

# **MEDIATED MAYHEM: MEDIA, CRIME, CRIMINAL JUSTICE**

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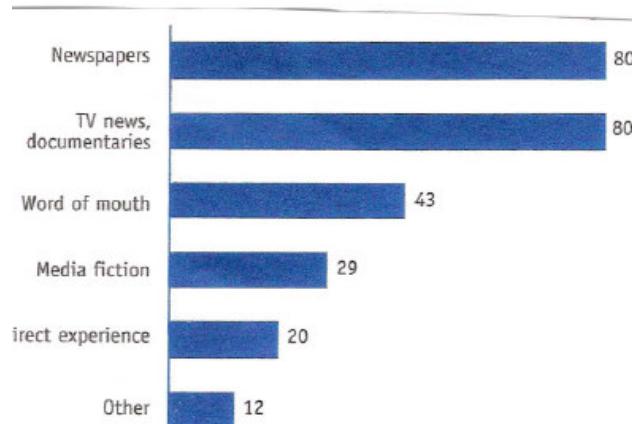
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## **INTRODUCTION: COPS, CROOKS AND CULTURE – THE REACH OF MEDIATED IMAGES**

A key feature of contemporary societies is the omnipresence of mass media of communication, in rapidly proliferating new forms. A significant part of each day is devoted by most people to media consumption of various kinds. In 2010 on average people watched 4.03 hours of television daily (BARB: *Trends in Television Viewing 2010* February 2011).

There is much controversy about the significance and effects of this media consumption, in particular for crime and criminal justice (see Chap.4 on 'Cultural Criminology' and Chap. 10 about public views on crime and justice). The salience of the media as perceived by people themselves is huge. A 2002 survey of Londoners found for example that their 'knowledge' of the police was overwhelmingly drawn from the media:

**Figure 1:**  
**Sources of Information About the Police (%)**



(Fitzgerald et al 2002 Figure 6.1, p.78).

Thus 80% of those interviewed said their main source of information about policing was the news media (four times as many as cite direct experience). Perhaps even more surprising is that 29% saw 'media fiction' as a crucial source – 9% more than 'direct experience'. It is fascinating to ponder whether this is mainly the more 'realistic' fictional representations, such as *The Bill* (described by former Met Commissioner Ian Blair as a permanent NVQ on policing) or *The Wire*, or *Midsomer Murders*, the rural idyll shattered by more killings than Al Capone's Chicago (and where it was a deliberate choice to exclude ethnic minority characters – 'Midsomer Murders producer suspended over diversity remarks' *The Guardian* 15 March 2011).

The ubiquity and the widely perceived influence of media representations of crime and criminal justice have stimulated various concerns about mass media representations of crime, deviance and disorder that have accompanied their development. It has long been feared, in particular by more conservative opinion, that the media are a significant cause of offending, and are fundamentally subversive. This has been a perennially recurring aspect of the 'history of respectable fears' that Geoffrey Pearson has traced back through the last few centuries (Pearson 1983).

A contrasting concern about media representations of crime has worried liberals and radicals (Wykes 2001). To them the media are the cause not of crime itself but of exaggerated public alarm about law and order, generating support for repressive solutions (Gerbner 1970, 1995). In their ideal-typical form these perspectives are polar opposites, sharing in common only their demonization of the media. Each has generated huge research industries conducting empirical studies of media content, production, and effects (for critical analytic reviews see Brown 2003; Carrabine 2008; Marsh 2008; Greer 2009; Jewkes 2010).

The difficulties in rigorously establishing straightforward causal relationships between images and effects have evoked the canard that media researchers are blinkered by libertarian prejudices. For example, Melanie Phillips has claimed that 'for years, media academics have pooh-poohed any link between violence on screen and in real life', because 'media images . . . merely provide "chewing gum for the eyes"' (Phillips 1996). This is a caricature of the media research on effects. A more sophisticated criticism of the effects research is that 'repeated failures to find anything much out would . . . suggest that the wrong question was being asked' (Brown 2003: 28). But the pervasiveness and prominence of media in contemporary life mean that 'the effects debate refuses to go away' (ibid.).

