Narcotisation by Media : The Public Perspective of Crime

Srabanee Ghosh and Titisha Mukherjee[*]

Mediated Reality, filtered view, media manipulation, moral panic.

We live in an age saturated by the media and it plays a central role in our everyday lives. Also, this age has seen a great surge in criminal activities as well as concern regarding the same. Primary experience of crime is rare. The only information furnishing source for the civic society is media. The media has the power to reach to the masses and shape public opinion and therefore this great power demands great responsibility.

In this backdrop, the paper analyses the distorted and incoherent information fed by the media to the gullible masses. Divided and politicized reporting, flailing its giant arms, has taken over balanced reporting. The political elites control the dissemination of information by the media. Also, the bias and pressure from media owners over-rides journalistic professionalism. As a result the public perception is tailored to an unrecognizable extent by media speculations. This is to fulfill the imperative of the commercially driven journalism- requirement to shock. Increasing moral indignation and public panic are the undesirable side effects to this crude perception of crime. The compelling images resonate strong emotions in the consumers enhancing the complexities of a simplified existence. All of which may cause people to modify their lives so as to take account of these. The depiction of the terrorist attacks in Mumbai and America, as well as the occupation of Palestine are clear illustrations of the above. This paper is concluded with a stern suggestion to include strict legal measures and rectification of the existing laws to ensure that a neutral and precise picture of the crime is presented by the media.

Narcotisation by media: the public perception of crime

Introduction

Since time immemorial media has dominated a considerable portion of our lives. Before the advent of modern technology, media, even though at its nascent stage, had been the news-provider to the masses. Where once news used to travel by ship, it now hurtles across the globe at light speed and is available 24 hours-a-day at the push of a button. The media modifies our thinking regarding politics, the economy, investments, what is 'in' and definitely what's not 'in'. But reporting of crime significantly alters the society's views and outlook so much so that we are almost forced to form certain judgements on the crime, the criminal and the victims which more often than not are incorrect.

Media is made up of a number of aspects- news, documentaries, films, editorials- some of which are fiction and most non-fiction. In this research paper, more attention will be paid to the non-fiction areas, particularly news reporting.

Today's society is fascinated with crime and justice. It is an age in which high crime rates and high levels of concern about the crime have become accepted as 'normal'. From films, books, newspapers,

magazines, television broadcasts, to everyday conversations, we are constantly engaging in crime "talk". The mass media play an important role in the construction of criminality and the criminal justice system. The public's perception of victims, criminals, deviants, and law enforcement officials is largely determined by their portrayal in the mass media. Research indicates that the majority of public knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media.[1] Therefore, it is imperative to examine the effects that the mass media have on attitudes toward crime and justice. The media also influences audience perceptions of police effectiveness.

Technological development has taken place to such an extent wherein the public assume that they can afford to let the media shape their opinions. Since primary information of crime is infrequent, the public perceptions are largely dependent and based on the mediated presentation of the state of affairs. These forced opinions have a profound effect on our lives and on the well being of the broader society. The naive masses, putting their faith on media coverage, believe that they are being presented the whole truth. However the media is far less governed by norms of good reasoning then one might uncritically assume.

What does the media do

Mediated Presentation of the Crime

When we hear the word crime, instantaneously a series of dramatic images such as murder, rape, terrorism, etc shoot through our overburdened minds. We conjure up the image of an unknown and feared creature as a criminal, a hapless and pitiful victim and an overtly dramatic crime scene. This imagination is given a definite representation by television broadcasts of the crime. The universal finding that the media alters every piece of news to cater to the tastes and preferences of its clientele, says it all.[2]

The media version of crime is largely oriented around events, in the sense that it focuses on certain specific criminal cases rather than wider debates about causes, prevention or policy.[3] Popular news items having tabloid nature are reported in a more sensationalistic style than news items having quality.[4]

"Media Criminology" is defined as the complex and constantly shifting intersections between crime, criminalization and control, on the one hand, and media, mediatisation and representation on the other.[5] In the hyper-realities of the 21st century, the blurring of nonfiction or news and fiction or entertainment as well as the overlapping worlds of hybrid infotainment and reality TV, for example, make it increasingly difficult to distinguish between these media and to separate out where the narratives of crime and justice of one end and the narratives of the others begin. Most postmodernists argue that in societies where images, signs and codes are constantly recycled through the media, it is no longer possible to distinguish with any certainty between 'image' and 'reality', the 'represented' and the 'real'.[6] In an age of media proliferation, political spin, ubiquitous public relations operatives, and ever-more sophisticated media audiences, perceptions of credibility and the balance of definitional power may shift from story to story. The media caters to different audiences, different markets uphold different agendas.

