

n°15 Bis
7 July 2008


MEDIA AND INSECURITY

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Within the CRIMPREV workpackage *Perceptions of Crime*, a workshop on 'Media and Insecurity' took place in Ljubljana at the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security (University of Maribor, Slovenia) between 11th and 13th October 2007.

Media, crime, people and insecurity are connected 'factors' and have been particularly interesting research topics and fields for the criminologists over the past years and have become more specific with the latest technology development, especially related to electronic media. Fear of crime is just one of many crime related phenomena created or co-influenced by the media.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the role of media in the social construction of the reality in connection with crime and insecurity and to learn about cognitions of media and insecurity in Europe that have been



researched. Different national views about the role of the media in connection with crime, consequences and social changes, were put on debate. Furthermore, the relations between the media and insecurity and the role of the media as the fourth branch of the government (legislative, executive, judicial and media) were discussed. An overview and assessment of the studies undertaken on the issue of media and crime was the main gist of the workshop: the evolution of media reporting, connections between crime in media and people, insecurity, public opinion, political influence and the meaning of worldwide web development.

The meeting was divided in four thematic parts: Myths about Crime; Media and Cybercrimes; Crime and Media - National and International Aspects, and Media and Power. 17 participants from 6 countries (Germany, Great Britain, Serbia, Spain, Portugal and Slovenia) presented papers, which were commented upon by participants from Finland, Germany, France, Belgium, Netherland and Poland.


The following overview will illustrate the presentations and discussions on the role of media and insecurity during the workshop in Ljubljana.

I - MAIN FINDINGS, PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

1 - Examining reporting about crime in the media

The media have great power in contemporary society. They publish, present, broadcast and transmit reports about various insecurity issues that attract public's attention. Some authors (Pratt, 2007; Leighley, 2004; Surette, 1998) describe the media as using their power while acting as the 'fourth branch' of the government, whereas other researchers (Curran, Seaton, 1993; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2005) warn about the disrespect that media show towards the individuals' right to privacy and the presumption of innocence in criminal proceedings. The media publish reports on crime and other security threats in a populist and sensational manner and use different techniques to attract people's attention. Their selective reports about crimes do not reflect the nature and extent of crime presented in official statistics and victimisation surveys.

It is wrong to suggest that the media are only simple transmitters of messages from the sources to the recipients. They are much more than that. They also construct social reality. By focusing on specific issues, specific crime phenomenon and by using special sensationalistic style of reporting, the media can influence public opinion and pre-define public debate. The media manipulate public perception by over-representing violent crimes, presenting crime events as if they were episodes and supporting the belief that crime is a result of individual deviance rather than wider social problems. The media also simplify crime problems and emphasise law enforcement solutions. They focus primarily on stories about dramatic, unusual



and violent crimes, with emphasis on stranger-to-stranger offending. The presentation of crime and security issues in the mass media is influenced by peoples' perception of threat of crime and, at the same time, exerts a substantial influence on the public's fear of crime. The media perform a variety of tasks amongst which the most important are informing people about crime and deviancy, constructing public image of crime, promoting social morality and creating an anti-criminal climate, exercising control over criminal justice administration and the mobilizing people for crime detection and investigation.

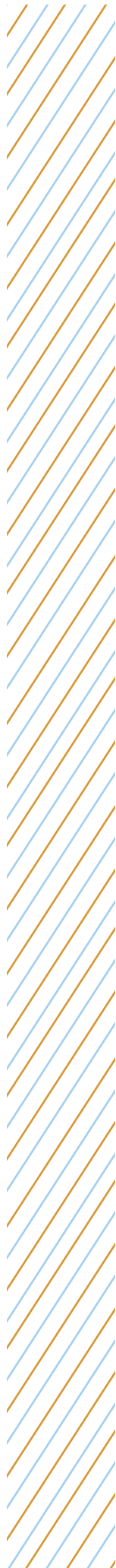
All participants agreed that the mass media do not equally present all crime prevention and police provision of safety and security but select only those that are newsworthy. Similarly, they do not focus the same level of media coverage to all crime events or police activities. Some of the reports appear on the front pages of newspapers or are presented as breaking news in the first minutes of evening news on television, while others are barely mentioned. The same characteristics are typical in terms of article's size in the paper or the length of a report on television or radio (Bučar, Meško, 2006). Media are warning us about different threats and new types of threats. Insecurity is more than just 'crime' it is all about threats. Professional, academic, public, commercial and daily media significantly differ in the quality of the information they provide about safety and crime. The responsibility for the creation of a safety climate relies strongly on television and radio broadcasts because of their strong impact on shaping public's opinion. There was also an agreement about changes in media's ways of reporting and their influence.

