Impact of media representations on pulic perceptions of crime

The media has had a significant influence over the public since the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This was a time of great turbulence and uncertainty, with many social, economic and cultural transformations changing the way in which people thought. Communities were fragmented with broken ties, and individuals were adrift; citizens turned away from authority, and the media was turned to as a key source in the aid of their wellbeing. In this essay, I will discuss the social impact of the mass media in relation to issues within crime; such as victims and stereotyping. I will draw on, and apply, the theoretical perspectives of behaviourism and the hypodermic syringe model, moral panics, and labelling to gain further insight about the impact of the media. I will use these media effects and theories to come to an informed response about the impact that the mass media has in shaping public perceptions of crime.

We rely on the media's culturally constructed definitions of who ' criminals' and ' victims' are in order to understand crime victims, as very few of us experience crime or victimisation ourselves. Although we do not experience the crime directly, some may feel as though they have experienced it as it is so abundant in the media. Garland's idea of crime consciousness suggests that we have become ' crime conscious', with " crime consciousness [becoming] embedded in everyday social life and institutionalised in the media [and] popular culture" (Garland & Sparks, 2000, p. 16), this notion highlights that the general awareness of crime has been heightened by the media- high crime rates have become normalised as crime is presented so frequently in the media and there is a generation of people who have grown up surrounded by crime. The public's views on crime " become settled

cultural facts that are sustained and reproduced by cultural scripts, and not criminological research or official data" (Garland, 2000, cited by Kemshall, 2012, p. 23), and this is where media representations create a problem in society, as crime rates may be decreasing but " many exhibit high levels of fear and anxiety" (Garland & Sparks, 2000, pp. 16-17), and there is an overall increase in the fear of crime.

The expansion of deviance in the media, and the way that the media focuses on the most serious examples of deviance, can be said to create moral panics. Jewkes describes moral panics as having five features; the first being that the mass media take a reasonably ordinary event and present it as an extraordinary occurrence. The media then amplify deviance by defining a group of acts as ' deviant' focus on it to the exclusion of almost anything else, a " person/group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 2011, p. 9). Moral panics also clarify moral boundaries in society, creating consensus and concern, thy usually occur during periods of rapid social change and target young people, as these are the people that symbolise the future of society, their behaviour is a barometer to test the heath or sickness of a society (Jewkes, 2004, p. 67).

Although the moral panic model is viable in some respects, it is still open to interpretations and there are many ambiguities surrounding the theory. There is a problem with the word ' deviance', because deviance is sometimes used as a byword for mental instability, manipulability, or unconventionality; the causes of deviance are not considered and are frequently overshadowed by prejudice against the groups involved. There are also difficulties with the definition of ' moral' and, in many cases, moral

panics do not actually have any ' moral' element in them. In addition to this, cultural and media theorists have rejected reports that the public cannot tell when they are being manipulated; ultimately, it is important to remember that the moral panics thesis is over 40 years old, so it may be less relevant today as the role of the media and its impact on society has changed.

Cohen highlights that " the media may not tell us what to think, [but] they can be effective in shaping what we think about" (Cohen, 1973, cited by Davies et al., 2017, p. 3). For example, the National Crime Survey shows that young men are more vulnerable to be victims of crime than young women, however the media has created the assumption that this would not be the case, as masculinity is not associated with vulnerability. The media is selective in what it presents to the public, for example " lower-level property offences that make up the significant majority of recorded crime, and white collar and corporate offences that place a major social and financial burden on society, have tended to receive less attention" (Hillyard et al., cited by Davies et al., 2017, p. 48). The media often only paints a partial picture of reality, and this has been proven to be damaging as it distorts public perceptions of crime.

Stereotyping is another issue that could be sourced back to the media. A stereotype can be defined as an " an oversimplified attitude people hold towards those outside one's own experience who are different. They are a result of incomplete or distorted information accepted as fact without question" (Patterson & Wilkins, 1991), as evidenced previously, the media heavily plays a role in distorting information and often presents incomplete information to increase the newsworthiness of a story. Stereotypes persist

today as they are functional, humans tend to reduce complex matters into simple ones, even though compromising for simplicity can lead to inaccuracy. The most influential factor in why stereotypes continue, however, is prejudice. Our perceptions are subjective, and many people subscribe to derogatory descriptions of ethnic groups, selectivity and the tendency to see what we expect to see can result in people twisting and distorting the characteristics of others until it fits their stereotype of a group they view with prejudice.

The theory of labelling branches from stereotyping in that people's behaviour is determined by the terms or categories used to classify them. Labelling suggests that the media constructs crime and deviance by rejecting pathology and stating that crime is not the act of either a ' sick individual' or ' sick society', it is deviant behaviour that people so label (Becker, 1963, p. 8). Taylor et al. (1973) saw labelling from a Marxist point of view in that the power to label people as criminals and prosecute them is a function of the state. From this stance, the media is seen as a tool of the state, it is owned by the ruling class and works in their interest. Labelling highlights issues within the criminal justice system as a false picture as to who is criminal is created- minorities have been negatively labelled and are seen as the ' usual suspects', however as much crime is committed by the respectable as the poor, crime is present all through the class structure and is widespread through society.

Behaviourism is a positivistic theory which suggests that an individual's identity is shaped by their response to the external environment. The hypodermic syringe model agrees with this notion in saying that the media '

inject' certain values into the mind of its passive reader. An example of this is ' copycat' crimes, such as, allegedly, the case of Jamie Bulger's murder, where Anne Diamond, a broadcaster, journalist and Sunday Mirror advice columnist, suggested that " exposure to violent video film may in part be an explanation", going on to say that the two ten year olds " must have seen the evil doll Chucky… they must have seen it over and over again, because some of the things they did are almost exact copies of the screenplay… We all know that violence begets violence" (Anne Diamond, quoted by Jewkes, 2004, p. 18). Gauntlett (2007) is critical of the media effects theory as there is no direct evidence of media effects on behaviour. He suggests that "[the media] must have some impact on our consciousness", however researchers have adopted the wrong approach, so it is very difficult " to isolate what this ' effect' might be" (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 58)- much of the research is artificial as it tend to be lab based so we cannot be sure if the media causes antisocial, deviant or criminal behaviour.

Overall, media representations can be seen to have a significant impact on public perceptions of crime. Garland and Sparks hold that criminology is shaped by three key factors, one of which includes " the world of culture-including mass mediated popular culture… it continues to be influenced by popular culture" (Garland & Sparks, 2000, pp. 192-193). The theories of mass society and behaviourism, which contribute research from sociological and psychological sources, both suggest that human nature is unstable and susceptible to external influences, thus highlighting how easily people's perceptions can be influenced. The media can be seen to construct our

understanding of crime, create panic within societies and, in extreme cases, it can stimulate more criminal behaviour.

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