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an analytic overview of the extensive empirical research and theoretical debates about how media represent crime and criminal justice. What patterns and trends are there in these representations, what is their impact, and how are they shaped and developed? In short, it will examine the *content, consequences* and *causes* of media representations of crime and criminal justice, and how these have changed and are changing.

In previous editions of *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* a long chapter described in some detail the findings of the huge volume of empirical research, mainly within a positivist paradigm, on the content and consequences of media representations. This will only be briefly summarised here, partly because of the severe methodological and theoretical limitations of such research (the more detailed account found in earlier volumes will still be available on the website). Instead the focus here will be on theoretical analyses of media production and impact, and the dramatically changing character of these in contemporary culture.

The next section will provide a brief summary and critique of the empirical research on content, consequences and causes of media representations of crime and justice. The second part will then give an overview of the theoretical debates about media, crime, criminalisation and control. The final section offers an analysis of the heightened significance of media representations of criminality and deviance in contemporary political-economic and cultural conditions.

## **PART II: THE CONTENT AND CONSEQUENCES OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIME: A BRIEF REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH**

### **Content analysis: some methodological health warnings**

‘Content analysis’ usually refers to a specific methodology for analysing the content of media, deploying quantitative techniques within a positivist theoretical paradigm. As defined by one leading practitioner, ‘content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communications in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring certain message variables, . . . free of the subjective bias of the reviewer’ (Dominick 1978: 106–7).

There are major problems with the claim that content analysis is ‘objective’. While the categories used to quantify ‘certain message attributes’ may be free of ‘subjective bias’ they are not randomly plucked out of thin air, and cannot

miraculously reflect a structure of meaning objectively inherent in the texts. They necessarily embody theoretical presuppositions by the researcher about criteria of significance. Moreover, the categories selected for quantification usually presuppose some theory about likely consequences. Meticulously counting units of 'violence' is not a form of train-spotting for sadists but motivated by concern that exposure to these images carries risks such as desensitization, or heightened anxiety (Sparks 1992: 79–80).

There is a further fundamental problem with traditional content analyses. What the researcher codifies as instances of the 'same' image may have very different meanings within particular narratives and contexts of reception. How viewers interpret images of 'violence', for example, is not just a function of the amount of blood seen or number of screams heard. The same physical behaviour, for instance a shooting, means different things in different genres, say a Western, a war film, a contemporary cop show, or news bulletins. It will be interpreted differently if the violence is perpetrated on or by a character constructed in the narrative as sympathetic. How audiences construe violence will vary according to how they see their own position vis-à-vis the narrative characters, quite apart from any preferred reading intended by the creators or supposedly inscribed in the narrative. For example, to black audiences, Rodney King, whose beating by Los Angeles police officers was captured on an amateur videotape, was a victim of police racism, while to many white police officers he appeared to be a threatening deviant who invited the beating (Lawrence 2000: 70–3).

These problems do not mean that quantification can or should be avoided, but they refute the claims of positivist content analysis to quantify a supposed objective structure in texts. Counting features of texts should be self-consciously seen as based on the observer's frame of reference, according to explicit criteria. Results must be interpreted reflexively and tentatively as one possible reading. As such, they can yield valuable insights and questions about the significance of trends and patterns.

### **Content analysis: a roundup of results**

#### ***Crime 'fact', crime 'fiction': blurring the boundaries***

Crime and criminal justice have long been sources of popular spectacle and entertainment, even before the rise of the mass media. This is illustrated by the genre of criminal biography and pre-execution confessions and apologias, of various degrees of authenticity, which flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Faller 1987; Rawlings 1992; Durston 1997). Similar accounts continue to

the present day, filling the ‘true crime’ shelves of bookshops (Rawlings 1998; Peay 1998; Wilson 2000: ch. 4; Biressi 2001), and they have been joined by the many volumes retelling the exploits of legendary cops as if they were fictional sleuths (e.g. Fabian 1950, 1954). In overtly fictional crime narratives, ultra-realism (often a quasi-documentary style of presentation) has been the predominant style (Potter and Marshall 2010; Brunsdon 2010).

