



How the Media Can Give a Distorted View of Crime

Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself the question – how you know something even if you have never seen it or been there? If you have never been to New York, you might feel you know the place because you have seen it on television many times. You may have never seen a giraffe in real life, but you know what they look like because of the media. The mass media is the main source of information for most of us. So, it is with crime to a certain extent. Most of what we know about crime is delivered to us via the media.

The information in this Factsheet would be relevant to exam questions on the topics of *Crime and Deviance* and *The Media*.

Activity: Make a list of the crimes you have heard about during the last week through the media, then think about how many of these crimes have affected you on a personal level.

The media is an industry, whose 'raison d'être' is to make money and therefore profit. This leads to the media sensationalising deviant behaviour. It has been found that personal violent crime makes up over 60% of space allocated to crime news in British newspapers, however, it makes up less than 20% of crimes reported to the police. This level of sensationalising however, sells newspapers.

Activity: Think about your own media consumption: newspapers, television, film, magazines, radio, social media etc., then try to determine how much of that consumption involves crime e.g. news bulletins, news feeds on social media, crime films etc. Can you turn this into a percentage of your whole consumption?

Crime has long been a major theme within popular culture. Both fictional and non-fictional crime stories have been a staple of the media for a long time. The first edited narrative film made in the US in 1903 *The Great Train Robbery*, had a plot line of a group of bandits holding up a train to rob money and jewels from the passengers, they do however, pay for their crime at the end of the film's narrative. The whole narrative therefore is crime based, and this was right at the beginning of film's history, 1903.

This was followed by some of the most popular films made in Hollywood and elsewhere and later on the introduction of television programmes



Decade	Programmes
1930s	Little Caesar, The Public Enemy, Scarface
1950s	Fabien of the Yard, Dixon of Dock Green
1960s	Danger Man, The Avengers, Fraud Squad, Z-Cars, Public Eye, Softly Softly, Man in a Suitcase
1970s	The Professionals, The Sweeney, Shoestring, Van der Valk
1980s	Taggart, Juliet Bravo, Bergerac, Inspector Morse, Dempsey and Makepiece, Boon
1990s	Heartbeat, Cracker, The Knock, Midsomer Murders, Cadfael, Specials, Thief Takers, A Touch of Frost, Prime Suspect

Activity: Investigate some of these films and television programmes. What were they about?

Research some of the popular crime dramas from 2000 up to the present day, then look up audience sizes on BARB for these programmes.

Compare the size of audiences for crime dramas with audience sizes for other genres, to see how popular they are.

The audience's need for fictional crime is matched by their need for non-fictional crime. Hence, why newspapers are full of crime stories, along with broadcast news bulletins too.

Activity: Watch a television news bulletin (on any channel) and count the number of stories, then count the number of crime stories within that, what is the ratio? Do the same with a national newspaper e.g. *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*

Hayward and Young (2012) suggest that advertisers have turned images of crime and deviance into tools for selling products within the consumer market. You only have to look at violent computer games to see this, and the impact these have on fashion e.g. hoodies.

Distortion of crime

There are many surveys that show most people base their knowledge of crime and the criminal justice system on the media, rather than their own direct experience. Ray Surette (2010) in **Media, Crime and Criminal Justice:**

Images, Realities and Policies argues that there is something called **backwards law** – meaning, the media constructs images of crime and justice which are a backwards version of reality.



189. How the Media Can Give a Distorted View of Crime

Chris Greer and Robert Reiner (2012) describe how this backwards law is a consequence of media news and fiction misrepresenting the reality of crime. They argue that there are several reasons for this:

1. The media over-represents and exaggerates sex, drug and serious violence-related crimes e.g. sexual assault, murder or armed robbery and by under-representing the risks of the most common offence of property crime.

Activity: Think about soap-opera storylines and analyse what kinds of stories related to crime crop up regularly.

2. Property crime is represented as far more serious and violent than most recorded offences, which are generally routine, trivial, non-dramatic, with little or no loss or damage, and no violence towards victims.

Activity: Why do you think the media does this?

3. Police effectiveness in solving crimes is over-exaggerated.

Activity: Why do you think the media does this? When you have decided why, illustrate with some examples.

4. The risks of becoming victims faced by higher status white people, older people, women and children is exaggerated.

Activity: This is quite complex, what do you think the reasons are for this?

5. Individual incidents of crime are emphasised, rather than providing some understanding or analysis of crime patterns or even the causes of crime.

Exam Hint: Evaluate this 'backwards law' theory by arguing its strengths and weaknesses. This will certainly help with higher marks in an exam response.

Deviancy amplification and moral panics

Deviancy amplification – this is when the actions of the media can actually cause more crime, by exaggerated and sensationalising reporting.

Moral panic – this is when there is a wave of public concern about perceived deviance and crime because of the way it is represented in the media, which is usually exaggerated and distorted

A good deal of the studies on moral panics were conducted in the 1960's and 1970's, mostly stemming from social occurrences e.g. mods and rockers skirmishes in the South of England in places such as Brighton.