The main problem is the selective media reports about crimes, which do not reflect the nature and extent of crime presented in official statistics and victimisation studies. This has a great influence on people, their fear of crime and also on the creation of myths about crime. The media ought to be more aware of the variety of tasks they perform. For them truthful and accurate reporting about the nature and extent of crime should always be more important than profit.

2 - The trends in media reports of crime

Mass media play an important role in making people aware of what goes on beyond the realm of their personal experiences. They constitute a "secondary social reality", on the basis of which conceptions about reality, risks and social changes evolve. Even though many people make sense out of their experiences they are usually hardly able to generalize beyond their personal sphere, since their experiences are normally too limited and specific for the individual. When it comes to events which are infrequent and do not concern everybody, this becomes even more true.

Crime is a rare experience that only few people are personally confronted with. Though many people - maybe even majority - become victims of crime at least once in their life, only a small fraction of




them are victimised each year. Even if we include indirect or vicarious victimization - the fact of knowing others who have become victims - which may have an impact on personal attitudes, it still holds that these experiences are too few to allow generalization. Under these conditions the media acquire an important role in conveying images of crime and in influencing attitudes and fears.

Information on deviance is selected in a priority way and the journalistic approach to it tends to magnify events (use of sensationalist titles, importance given to negative elements or stereotypes, overrepresentation of minority of the phenomena like rare crime - but popular...). The media select and represent interesting examples in relation with crime for “public use”. The selection of the case depends on the journalist and editors in the context of the competitive orientation of modern media and the market value of information. With regard to this, we must mention the creation of sensations and marketing orientation of the media. Tunnell (1992, 300) emphasizes that “news about crime” as well as contents about new forms of crime are those which enable the entertainment of people, the functioning of the film industry and the creation of admissible profit on crime’s behalf. Even after more than 30 years, Fishman’s (1976, 535) comment about discussions on waves of crime news is true: Journalists do not create reports exclusively with the purpose of presenting order and justice, social problems and crime to viewers. Editors actually demand from them information, raw material, which is then organized and presented. Editors receive raw material, from which they create several stories, every day. Editors are the ones, who decide, which contents and how it will be presented to the public. Bad news pays!

Thus, the media play an important role in the identification and creation of myths on crime and are not just unbiased reporters about criminal events. The journalist’s freedom of choosing the content depends on external factors and events; therefore, the media cannot be always blamed for sensationalist reports and intentional misleading of the public. Myths about crime are often problems, on which light would also have to be shed from other points of view. One of such myth was created about “cybercrime” and “cybercriminals¹”. As Wall (2007) indicates, “cybercriminals¹” are nothing more than just ordinary people (housewife, baker, etc.), who have plenty of spare time and ‘surf’ on the cyber space. People mistakenly think

¹ The debates about cybercrime present us with a complex and potentially paradoxical situation in which rhetoric conflicts with reality. The science fiction origins of the concept, competing media processes and prevailing myths discuss and frame cybercrime in a language of prospective technological impact that distorts our understanding of the facts - in the absence of facts. The reporting of actual, and especially novel, events therefore become dramatised and perpetuates the various myths that circulate about cyber-crime and reinforces the resulting culture of fear. Combine this distortion with expectations of crime forged by Peelian concepts of policing and criminal justice and a popular view of cyber-crime emerges of singularly dramatic, dystrophic and catastrophic events that are highly prevalent. Events that the police, as governmental protectors of peace and enforcers of law, are expected to deal with. In short, cyber-crimes scare us and we expect to be scared by them and a gap has opened between our expectations of crime and our expectations of security. This ‘reassurance’ gap is widened by tensions in the production of our knowledge about cyber-crimes, which perpetuates both the culture of fear about cyber-crime and also the various myths that have emerged about it (Wall, 2007).




that these offenders are highly intelligent and have remarkable talents and capabilities. On the contrary, they are just ordinary people, who use Internet as a tool.

Another such misinterpretation is the belief that the world seems to be filled with violence. Reports on crime are found in various media. While it is understandable that a part of the violent criminal and morbid world should be exposed to the public eye, it also seems that the media struggle with setting limits beyond which no reporting should go. There are several reasons for their inability to impose restrictions. Media democracy makes it difficult to accept any idea involving censorship (except in relation to classified information). Media companies also offer a number of variously convincing explanations. They maintain that the media offer what readers want, or rather demand, while referring to the right to be informed. In addition, the media claim they present the truth, the naked truth, in all its various dimensions: should they be blamed because reality is as it is? It is not difficult to substantiate these claims, because the audience rewards the media with high ratings.