The fact/fiction distinction has become ever more fluid, with the emergence of what is usually referred to as ‘reality’ television or ‘infotainment’ (Fishman and Cavender 1998; Leishman and Mason 2002: ch. 7). There has been the growth of programming such as *Crimewatch UK* that re-creates current cases, often with an avowed purpose of solving them (Jewkes 2010: ch.6). Fly-on-the-wall footage of actual incidents has proliferated in documentaries like Roger Graef’s pioneering 1982 Thames Valley Police series, and entertainment programming based on real cops in action, for example *Cops* (Doyle 2003). Live newscasts of particular occurrences are increasingly common, such as the O. J. Simpson car chase and subsequent trial (Brown 2003: 56–60). Film footage of criminal events in process is frequently used in news broadcasts, perhaps most influentially in the CCTV shots of Jamie Bulger being led away by his killers (Green 2008). Police deviance has been caught increasingly often on citizens’ cameras since the amateur video capturing the 1991 beating by Los Angeles police of Rodney King. The video footage that showed newspaper seller Ian Tomlinson had been struck and pushed to the ground by a police officer shortly before he died during the 2009 London G20 demonstration is a recent dramatic example, leading to a coroner’s verdict of unlawful killing (Greer and McLaughlin 2011). Such challenging of official accounts by the proliferation of citizen media, dubbed ‘synopticon’ (Mathiesen 1997) or ‘sousveillance’ (Mann et al 2003) is a hugely significant factor making contemporary media representations more complex and multi-faceted (Greer 2009 Part 6). The police for their part have increasingly resorted to the media as a part of criminal investigations (Innes 1999, 2003), as well as to cultivate support more generally (Mawby 1999, 2002, 2003, 2010a). The media and criminal justice systems are penetrating each other increasingly, making a firm distinction between ‘factual’ and ‘fictional’ programming tenuous (Manning 1998). The implications will be explored further in the conclusions, but we will turn next to a consideration of the results of content analyses.

### ***Deviant news: Extent***

Crime narratives and representations are, and have always been, a prominent part of the content of all mass media. The proportion of media content that is constituted by crime items clearly will depend on the definitions of ‘crime’ used.

Richard Ericson and his colleagues adopted an exceptionally broad definition of deviance for their study of newsmaking in Toronto (Ericson *et al.* 1987, 1989, 1991): ‘the behaviour of a thing or person that strays from the normal . . . not only . . . criminal acts’ (Ericson *et al.* 1987: 4). When defined so widely deviance is the essence of news, ‘*the defining characteristic of what journalists regard as newsworthy*’ (*ibid.*). Unsurprisingly, given their broad definition, Ericson *et al.* found that a remarkably high proportion of news was about ‘deviance and control’, ranging from 45.3 per cent in a quality newspaper to 71.5 per cent on a quality radio station (Ericson *et al.* 1991: 239–42). Contrary to most other studies, they found that ‘quality’ broadcasting outlets had *more* deviance stories (both about violence and economic malpractice), because of ‘their particular emphasis on deviance and control in public bureaucracies’ (*ibid.*). Stories about crime in the narrower sense of violations of criminal law are a more limited but nonetheless generally high proportion of news, varying somewhat according to medium (e.g. radio, television, or print journalism), market (e.g. ‘quality’ or ‘popular’ journalism), and methodology (e.g. do we only consider stories about specific criminal incidents or include reports, articles, or also include editorials about the state of crime and criminal justice generally).