The Nature and Extent of Crime in the Media

Apart from the said quantitative alteration, the media also alters the news-items qualitatively. Quantitative analyses are concerned first and foremost with measuring the amount of crime in the media- for example, the number of crime stories reported in a newspaper. Qualitative analyses by contrast are concerned primarily with investigating the nature of media representation of crime.

A virtually universal finding is that media representations exaggerate both the levels of serious interpersonal crime in society and the risk of becoming a crime victim. This is the case for studies of newspapers[7], television[8] across news media. The representation of crime most significantly in the news media, is largely event oriented in that it focuses on specific criminal cases and incidents rather than wider debates around causes, prevention or policy.[9]

It is quite vicious how each time the media reports a sensational crime. First, it berates the police for not solving the crime immediately and then follows it up by ridiculing the probe. The media satisfies itself by launching its own investigations, which are generally at variance with the police findings. It does not seem to matter if eventually the conclusions of the media sleuths turn out to be way off the mark.

Wherever the executive or the legislation falters, it's the media who takes up the issue as in a democracy it's the people who have the power in their hands. But sometimes, this power of being able to reach to the masses and the ability to shape the public opinion is not aptly handled by the media.

The Causes of Media Representation of Crime

The foregoing shows how the media coverage of crime can influence public opinion. It raises questions on the choices made by the media with respect to the criminal events on which they report. These choices do not seem to fall in line with the true criminal reality of our society.

Crime news is not simply plucked out of thin air. Nor does it exist in a vacuum. It is the end result of a complex process of selection, processing and prioritization and is shaped by interaction between journalists, editors, their working conditions, the wider environment, newsworthiness and crucially, news sources. News sources are those individuals, organisations and institutions which provide the information. In relation to crime news, key sources include the police, prison services, politicians, victims and a host of other interested but unrelated parties.

It is not desirable to report everything that happens in the world. Only a tiny fraction of events, more desirably criminal events, are deemed sufficiently 'newsworthy'. It is more probable that a single murder would be the top headliner in a newspaper or news broadcast rather than hundreds of people dying due to a natural disaster.

The news reporters themselves sift through information, choosing only those areas which are 'newsworthy'. The distortion of information arises from the commercial and highly competitive nature of the news papers and channels and their fight to obtain a wider readership and viewership which is generally achieved by titillating their patrons and/or by stimulating their lives with sensational information. Crime reports, particularly of violent and/or sexual crimes, sell news, which gives the media a

powerful incentive to give most prominence to the more graphic cases of criminal behaviour.[10] News papers select events which are atypical, present them in a stereotypical fashion and contrast them against a backcloth of normality which is over-typical.[11]

Reports will be presented in a dramatic and unusual way so as to capture the readers' imagination, for example , reporting of a rape focuses on dramatic attacks by strangers in public places, whereas women are more likely to raped in private by someone they know. Reporting of a terrorist attack would focus on the victims' sorrowful plight rather than ways to make the people aware of the menace of terrorism and how to react in such situations. In this way the 'story' is supposedly rendered more interesting to the public. Normality would be boring to read about, so media naturally pick out the unusual. To gain newsworthy status it is therefore necessary to fall outside many people's experiences ergo out of this world experiences.

The media constitute the backbone of democracy. The media are supplying the political information that voters base their decisions on. But we fail to ask ourselves if the information supplied to us is the 'image' or the 'reality'. Typically emphasis is laid on how the media sways public opinion so as to promote a particular political party against another. More crucially the gullible masses need to discover the cause for this- the medium's political affiliations. The politicians and parties use media, as a tool to simplify events, sensationalise them with shock headliners; present the story as good threatened by evil, to their own advantage.

In addition, a number of researchers suggest that a symbiotic relationship exists between news media personnel and the police. It is suggested that the police and the media engage in a mutually beneficial relationship. The media needs the police to provide them with quick, reliable sources of crime information, while the police have a vested interest in maintaining a positive public image.[12] Not just the Home Office and the police, but the professional associations and trade unions as well as the many pressure groups all work hard to influence media coverage which they see as influencing public attitudes.[13]

Effect of mediated representation of crime

Can mass communication-text and visual-be used to stop war, abolish the death penalty, cultivate genocide, reduce ethno-political conflict, or mediatise peace and nonviolence? In terms of genocidal murder or rape, for example, or more generally in the context of collective and/or organizational crime, the causes of ethnic conflicts (or peace) involve "structural factors," including economic, social, and political dimensions relating to both the distribution of wealth and inter-ethnic relations, "facilitating factors," such as the degree of politicization and ethnic consciousness, and "triggering factors," including sharp economic shocks, intergroup tensions, and collapsed central authority. The restricted question has always been: Do the various mass media and mediatised representations of these behaviours elicit fear or imitation from their audiences? This is because surveys have shown that up to 95% of people say they rely on the media as their primary source of information.[14]