Different studies on crime and the media in Germany (Kerner, Feltes, 1980; Reuband, 2007) and elsewhere (Pratt, 2007; Sket, 1991; Leighley, 2004; Meško *et al.*, 2000; Petrovec, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Vodopivec, 1997; Roberts *et al.*, 2003) show that violent crime is overrepresented in the media. The tendency to over report the more serious, violent crimes and to neglect the seemingly more trivial white-collar crime is not only found in the newspapers but also in television programmes focusing on real crime cases, such as “Aktenzeichen XY” or “Kripo live” in Germany (equivalent to “Americas Most Wanted” in the United States and “Crime Watch” in Britain). This is probably true for other crime programs, fictional or non-fictional. In the case of real crime the tendency to focus disproportionately on violent crime already sets in with the police Public Relations and is further aggravated when journalists write about violence on the basis of their own selection. The more violent is the crime, the greater the chance of it being reported about on the front page of the paper. The criteria underlying the selection process is “newsworthiness”. It means that certain characteristics of the events - as represented especially in violent crime news - attracts greater interest than others and is therefore considered to be more “noteworthy” than others. The journalists apply a set of criteria, which are probably not too different from that of the general public. As American studies have shown, everyday talk about crime experiences in the population also tends to disproportionately focus on violent crime.

The overview of Slovene research on media reports about insecurity issues shows that conclusions of Slovene authors (Sket, 1991; Meško *et al.*, 2000; Petrovec, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Vodopivec, 1997) agree with the conclusions of researchers (Pratt, 2007; Leighley, 2004; Surette, 1998; Curran, Seaton, 1993; Roberts *et al.*, 2003; Pfeiffer *et al.*, 2005) in other western countries. The media clearly follow simi-



lar patterns and use the same approach in all industrially developed societies, a fact that can be explained by the common operative characteristics of the mass media organizations in these countries. Mass media organisations are one of the economic components of the global business market. Beside this economic explanation, similar patterns of media reports can also be connected to the same political system. Furthermore, the overview of Slovene research on media shows that this is not a new topic because Maklecov (1941) already wrote about it in his criminological study of crime in the press in 1941.

History is an important teacher for contemporary generations because it can offer us useful suggestions and answers to our questions regarding today's problems. A case in point is corruption. The media can create an atmosphere that would be unpleasant for corruption, with dual consequences - directly, immediately visible or indirect, less visible. The visible consequences usually follow an article or a series of articles about a particular corruption act or a suspicion thereof. Practice shows that the power structure and people are far more sensitive to a locally and temporally condensed series of articles than to individual, unconnected and temporally far-removed articles on particular cases. Certainly the effects of the media activity in the field of crime in general and particularly corruption vary from country to country, but there are some common characteristics. The role of the press in combating corruption has already been substantiated in Slovenia. Despite mass media inclination to exaggeration, sensationalism and superficiality, Slovenian media are still a guardian of the public interest and a so called watchdog.

The historic review of the development of the media reporting also showed that one of the main problems in all countries was the influence of politics and governments (including police) on media reporting. In some countries criminality and insecurity in the periodical press are still skilfully used by a large number of political actors and interests.

II - HOW CAN WE STUDY MEDIA REPORTING ABOUT CRIME? SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Mass media are a basic source of information on crime for citizens. They are important actors in the processes of construction of social meanings (Cohen, 1990; Tuchman, 1978). They give the facts an existence as public events by making them visible. They do not offer an aseptic treatment of the information, but give a certain character to the facts. Thus, the diversity of the media is a very important topic for further research. Surette (1998) defined different type of media: print media, electronic and film media and media service, and multimedia delivery systems, as shown in Figure 1 below. So as the differences among these types of media accrue, so the influence or impact on insecurity connected with reporting about crime can be very different. Participants agreed that this aspect has to be considered in future surveys.