The proportion of crime news varies over time, and has generally increased in recent decades (albeit with persisting variations according to ‘market’). The first study of crime news in Britain looked at crime news reporting in September 1938, 1955, and 1967 (Roshier 1973), and found that on average 4 per cent of stories in the three newspapers sampled were about crime. More recent studies have found higher percentages of crime news, for example a study of six Scottish newspapers in 1981 found that an average of 6.5 per cent of space was given to crime news (Ditton and Duffy 1983: 161; see also Smith 1984; Schlesinger *et al.* 1991: 411–15). This rise was confirmed by a later study comparing coverage of crime in 10 national daily newspapers for four weeks from 19 June 1989 (Williams and Dickinson 1993). ‘On average, 12.7% of event-oriented news reports were about crime’ (*ibid.*: 40). The proportion of space devoted to crime was greater the more ‘downmarket’ the newspaper. The smallest proportion of crime news was 5.1 per cent in the *Guardian*; the largest was 30.4 per cent in the *Sun* (*ibid.*: 41). The reporting of white-collar crime tends to be concentrated in ‘quality’ newspapers and is often restricted to specialist financial pages, sections, or newspapers (Stephenson-Burton 1995: 137–44), framed in ways that mark it off from ‘real’ crime unless they are sensational celebrity-style stories that are treated as a form of ‘infotainment’ (Tombs and Whyte 2001; Levi 2006).

A long-term historical study examined a random sample of issues of *The Times* and the *Mirror* for each year between 1945 and 1991 (Reiner *et al.* 2003). It found a

generally upward (albeit fluctuating) trend in the proportion of stories focused on crime in both newspapers (from under 10 per cent in the 1940s to over 20 per cent in the 1990s). The sharpest increase occurred during the late 1960s, when the average annual proportion of crime stories almost doubled, from around 10 per cent to around 20 per cent in both papers. In both papers the proportion of stories about the criminal justice system, as distinct from the commission of criminal offences, has clearly increased since the Second World War. Criminal justice stories were on average 2 per cent of all stories in the *Mirror* between 1945 and 1951, and 3 per cent in *The Times*. By 1985–91 the average had increased to 6 per cent in the *Mirror*, and 9 per cent in *The Times*.

In conclusion, deviance and control in a broad sense are the very stuff of news. However, stories about the commission of particular offences are more common in 'popular' news outlets (although for official or corporate crime the reverse is true). The proportion of news devoted to crime and criminal justice has increased over the last half-century.

### ***Deviant news: patterns***

Crime news exhibits remarkably similar patterns in studies conducted at many different times and places. From the earliest studies onwards, analyses of news reports have found that crimes of violence are featured disproportionately compared to their incidence in official crime statistics. In the USA 'the ratio of violent-to-property crime stories appearing in the surveyed newspapers was 8 to 2; however, official statistics reflected a property-to-violent crime ratio of more than 9 to 1 during the survey period' (Marsh 1991: 73). A similar pattern was found in fourteen other countries (ibid.: 74–6). Indeed a general finding has been the lack of relationship between patterns and trends in crime news and crime statistics (Beckett 1997).

The previously cited historical study of two British newspapers since the Second World War found that homicide was by far the most common type of crime reported, accounting for about one-third of all crime news stories throughout the period (Reiner et al 2000, 2001, 2003). Other violent crimes were the next most common. However, there were significant shifts in the proportion of stories featuring other sorts of crime. In particular there was a marked decline in the proportion of stories featuring 'volume' property crimes such as burglary in which no violence occurred (these are of course the overwhelming majority of crimes according to official statistics and crime surveys, cf. Maguire, Chapter 8, this volume). During the 1940s and 1950s property crimes featured frequently in news stories, but after the mid-1960s they were hardly ever reported unless there was

some celebrity angle. On the other hand, some offences began to feature prominently in news stories only after the mid-1960s, notably drug offences, which by the 1990s accounted for about 10 per cent of all crime stories .

Several studies confirm the pattern of increasing over-representation of violent and interpersonal (especially sex) crimes. Between 1951 and 1985 the number of rape trials in Britain increased nearly four times, from 119 to 450. In the same period, the number of rape cases reported in the press increased more than five times, from 28 to 154. The percentage of rape cases reported jumped from 23.5 per cent in 1951 to 34.2 per cent in 1985 (Soothill and Walby 1991: 20–22). In Northern Ireland press reporting of sex cases tripled during the 1980s and 1990s (Greer 2003).

