

“How media distorts crime for the sake of news reporting, how it is becoming criminogenic, and how it creates moral panics”

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Media’s idea of ‘newsworthiness’ tends to distort how crime is presented as a subject.

It is undeniable that crime is a staple form of news reporting. The newsworthiness of a topic is decided based on a set of necessary criteria. What are some of the values that help define if something is ‘news-worthy’? The newsworthiness of a news story is based on a set of necessary criteria, that once met allow for a news event to be included in a broadcast or print. Outlines of such core values and professional ideologies that determine and support the newsworthiness of a news event have been outlined by some authors. These core values mark the basis of every editorial decision about printing or broadcasting a certain story or not. Steve Chibnall’s influential early classic study has identified eight such values or professional imperatives that help deconstruct what goes behind the construction of a news story. These are:

1. The immediacy of the event (was it urgent or breaking and is it of the current times).
2. The scope for dramatization (use of drama and action).
3. The scope for personalization (cult of celebrity).
4. The element of simplification (does it have a lot of shades of grey and if they can be eliminated).
5. The scope for titillation (does it reveal anything forbidden/voyeurism and what is the scope of adding or eliminating it).
6. The scope for conventionalism (does it convey any hegemonic ideology, depends on the current political state).
7. The scope to get structured access on the news event (get opinions from experts, authority for validation).
8. The scope for novelty (can it be given a new angle/speculation/twist to make it slightly enticing).

Media’s representation of crime can lead to a distorted picture of how crime is perceived and how it exists in actuality. It is undeniable that media representation influences people’s ideas about crime regardless of whether such impressions are true or not. Some characteristics that show how news reporting can represent a distorted picture are:

Focus on selective offenders that fit the bill: How news reports tend to feature offenders - the representation is generally sensationalized - focuses on their living status. Newsworthy reports will often have older offenders and of higher status as compared to what the actual case is in the criminal justice system. Newsworthy reports often stray away from reporting crimes with young offenders as it not might checkmark the criteria of being newsworthy.

Overstating the role of the police: The police play an important role in clearing up a certain crime event. Media often tends to exaggerate what the police's success has been for a certain crime event. This is probably a favor returned by the news media since the police are the source of most of their stories and this vested interest in portraying them positively is a priority. There is a disproportionate focus on violent crimes.

Spreading victimization: News reporting often has a risk of victimization as a focal point. It considers news related to white, female and high social status adults as a primacy. The problem with this is that such exaggeration tends to ignite a sense of victimization in people of similar backgrounds and spread a sense of vulnerability which might not exist at that scale.

Breaking down one incident into multiple fractions: General news often portrays crime as discrete or separate incidents. Whereas it might be possible that such incidents are part of a bigger structure and pattern. Since a break up of incidents makes for more newsworthy stories for reporting.

How the media become criminogenic?

Mass media and its ill effects have been a topic of long-standing debates. In its effects, the mass media has tended to have negative effects on its consumers. Here are some of the ways mass media might encourage crime.

1. Labeling - it takes the liberty to label certain acts as criminal, harmful, and deviance. Such acts can be certain forms of drug use.
2. Deviance amplification or excessive exaggeration of the harmfulness of a particular activity.
3. By creating moral panics.
4. It stimulates and promotes materialism, overly exaggerated lifestyles, and glamour.
5. It promotes copycat crimes - or how individuals can learn new crimes and tricks through crime programs on TV.
6. It promotes arousal by highlighting sexual and violent imagery.
7. It can easily desensitize a critical topic through repeat broadcasting and viewing.

8. It tends to undermine the credibility and importance of criminal justice agencies where media trials are now a thing.
9. Some valued media commodities like TVs, video recorders, DVDs and more media equipment are targeted by robbers.
10. It has often glamorized offenders by putting certain offenders or cases in the entertainment segment for viewers.
11. It often presents a moral angle when presenting a criminal behavior, negating its practical aspects as to what might have led to the crime.