It was shown that the type of policies people want may depend on the feeling of fear instilled by the

media's coverage of criminal events. Use of the media is important in defining the relationship between people's knowledge of events and how they are affected by said events.[15] This relationship is believed to lead citizens to favour two types of crime-fighting policies: punitive or preventive. Opting for prevention requires a complex thinking process, whereas calling for punishment is apparently directly related to a sense of fear. Both scenarios depend on use of the media. The use of more complex media is believed to lead to more complex reflection on crime, whereas exposure to information shows and TV news magazines is believed to be linked to low levels of complexity.

Media and Imitation of Crime

The public are primarily affected in two ways when viewing a crime report- imitation of the crime or fear of the crime. Certain audiences are motivated to imitate the crime and thus for a crime to occur there are several logically necessary preconditions: labelling, motive and means. The media potentially play a part in each of these.

Labelling

For an act to be 'criminal' (as distinct from harmful, immoral, antisocial, etc.) it has to be labelled as such. The media are an important factor shaping the conceptual boundaries and recorded volume of crime. The role of the media in developing new (and eroding old) categories of crime has been emphasized in most of the classic studies of the emergence of criminal law within the 'labelling' tradition. Stan Cohen coined the influential concept of 'moral panic' in his study of how the media together with the police developed a spiral of respectable fear about 'mods' and 'rockers'.[16]

Motive

A crime will not occur unless someone is tempted, driven, or otherwise motivated to carry out the 'labelled' act. The media feature in many of the most commonly offered social and psychological theories of the formation of criminal dispositions. The media are pivotal in presenting for universal emulation images of affluent lifestyles and a consumerist culture, accentuating relative deprivation and generating pressures to acquire ever higher levels of material success regardless of the legitimacy of the means used. It has been claimed that the images of crime and violence presented by the media are a form of social learning, and may encourage crime by imitation or arousal effects.[17]

Means

It has often been alleged that the media act as an open university of crime, spreading knowledge of criminal techniques. Video games such as Grand Theft Auto have been accused of being an especially potent source of learning about crime, as the player is placed in the subject position of a criminal.[18] New forms of media have sometimes been seen as creating new means to commit crime. This concern has been particularly stimulated by the Internet, which is feared as facilitating all sorts of offences, from fraud, identity theft, child pornography and grooming children for sex, to organizing transnational crime and terrorism.[19]

Media and fear of Crime

The consequences of crime fear ranges from not walking home alone at night to withdrawing from society altogether and living in isolation.[20] Fear of crime is influenced by a range of social and demographic variables- perceptions of risk and vulnerability, age, geographical location, ethnicity and experience of criminal victimisation.[21]

Moral panic is used to the disproportionate and hostile social reaction to a group or condition perceived as a threat to societal values. It involves sensational and stereotypical media coverage, public outcry and demands for tougher controls. Moral panic has a tendency to exaggerate statistics and to create a bogey-man, known as a folk-devil in sociological terms. Moral panic goes back as far as World War One when the wartime British government used the media to portray the Germans in a certain manner in the hope of provoking a response. The same happened in World War Two. In this case, the media did not have to portray Hitler in a certain manner as the public already had its view on him that was an identical one to the government. This continued into the 1960's with the media's portrayal of the clashes between Mods and Rockers. The whole idea of the media's coverage was to convince the general public that these youths were operating outside of the social norms desired by society as a whole.

It is suggested that the media can reinforce the stigmatization of certain groups (youth, ethno-cultural communities and indigenous peoples) and of certain geographical locations or neighbourhoods. The problem is that most people learn about the justice system mainly from the media, "dominant cultural understandings about young offenders are developed in complex interplay between media, political players, audiences". Thus, inaccurate or inappropriate media coverage on specific individuals and places can lead to harmful policies and generate stereotypes about certain groups as offenders.[22] For example, After 9/11 it was obvious that certain communities would be targeted under the new security agenda. Visas for the Americas and Europe were denied to people belonging to the South Asian countries. Racial profiling was taking place at various ports of entry to the United States and other European countries. Racial profiling is commonly defined as a practice that targets certain individuals and communities for investigation based on stereotypes about race or ethnicity.

The study found that in the post 9/11 world, the lens through which individuals are judged as security risks is often coloured by complex notions of ethnicity, religion and place of origin.

