Jury hear.' Comparing the same story in broadsheet newspapers, there are many differences to the tabloid newspapers. Though the headlines are still used as a shock tactic, for example, The Times used the title 'Ferry officer' left sailors to drown. It then goes on to describe the incident in a lot more detail.

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It explains both the circumstances leading up to the accident and how the trial is unfolding presently. The broadsheet newspapers use photographs effectively to personalise the article so that the reader can relate more to the article. Broadsheet newspapers also contain some analysis of the causes of crime rather than just focusing on the incidents of crime, unlike the tabloids which provide little attention to the causes.

The over dramatised stories in the tabloids portray an unrealistic view of crime, reporting mostly on what Mike Presdee calls 'spectacular crimes.' These tend to consist of 'great robberies, serial killers, gang leaders or sexual predators.' (Presdee, 2005, p. 185) He claimed that although these crimes are the ones most published they make up only a small percentage of the crimes either reported or recorded in any given year. Presdee saw the large number of crimes as petty by nature and crimes which many people would consider unimportant or not really proper crime.

Danny Shaw the BBC's home affairs correspondent had the same view as Presdee saying "People fed a diet of murders, muggings and rapes in newspapers and on television, are left with the impression that crime is rocketing." (Shaw, 2003) In the 2006/7 British Crime Survey it was found that 2 out of 3 people believe nationally crime has risen. Whereas only 2 out of 5 people believe crime has risen in their local area. People are inclined to think crime is down in their local area but has risen nationally.

However the 'Measuring Crime For 25 Years' report showed an overall fall in crime of 42% since 1995. There are two explanations for the difference between people's views on crime and the figures and they are, "the crime

figures are just not displaying the reality, or peoples views of reality are being distorted by other influences, like the media coverage of crime. ”

(Shaw, 2003) Studies such as victimisation studies and self-report studies show that women and older people are most fearful of crime, but young men are most likely to be victims of crime.

Two key factors in creating this fearfulness of crime is, (1) Believing you are likely to be a victim of crime and (2) Perceived high levels of physical disorder in your area. Studies also show that tabloid readers are twice as likely to worry about crime as a broadsheet newspaper reader, this is because the more downmarket the newspaper, the greater proportion of space given to crime features. In 1993, Williams and Dickinson conducted a study which found The Guardian gave only 5. 1% of its space to crime whereas The Sun gave a much larger percentage of 30. 4%.

However another study found that broadcast news such as television and radio news shows dedicated even more attention crime than the newspapers, with “ Commercial stations containing a higher proportion of crime features than the BBC. ” (Cumberbatch et al, 1995) Peoples concerns about crime have been found to be associated with the papers they read. Compared to people who read broadsheet newspapers, tabloid readers according to the British Crime Survey were found to be twice as likely to be ‘ very worried’ about rapes, physical attacks, muggings and burglary’s.

Tabloids also tend to headline the more dramatic and negative aspects of official crime statistics for example, ‘ Crime Soars-muggings up by 28%’

(Daily Mail, 12-7-2002) These types of headlines create Moral Panics among

the general public, as Hall et al (1978) found in his study of Muggings. He argued that the state arranged a moral panic around mugging. Portraying the young black male as always the criminal. This creation of a 'folk devil' meant that all the 'civilised' people could unite against the criminal. The state could then appear to be handling the problem by 'policing the crisis', a crisis which really did not exist.

Some argued that the creation of moral panic's by the media to help rush through some government legislation hoping to fix a problem for example, binge drinking doesn't really work, but instead makes the problem and the public's perception of it much worse. On the other hand, the people who read the tabloid newspapers tend to be working class people who live in inner city areas or council estates. Places where violent crime is probably highest. Rather than causing a fear of crime, the tabloid newspapers could possibly be just reflecting it.

Crawford et al (1990) said " In inner city areas, mass media coverage of crime tends to reinforce what people already know. " There are many, many problems in today's society and when the media chooses to focus on a section of them in a small amount of time for example, the shooting of 11 year old Rhys Jones. This big story encouraged the media then to report on countless other shootings using headlines such as, ' More shootings take place. ' This over-reporting by the media of a certain crime misleads the public into thinking the problem is new or perhaps just getting much worse when in fact it isn't.

The same amounts of shootings are happening as there were before Rhys Jones was shot, it's just now the public are hearing about them. In conclusion, not everything is considered newsworthy and so the press and broadcasting companies have control over what they choose to publicise. As the more 'Spectacular' crimes tend to sell more papers and attract more viewers and listeners these are the crimes that are most reported to the public. Therefore this gives the impression to the public that these crimes are rising, creating a fear in people over crime.

As the media usually only publicise the negative aspects of the official statistics this reinforces people's suspicions that these crimes were on the rise. The media are not necessarily making the statistics up but they are twisting them in a way that benefits their stories, the official crime statistics may indeed have said crime is rising, but what most people don't take into account is it is most probably petty crimes such as shoplifting and other non-violent crimes that are raising these figures, crimes that most people dismiss and may in fact have done or do commit themselves.