The proportion of news devoted to crime of different types, and the prominence with which it is presented, varies according to market and medium. In one month of 1989, 64.5 per cent of British newspaper crime stories featured violence, while the British Crime Survey found that only 6 per cent of crimes reported by victims were violent (Williams and Dickinson 1993: 40). The percentage of stories dealing with crimes involving personal violence, and the salience they were given, was considerably greater in more downmarket newspapers (*ibid.*: 40–3).

In Britain, the proportion of violent crimes reported in television news broadcasts is closer to the tabloid figure than the quality press, especially for local rather than national bulletins. One study found that the proportion of crime stories reporting non-sexual violence against the person in 'quality', 'mid-market', and 'tabloid' newspapers respectively was 24.7 per cent, 38.8 per cent, and 45.9 per cent. On national news bulletins it was 40 per cent; on local bulletins violent crime stories were 63.2 per cent of all crime news (Schlesinger *et al.* 1991: 412–15).

Homicide in general is the most prominent crime in news stories, but the likelihood of particular cases being reported varies systematically. A recent study analysed the reporting of homicide in three British newspapers between 1993 and 1997 (Peelo *et al.* 2004). Of the 2,685 police-recorded homicides in this period, just under 40 per cent were reported in at least one of the papers studied (*ibid.*: 261). 'Sexual homicides were most likely to be reported in all three newspapers, as were homicides where there was a clear motive for monetary gain, or a jealousy or revenge motive' (*ibid.*: 272). Least likely to be reported were the most common homicides, those arising out of 'rage or quarrel' (*ibid.*: 269). Victim characteristics were also important determinants of the likelihood of reporting. Homicides where the victim was a child (but not an infant), female, or of higher status were more likely to be reported (*ibid.*: 262–7).

An indirect consequence of the pattern of offences reported by news stories is an exaggeration of police success in clearing-up crime, 'because the police are more successful in solving violent crimes than property crimes' (Marsh 1991: 73). However, the representation of police success is declining: the 'clear-up' rate in news stories fell from 73 per cent in 1945–64 to 51 per cent in 1981–91 (Reiner *et al.* 2003: 23).

Most studies find that offenders and victims featuring in news reports are typically older and of higher status than those officially processed by the criminal justice system (Roshier 1973: 45–6; Reiner *et al.* 2003: 19–21). There is contradictory evidence about whether news reports disproportionately feature ethnic minority offenders (Graber 1980; Marsh 1991: 74; Sacco 1995: 143; Barlow 1998). Crime reports in local newspapers or broadcasting clearly focus more on ethnic minority and lower-status group suspects (Garofalo 1981: 324; Beckett and Sasson 2000: 79). 'Reality' television programmes also present a marked variation to national news reports in terms of the demography of the offenders portrayed, concentrating on stories with young, ethnic minority suspects (Oliver and Armstrong 1998). The one demographic characteristic of offenders which is overwhelmingly congruent in news stories and in all other data sources on crime is their gender: 'both crime statistics and crime news portray offending as predominantly a male activity' (Sacco 1995: 143).

Studies assessing the profile of victims in news stories are fewer in number than analyses of the representation of offenders. There is however a clear trend for victims to become the pivotal focus of news stories in the last three decades (Reiner *et al.* 2003), paralleling the increasing centrality of victims in criminal justice and criminology (see Hoyle, Chapter 14 in this volume) and crime fiction (Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001). News stories exaggerate the crime risks faced by higher-status white people, as well as disproportionately representing women, children, or older people as victims Mawby and Brown 1983; Chermak 1995; Chiricos *et al.* 1997; Beckett and Sasson 2000: 79–80; Greer 2003: 70–2; Reiner *et al.* 2003: 21–2; Peelo *et al.* 2004: 262–7).