Security agents singled out Arabs or Muslims at what they called the new "hot spots" - the airports, the borders and the mosques. It's both systemic and random. It's systemic discrimination and people are hit randomly based on how they're perceived. Whether it is a common person belonging to a specific targeted religion or someone as high profile as Indian actor Shahrukh Khan- no one is spared. These are powers that can destroy people's lives. claims surrounding the need for improved intelligence gathering in a post 9/11 world should not be enough to supersede basic human rights. Of course security is necessary, but these agencies have a responsibility to be accountable and to demonstrate that what they do is the bare minimum needed to get the job done.

The discrimination was to such an extent where five passengers were removed from or prevented from boarding flights after the September 11 terror attacks. They filed suits against four major U.S. airlines, accusing them of racial profiling and discrimination. The separate suits were filed against Continental, American, United and Northwest airlines in federal courts, respectively, in Newark, Baltimore, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Recently, The US Department of Homeland Security has brought out a presentation that aims to educate people on recognising terrorists and how to report them.[23] The report titled "Terrorism Awareness and Prevention" warned that people yawning, developing goose bumps and appearing fidgety could all be potential terrorists. If an individual has a cold stare, "trance-like gaze" or wide "flashbulb eyes", they may be a terrorist, according to the report. If they seem to exaggerate yawn during conversation, repeatedly touch their face or ears, or excessively watch a clock or fidget, these may also be indicators of a terrorist. If they pace, tremble, perspire or have goose bumps, these also may be indicators.

The Middle East and North Africa region is not the first area to come to mind when discussing human trafficking in the world. Human trafficking is considered a contemporary form of slavery. Slavery has historical roots in the Middle East, especially in the region bordering African states. Keeping this in mind, Indian parents do not want to marry their daughters to Indian men residing in the Middle Eastern countries as they suppose that their daughters would be sold off once they reach the Middle Eastern countries. All of this is due to the image conjured up by the media.

A Suggestive Conclusion

Certain conditions are necessary for a successful partnership between the media and the general public at large, such that the masses receive the whole truth about a crime from the media. One such method is the establishment of a 'Communication Policy'. This policy suggests changing the mindset of government and community groups, in order to enhance openness and proactive interaction with the media, to understand communication implications and to make communication a strategic issue. A communication policy aims to build partnerships between the media, government and the masses and thus requires several processes. Such a partnership may involve governments and NGOs engaging journalists in local coalition public events and meetings in order to stimulate 'civic journalism' and participation in crime prevention. In this case, the government needs to develop a relationship with the media - one that goes beyond using them as simple advertising tool for public announcement. They, with the help of diverse scholars in multiple disciplines, need to work to influence general reporting practices on crime-related issues throughout the development and implementation of the strategy. This strategy would be successful in building community cohesion and trust between parties. It demonstrates the effectiveness of partnerships between multiple groups in order to open dialogue, encourage collectivity, promote responsible reporting and dissemination of information, and reduce stigmatization

The government should create a pedagogical framework in order to provide ongoing information, assistance and training to a diverse range of media representatives outside the media context. This tactic

will facilitate communication between parties in order to disseminate accurate and consensual information on crime-related events. By expanding contact with the media and by better informing media representatives of their role in crime prevention, the way in which crime is currently represented can begin to shift

Finally it is also the duty of the individuals to broaden their thinking and not digest whatever is fed to them. In today's world, the term 'seeing is believing' does not apply as what we see might have been filtered so as to appear 'newsworthy'.

_____

* Srabanee Ghosh and Titisha Mukherjee, 3rd Year, 6th Semester, Hidayatullah National Law University Uparwara Post, Abhanpur, New Raipur - 493661 (C.G.) Phone- 0091-8103782465, 0091-9752368880 E-mail: srabaneeghosh.hnlu@gmail.com, titisha.m@gmail.com

1. Roberts, J. and A. Doob. 1986. "Public Estimates of Recidivism Rates: Consequences of a Criminal Stereotype." Canadian Journal of Criminology 28:229-241.