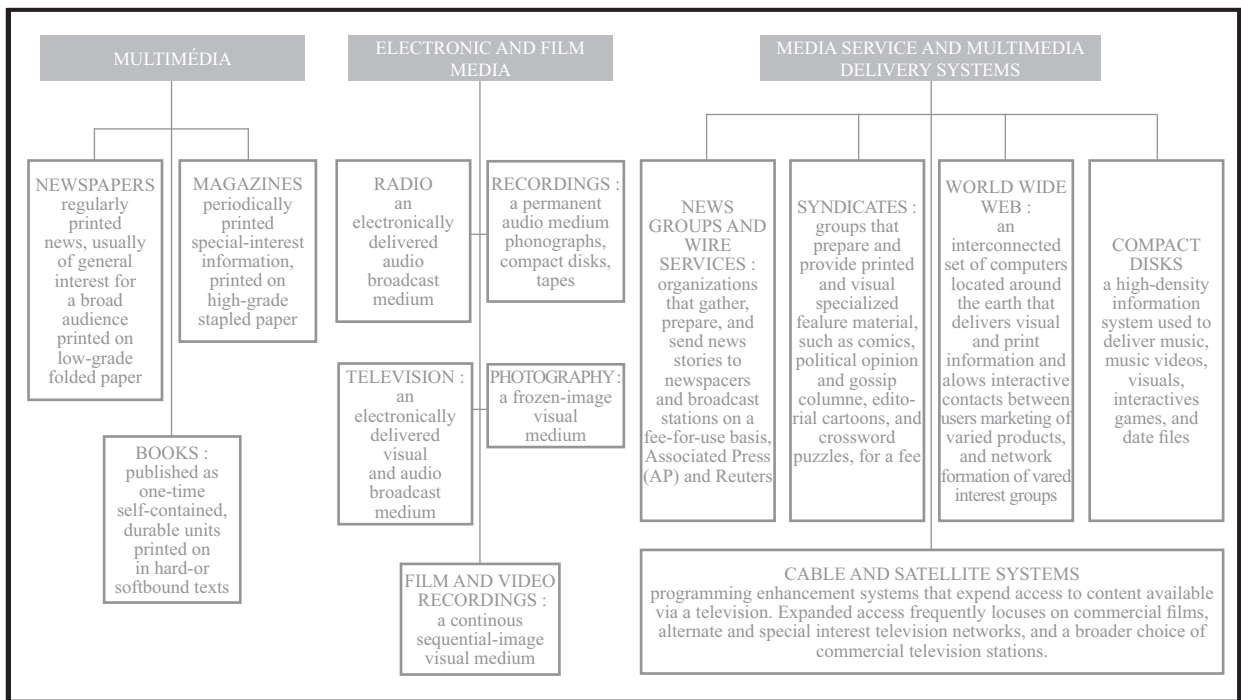



Figure 1: The Mass Media (Surette, 1998: 16).

It is important to continue and develop research of media representations of crime, because news media are important actors (sometimes partly independent) in the battle of power over the interpretation of reality.

III - CONCLUSION

It seems important to distinguish between printed media and television. In most countries, television is increasingly replacing printed media as the primary source of information. This means that reading is vastly replaced by watching pictures. So, dealing with the impact of media on fear and anxieties means dealing with television to a greater extent. Even if there still are daily newspapers (especially tabloids) the way they present news very often resembles the thirty-seconds television advertising (Gore, 2007). That is, the news fails to include the social and individual contexts, which alone make crimes understandable and may reduce common fear. The assumption is that techniques of fear-mongering are much more effective through TV crime programs than through crime reports in news magazines. This “quasi-hypnotic effects” of television (Gore, 2007) should therefore induce the criminological community to include TV programs in research projects to analyse the relationship between “Media and Insecurity”.

To learn about crime people are using different sources including their own experiences and of those in their immediate surroundings. All information of a more general nature (distribution or trends of crime in the country or in a specific area) are collected, condensed, fragmented, decontextualized, commented and presented by the media. That is, people’s knowledge about crime and attitudes towards



crime depend largely upon the selection of the facts by the media and the way they are processed: what is not in the media does not exist, so to speak. If there is any impact of crime on fear or unsafety, it's quite generally a consequence of the way crime is being reported/non-reported.

There is commonly accepted differentiation between the “good news media” and “bad news media”. And it is usually assumed that free media existing within the framework of market economy tend to be “bad news media” concentrating on crime, war, and disasters etc., because this attracts people and does pay. It brings disasters into people's homes (self experience with the unwanted). In countries under dictatorship or totalitarian rule media tend to be “good news media”. This is mainly due to the fact that authoritarian governments use media to influence the public and to create favourable perceptions of the government and it's accomplishments. Because of this media are used rather to create impression of peace, security and effectiveness of government activities in this area.

Diversity of the media is a very important issue for research and future surveys about media and insecurity. The development of Internet and spreading of web-media has an important influence on the media reporting about crime and insecurity. The demand for classical articles and newspapers is decreasing; they are losing their original value.

Participants agreed that media and insecurity presents one of the possible challenges for criminologists in the 21st century. Although there are differences among European countries with respect to this relationship, international cooperation is important to foster common knowledge and solutions. Participants also agreed that education about media and insecurity could have a positive effect, especially for juveniles. Furthermore, it is necessary to strive for higher standards of responsibility and professionalism of the media, set higher demands for them and develop a critical perspective towards crime reporting. The media have to become more aware of their role in rising public's awareness and educating a broader public. As such, ‘newsmaking criminology,² should be put forward. Criminologists and other researchers should cooperate more often with the reporters. Listening to criminology might have a positive impact on media reporting about crime and might help reduce fear and insecurity.

² Newsmaking criminology is the process whereby criminologists use mass communication for the purposes of interpreting, informing and alerting the images of crime and justice, crime and punishment, and criminals and victims (McLaughlin, Muncie, 2001, 190).

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Crimprev info n° 15^{bis} - 7 July 2008

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Design : CampingDesign