

Discuss the Contention that the media produce partial and exaggerated images of Crime, In what ways might these influence Public Perceptions of Crime?

The Media is often accused of playing a role in the creation of partial and exaggerated images of crime amongst the public. This essay will begin with the assumptions that the media does indeed produce partial and exaggerated images of crime, and this influences public perceptions of crime in two main ways, both leading to the creation of fear of crime amongst the public. The ways in which the media does and the processes at work within the media are important and will be explained, using relevant examples from contemporary society. The two main ways in which peoples perceptions of crime are altered by the media is firstly, people perceive that there is more crime than there actually is, also the type of crimes which people think are most prevalent, such as murder, are often altered by partial reporting by the media. This creates, as I have already stated, an increased fear of crime. There are some key terms which are used within this particular area; these will be explained within the essay also.

One of the most important sociological terms when looking at media and crime is that of a “moral panic”. One of the most influential and important theories of this was put forward by Stanley Cohen, in assessing deviancy amplification. (Whereby societal reaction creates more of the undesired behaviour.) Cohen’s work showed how police attempts to control 1960 subcultures – the mods and rockers, coupled with sensationalist heightened media attention led to a moral panic, thus increasing the popularity of these groups to the younger generations, and therefore an increase in the numbers of these Subcultures, whilst at the same time the older generations labelled such youngsters as “devils” etc. and mainstream societies fear of these “dangerous groups of youths” increased. Many of the members who were attached to these groups and heard about the media coverage showed evidence of the self fulfilling prophecy, whereby they acted on the labels the media gave them, and more crime was created through this process. The moral panic makes people think that there is more crime within society and because it focuses on one act of “criminal” behaviour and this is how the fear of crime comes about.

This quote from a newspaper article shows how the media can play a role in fear creation. “Media stories often create an inaccurate - sometimes completely false - perception in the minds of the public about crime. They construct a completely unsuitable base from which to develop policies for law reform. They prompt unwise, knee-jerk reaction. This is the Real Danger” Nicholas Cowdery, **(Tabloids and talkback have mugged sensible crime debate)** The Age Newspaper, Australia, October 3, 2002

The result of the “inaccurate” stories within the media can have dangerous effects, as shown in the “Folk Devils and Moral Panics” piece by Stanley Cohen. The article is important because it highlights one of the key factors in newspaper sensationalism. The type of paper is important in deciding whether a particular story may have been reported sensationally. Tabloid newspapers are more synonymous with the creation of

sensationalist stories, and therefore certain conclusions can be drawn from those who consume different forms of media. It may therefore be that those who read tabloid newspapers have an increased fear of crime, compared to those who read broadsheet or other types of newspaper which are said to be more factual. For example The Guardian will probably contain less sensationalist stories than “The Daily Sport”

This debate is of increasing importance in the United States, where media coverage is much more widespread and competitive and different news companies compete for the most interesting and popular stories. Sensationalist reporting can be the greatest tool in the media arsenal when reporting news with which to do this. Some may argue that human beings are, or can be attracted to tragedy, whether it be true crime novels, or in film. The media may pick up on this and create the story to appear more sensational to gain human interest. These human interest stories gain greater attention from the public. From this the newspaper will have the “best stories” and therefore sell more papers. Sensationalist reporting is done purely in the interests of profit, often with neglect for the objective truth. Further to this, the real ill of the media is that if we choose to believe such stories, they may alter our perceptions and lead us to conclude that as more crime is being reported in such a graphic way, then crime is on the increase.

This essay has observed how the media would have us think that crime is on the increase. Therefore it is necessary to analyse the statistics on crime to see if this is actually the case. Misleading though they may be, crime statistics are the best way for us to determine the crime level on a nominal level. The British Crime Survey (BCS) said overall crime fell by 12% between 1999 and 2000, with particular decreases in vehicle related thefts and domestic burglary.

Taking the recent moral panics of “car jacking” into consideration without analysing the statistics would indicate that the occurrence of vehicle related thefts are on the increase, and in particular violence involved in such crimes. Many of the figures which the newspapers use to their advantage do not even exist within official statistics. The closest category to “car jacking” is vehicle related theft, and this has been shown to be on the decline. This may seem inconsequential, however when the final statistic is added, this proves not to be the case. In the year 2000 the type of crime which men feared most, across all ages, was vehicle related crime. Although this data must be treated carefully, and any correlations between the three may be coincidental, it appears that whilst the actual crime of “vehicle related theft” is dropping, the fear and media coverage and intensity of reporting is increasing. This holds weight as evidence to suggest that media influence does indeed alter people’s perceptions about crime, and indeed increases their fear of crime. This is a particularly good example because the recording of vehicle related thefts is consistently the type of crime which is most frequently recorded to the police.