In his famous book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (1972) Stanley Cohen was able to show how the



Stanley Cohen

media helped create two opposing groups in the 1960's - the Mods who rode scooters and the Rockers who rode motorbikes. On a Bank Holiday weekend in 1964 at Clacton and other seaside resorts, some minor acts of vandalism were committed, as well as some scuffles between Mods and Rockers, though the scuffles were no worse than what would have been occurring anywhere else in the country. However, the media reporting of these events was hugely exaggerated with the front pages of newspapers carrying very misleading headlines, suggesting Clacton had been the arena for a pitched battle between Mods and Rockers. E.g. The *Daily Mirror* Monday 30th March 1964 carried the headline *Scooter gangs 'beat up' Clacton and 'Wild Ones' Invade Seaside - 97 arrests*



E.g. The *Daily Sketch* Tuesday 19th May 1964 carried the headline *Beach crowds take cover from battling Mods and Rockers and Wildest Ones yet.*

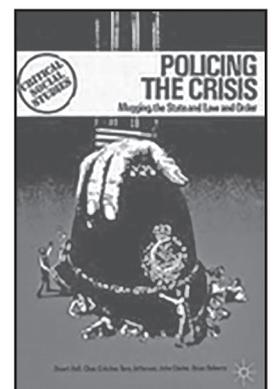
As a consequence of this media reporting, a moral panic was created, with widespread public fear and hostility towards the Mods and Rockers – they became labelled as folk devils – who posed a threat to public order. The police were then forced to clamp down hard on these folk devils, which then resulted in greater numbers of arrests.

The media and the public look for someone to blame, and this is known as a scapegoat. The Mods and Rockers therefore became the scapegoats for most of the ills in society at that time.

These moral panics flare up from time to time, the 1960's saw Mods and Rockers and Hippies. The 1970's saw Punks, Skinheads and Muggers. The 1980's saw Black youths and Football hooliganism. The 1990's saw Joyriding, Ecstasy use.

Activity: Do some research into more contemporary moral panics, and folk devils from the 2000's onwards.

Stuart Hall et al (1978) in a book entitled *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, examined a 1970's moral panic over the crime of *mugging*. Newspapers at the time ran sensationalised stories claiming there was an increase in violent street crime, mostly perpetrated by young Afro-Caribbean men. However, through research Hall found that it was growing more slowly than it had done in the previous decade. They came to the conclusion that mugging could be explained through the notion that capitalism was in crisis, and that the moral panic developed because of this crisis, which saw high unemployment and strikes. The crisis was therefore a crisis of authority. People were losing faith in the government and authorities. For Hall, the mugging moral panic came at the right time for the government and authorities as they were able to scapegoat black muggers to distract attention from the real problems such as high unemployment. It divided the working class along ethnic lines, the media then fueled this with sensationalised reporting, which helped to sell newspapers. The police labelled young black men as muggers, and arrests of this group increased. The media then reports, and the cycle perpetuates – deviancy amplification.



189. How the Media Can Give a Distorted View of Crime

Once a moral panic has been created, the police, courts and other agencies of social control become sensitised, and this leads to demands by the media fired up public for action to clamp down on the alleged deviance. Harsher measures will be called for against the folk devils. Action then by the police, often amplifies what was originally a relatively minor or one-off occurrence, by making more arrests.

Deviancy amplification therefore occurs when these extra arrests, combined with media coverage might even create deviance where there might not have been any before. It can certainly be argued that once reporters and television cameras are in place, people could be encouraged to act up for the cameras.

Activity: Try to draw a diagram or flow chart to show how a moral panic starts and deviancy amplification occurs.

Is the concept of moral panic still relevant today?

There is a line of thought that the concepts put forward by Cohen are outdated. There is more diversity within culture now, music and fashion are more diverse, young people have the option to change their identity, frequently if they wish. Allied to this, society is more complex, fragmented and liberal.

Certainly, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue that the concept of moral panic is no longer useful. For them, with new technology, the growing sophistication of audiences in, what postmodernists would call a media-saturated society, plus intense competition between different types of media (digital and traditional) and the fact that media companies no longer report in the way that they used to, which caused moral panic. All of which, render it outdated.

Postmodernists argue that there is now such a diversity because of our media-saturated society, and this leads to a huge diversity of media reports and the interpretation of them. This is particularly relevant now due to 'we media' and 'citizen journalism' and social media. Audiences are therefore creating and interpreting news. Mainstream media are less likely now to set the news agenda as a consequence of this. The nature of news too, the fact that we no longer see news delivered via bulletins at 6pm and 10pm, news reporting is now 24/7, we can access it whenever and wherever we want, so stories have less shelf life now. Less time for deviancy amplification to occur.



Postmodernist theorist Jean Baudrillard (2001) argued that we are living in a **hyperreality**, meaning that we have lost touch with reality, because of media saturation, the media no longer reflects, it creates the reality. So that, as suggested earlier, our knowledge of crime is now mostly through the media. You and your family may have never had a house break-in/burglary, but we all live with the fear of this happening. Flatley et al (2010) show that although all crime in England and Wales had been falling between 1995 and 2010, between three quarters and two thirds of the population wrongly think it is rising.

Activity: Do you think the concept of moral panic is still relevant today?

Make two lists: one list containing evidence that the concept is still relevant today and the other list containing evidence that it is not relevant today.

Exam Hint: In answering a question such as 'How does the media give a distorted view of crime,' or 'Evaluate whether the media gives a distorted view of crime', you would need to cover the following:

- The over-representation of violent and sexual crime
- Over exaggeration of police success
- Romanticising the criminal
- The media creating moral panics and deviancy amplification
- Media exaggerating the chances of becoming a victim of crime

Exam Hint: If the question is more specific, such as 'Explain the meaning of deviancy amplification' you would need to cover the following:

- Give an accurate definition of deviancy amplification
- Give examples
- Include associated concepts, such as moral panic and folk devils