An academic approach to study the possible effects of media involved two approaches - the mass society approach and behaviorism. Mass media stands as a shared common platform for societal knowledge and information at a global level. It is increasingly influential and potentially manipulating people's attitudes and behaviors. Behaviourism is about human behavior and how watching violent and sexual images shown in the media are promoting aggression and violence. One such study was the bobo doll experiment by psychologist Albert Bandura that demonstrated how young impressionable minds of children are easily influenced by what they saw on TV.

Media is all about creating moral panics

Moral panic is a sociological term. As per Stanley Cohen, a key theorist on media's foray of moral panic, such panic can be brought to the limelight out of nowhere; however, it can also be forgotten fast as fades out very quickly. Many theorists have been critical of the ideological nature of the way this moral panic is carried out. The main criticism of moral panic is that such concerns are necessarily exaggerated and often irrational.

1. The focus of such moral panic is often not clear as to what matter of deviance does it concern.
2. Also, it is often not clear as to what are the moral elements in such moral panics.
3. The moral panic literature suggests that such moral panics that see cultural resistance from youth subcultures are often over-read.
4. Such over-reading is done occasionally by the media in its representation that extends a state of panic or fright.
5. The perceived threat or problem and a response to this threat are often exaggerated where media and public relations are often considered one channel, and that such an approach is wrong.
6. Moral panic and its theory create unrealistic assumptions as to how these moral messages will be received by the audiences.

Cohen's book mentions some important criticism of this moral panic theory. The first criticism is of the difficulty in assessing the disproportionality of reactions as per the nature of the condition

or what happened, compared to the questions of symbolism, representation, and emotion that cannot be represented into comparable statistics.

A second criticism is regarding the rapidness of these panics and their specificity or targeting nature, often portrayed more like a vengeful or hostile act, for instance, when the news focuses on highlighting the race of a convict. In addition to this, McRobbie and Thornton have argued that such panics can occur often frequently and it has become a norm for the media to use such panics to present everyday events to people, which is a highly misleading approach.

Cohen also argues that though the media interpretation of social worlds is complex, it has given birth to new long-term anxieties, where a panic by definition has no or mundane boundaries. A study of moral panic can help one understand the lines of power, how they are manipulated and used for promoting certain ideas and theories amongst the audiences to further a political agenda or motive.

Some of the recent examples of moral panic can be picked from different demographics around the world. It has become a widely practiced norm for most media. One recent moral panic was around the gay rights agenda, which was massively protested in first world countries like the US and the UK, in the US especially, it was found to have threatening consequences for the rest of the population or civil liberties. The simple demand was to give equal rights to the LGBTQ community.

One of the most evident moral panic events charred by the media is the terror event of 9/11 in the US, the aftermath of which was the increase in surveillance laws and wide-spread propagation of what is called Islam phobia, or hatred against Muslims. Muslims or people from Arab countries and people of color (brown people specifically) were excessively targeted. Strict profiling of these people had been blown out of proportion by the media that successfully gave air to the fear that all brown people are dangerous and should leave America because those who conducted the attract on the World Trade towers were of that same background. Irrespective of the fact that many acts of domestic terrorism have been conducted by non-Muslims. This moral panic was propagated through media channels.

Another example of moral panic is in India was the ‘love-jihad’ movement alleging that Hindu girls were being raped and abducted by Muslim men so they can be forced into marriage and converted to Islam. The media reported an incident of a 22-year old Hindu girl who went missing stating that she had been allegedly forced to marry a Muslim man upon abduction and rape. The event was so blown out of proportion that it caused large-scale Hindu-Muslim riots across the state killing more than 60 people, leaving 93 injured and thousands displaced, even permanently. This propaganda was useful for Hindutva leaders and parties who were able to win the election

based on casting a fear against Muslims. But the eventual reality of this media report was disclosed when the girl revealed that this supposed ‘love-jihad’ was, in fact, a love story and that she had eloped out of choice.

The five elements of Cohen’s moral panic theory can be found in these examples. First, they showcase concern for threat to society; second, there is hostility to the threat, where folk devils are used as scapegoats. Third, there is consensus on the society towards the seriousness of the threat. Fourth, the reaction to this threat is disproportionate, and fifth, such panic is volatile, that is it suddenly erupts and dissipates too, with no warning at all.

This still holds for the current state of the mainstream media; if you are watching with a passive eye, and not partaking in the show.