If crime is on the increase, the people in the best position to answer this may be the police. An example of police attitude that is particularly relevant is a report on the fear of crime by Chief Superintendent John Holt of Huddersfield Police, he said:

“A burglary at a local primary school may be recorded as one crime, but has a real impact on the children, their parents, grandparents and staff. Similarly a fight in a crowded village pub quickly becomes the subject of speculation in the shops the following morning. When added to the impact of media reporting, it is easy to understand why the fear of crime significantly outweighs the reality.”

This is an important quote as it takes into account societal reaction as well as the role of the media. The societal reaction may be as much an important factor as the media reaction to crime. The reaction of the society, particularly in smaller communities may do have the similar effect as the media in amplifying deviant acts, a kind of “Chinese whispers” can take place within the community, whereby the incident becomes sensationalized and an increased stigma attached to it. Therefore it may be concluded that although the media does play an important role in the creation of fear, there may be other factors also at work.

Another interesting view on this debate comes from Prof Paul Wiles, head of Statistics at the home office, who maintains that although there is a large amount of media attention and influence in the way that crime is reported, crime is actually on the decrease. Furthermore, he argues that whilst fear of crime is higher than the actual amount of crime taking place, that it is falling, despite such graphic and intense media coverage.

The book that provides the best argument that the news is socially produced is “Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order” by Hall et al. The book argues that there is a professional ideology of “good” news. This includes events that have negative consequences, events that play up the extraordinary or tragic, and those that provoke human characteristics such as sadness and fear. This is why crime plays an important part of the news. Millions of events happen everyday, however their inclusion within the news depends upon whether the event scores highly on the attributes just mentioned. This is known as “newsworthiness”.

The news is shaped by a consensus within society, and newsworthy events such as crime break the consensus. The news reproduces statements of power such as the law and the Police, who judge what it is to be illegitimate; in effect the news provides a definition of what’s wrong and right within society. News reaffirms the morality of society, and with this the fear of crime is increased, although crime is not unusual and is usually uniform and not dramatic, it is the over reporting regarding the consensus that the crimes are sensationalised and fear increases.

“Policing the crisis” focuses on mugging to illustrate the arguments the book made. In October 1972 the when the moral panic over mugging was at its height, the incidence of reporting within the newspapers increased dramatically. When this happens, the news is focusing on the extraordinary and the novelty in order to sell more papers and keep up public interest. With this increased repetition, the event becomes boring, and we do not fear the ordinary so the public interest is lost, this is shown in the figures for November 1972 where the incidence of reporting within the newspapers returns to normal. This is

where the papers employ more sensationalist reporting to incite public fear and increase newsworthiness.

The Labelling theory is also useful in explaining this question. Attributions of labelling mediated by those in power such as the police increases the legitimacy of more news coverage. This has two effects, firstly reporting comes more widespread, and secondly, as the police legitimise the newspaper claims, public fear is increased.

It would be naïve to assume that these are the only factors which influence public perceptions of crime, such as peoples overall attitudes towards the criminal justice system. Governments try to respond to the public's level of fear of crime by introducing new legislative measures that they hope will reduce fear and put faith back into the criminal justice system, however this does not seem to be the case, in fact the current Home Secretary David Blunkett has an unusual problem on his hands, trying to convince people that the crime rate is actually falling. Many believe (due to the many factors this essay has explained) that Crime is still rising, Home Office Statistics show that the crime rate is actually falling, Paul Wiles, a Home Office Statistician says of this that "The public remain pessimistic about the problem of crime... generally people overestimate the chance of particular crimes happening to them." (Paul Wiles 2002)

In conclusion therefore, to answer the question it appears that the media does "produce partial and exaggerated images of Crime" This alters public perceptions of crime in that they become more fearful of a greater and more threatening violent type of crime which is becoming ever more prevalent, even though most Home Office Statistics show that this is not the case. As for what will take place in the future, it is believed that this trend is set to continue. One of the main reasons for this is the Globalisation of Society, and with this the expanded size of the media. The media market is now larger, more profitable and more competitive, with more news channels, newspapers, internet sites and magazines etc all competing for the best ratings and profits. Add to this the need to fund themselves through the use of advertising, it is important to add to this campaign of fear the element of consumerism – keep people afraid and they will consume, and the owners of the media will become richer and the media will continue to spiral, and peoples perception of crime will continue to be false and skewed.

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