2. H.L. Marsh, A Comparative Analysis of Crime Coverage in Newspapers in the United States and Other Countries from 1960 to 1989: A review of the Literature, JOURNAL OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE, 19,1:67-80; B. GUNTER, J.HARRISON AND M. WYKES, VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION: DISTRIBUTION, FORM, CONTEXT AND THEMES (London: Lawrence Erlbaum); CUMBERBATCH, G. WOODS, S. AND A. MAGUIRE, CRIME IN THE NEWA: TELEVISION, RADIO AND NEWSPAPERS: A REPORT FOR BBC BROADCASTING RESEARCH (Birmingham: Aston University, Communications Research Group)

3. P. Rock, News as eternal recurrence in COHEN AND YOUNG (EDS.), THE MANUFACTURE OF NEWS: DEVIANCE, SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THE MASS MEDIA (revised ed. London: Constable)

4. D. GRABER, CRIME, NEWS AND THE PUBLIC (New York: Prager)

5. Chris Greer, Crime and Media: A Reader, (ed. 10 London Routledge)

6. J. Baudrillard (1983), The Precession of the Simulacra, in T. DOHERTY (ED) THE POSTMODERN READER, Hemel Hampstead: Harvester Press; M. Poster (1990), The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context, Cambridge: Polity Press

7. H.L. Marsh, A Comparative Analysis of Crime Coverage in Newspapers in the United States and Other Countries from 1960 to 1989: A review of the Literature, JOURNAL OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE, 19,1:67-80

8. B.Gunter , J.Harrison AND M. Wykes, Violence on Television: Distribution, Form, Context and Themes (London: Lawrence Erlbaum)

9. Rock P. (1973), News as Eternal Recurrence, S. COHEN AND J. YOUNG (EDS) (1981) THE MANUFACTURE OF NEWS: SOCIAL PROBLEMS, DEVIANCE AND THE MASS MEDIA, (revised edition, London:Constable); C. Greer (2003a), Sex Crime and the Media: Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society, Cullumpton: willan.

10. P. Schlesinger and H. Tumber (1994), Reporting Crime: The Media Politics of Criminal Justice, Oxford: Clarendon Press

11. Jock Young (1974), Mass Media, Drugs and Deviance, PAUL ROCK AND MARY MCINTOSH (EDS), DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL, London: Tavistock

12. R. Ericson, P. Barancek and J. Chan (1987), Visualising Deviance: A Study of News Organisation, Milton Keynes: Open Press; M. Fishman (1978), Crime Waves as Ideology, IN SOCIAL PROBLEMS, 25:531-43; S. Hall, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clarke and B. Roberts (1978) Policing the Crisis: Mugging the State and Law and Order, London: Macmillan

13. Supra, note. 15

14. D. Graber (1979), Evaluating Crime-Fighting Policies. Evaluating Alternative Law Enforcement Policies, Ed. R. Baker and F. Meyer, Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 179-200.

15. M. Sotirovic (2001), Affective and Cognitive Processes as Mediators of Media Influences on Crime-Policy Preferences, MASS COMMUNICATION AND SOCIETY, 3 (2001): 311-329.

16. S. Cohen (1972), Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers, London: MacGibbon and Kee

17. S. Bailey (1993), Fast Forward to Violence: Violent Visual Imaging and Serious Juvenile Crime, CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS, 11 (Spring): 6–7; S. Carey (1993), Mass Media Violence and Aggressive Behaviour, CRIMINAL JUSTICE MATTERS, 11(Spring): 8–9; E. Wartella (1995), Media and Problem Behaviours in Young People, M. RUTTER AND D. SMITH (EDS), PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS IN YOUNG PEOPLE, 296–323, London: Wiley; S. Livingstone (1996), On the Continuing Problem of Media Effects, J. CURRAN AND M. GUREVITCH (EDS), MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY, 305–24, London: Arnold.

18. K. Hayward (2004), City Limits, London: Glasshouse

19. D. Wall (ed.) (2001), Crime and the Internet, London: Routledge; Y. Jewkes (ed.) (2003), Dot.Cons: Crime, Deviance and Identity on the Internet, Cullompton, Devon: Willan; S. Brown (2003), Crime and Law in Media Culture, Buckingham: Open University Press; A.M. Hargrave and S. Livingstone (2006), Harm and Offence in Media Content: A Review of the Evidence, Bristol: Intellect

20. K. Ferraro (1995), Fear of Crime: Interpreting Victimisation Risk, New York: State University of New York, Albany

21. S. Box, C. Hale and G. Andrews (1988), Explaining Fear of crime, IN BRITISH JOURNAL OF CRIMINOLOGY, 28:340-56; M. Davis (1994) Beyond Blade Runner, Urban Control, The Ecology of Fear, E. MCLAUGHLIN, J. MUNCHIE AND G. HUGHES (EDS) (2003) CRIMINOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES: ESSENTIAL READINGS, (2nd ed), London: Sage; C. Hale (1996), Fear of Crime : A Review of the Literature, INTERNATIONAL REVIEW VICTIMIOLOGY, 4:70-150

22. S. Hall (1978), Policing the Crisis, London: Macmillan,

23. How To Spot A Terrorist, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-03-18/, Accessed on :18th March 2012