Another consistent finding is the predominance of stories about criminal incidents, rather than analyses of crime patterns or the possible causes of crime (Garofalo 1981: 325; Marsh 1991: 76; Sasson 1995; Barlow 1998; Beckett and Sasson 2000: 80–1; Greer 2003: 66–70). Although an aspect of the more general event-orientation that is part of the 'eternal recurrence' of news (Rock 1973), the 'mass media provide citizens with a public awareness of crime . . . based upon an information-rich and knowledge-poor foundation' (Sherizen 1978: 204). An important example is the reporting of rape and other sex crimes, where issues of power and gender disappear

in the fascination with the demonization of individual offenders or victims (Soothill and Walby 1991; Lees 1995; Greer 2003). Stories with child homicide victims and/or perpetrators are particularly likely to be featured so prominently that they become long-running stories with a familiar cast of characters, regularly invoked as symbols of wider issues or the state of the nation, illustrated by the Moors murders, and the Jamie Bulger and Soham cases (Jones and Wardle 2007; Green 2008).

The tendency to exclude analysis of broader structural processes or explanations is also evident in stories about political disorder (Halloran *et al.* 1970; Hall 1973: 232–43; Sumner 1982; Tumber 1982; Cottle 1993; De Luca and Peeples 2006). The portrayal of political conflict such as riot or terrorism is often in terms of sheer criminality (Clarke and Taylor 1980; Hillyard 1982; Iyengar 1991: 24–46; Hutchinson and Lester 2006).

There is a tendency in recent years for critical and campaigning groups to have more access to the media, partly because of the increasing politicization of law and order (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Reiner 2007 Chap.5; Downes and Morgan, Chapter 7, this volume; Cottle 2008). Although critical stories exposing malpractice by the police or other criminal justice officials are regularly published, this 'watchdog' function has not served historically to undermine the legitimacy of criminal justice institutions. Corruption and other police deviance stories have tended to be situated within the 'one bad apple' framework, whereby the exposure of individual wrongdoing is interpreted as a testimony to the integrity of the system which dealt with it (Chibnall 1977: ch. 5). As the volume of police deviance stories has increased in recent years (Reiner *et al.* 2003: 22–4), the 'one bad apple' story becomes harder to recycle. An alternative damage-limitation narrative is to present scandals as stories of institutional reform. This acknowledges previous malpractice, but safeguards the legitimacy of the institution as it is portrayed as putting things right (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994: ch. 7).

Recently, this narrative has been complicated by a shift in media emphasis from 'institutional reform' as a means of re-legitimation to 'institutional failure' as a systemic characteristic of publicly funded bodies and a key determinant of newsworthiness (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010). In a context of increased market competition, shrinking readerships and a decline in deference to authority, newspapers in particular have gone on the offensive. The press now routinely engage in 'attack journalism', questioning the integrity of institutional power and seeking, often via 'trial by media', to hound senior public figures out of office (Greer and McLaughlin 2011).

### **The content of crime fiction**

Although there are some quantitative content analyses of film and television crime fiction,<sup>1</sup> a variety of qualitative techniques and theoretical perspectives drawn from literary, film, and social theory have more frequently been used.<sup>2</sup> The pattern of representation of crime in fictional stories, in all media, resembles the content analyses of crime news.

Crime and detection have always been staples of modern literature, as Defoe, Fielding, Poe, and Dickens illustrate (Ousby 1976). Some authors have postulated an ancient ancestry for the detective story. 'We find sporadic examples of it in Oriental folk-tales, in the Apocryphal Books of the Old Testament, in the play-scene in *Hamlet*; while Aristotle in his *Poetics* puts forward observations about dramatic plot-construction which are applicable today to the construction of a detective mystery' (Sayers 1936: vii). This was clearly an attempt to emphasize the 'snobbery' rather than the 'violence' of the classic ratiocinative detective story (Watson 1971). The dominant style of crime fiction has varied from the classic puzzle mystery exemplified by Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie, to the tougher private eye stories pioneered by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and the police procedurals of Ed McBain, Joseph Wambaugh, and others. One estimate suggests that 'between a quarter and a third of total paperback output could probably be put into the category of "thriller" of one kind or another . . . since 1945, at least 10,000 million copies of crime stories have been sold world-wide' (Mandel 1984: 66–7).

Crime stories have also been a prominent genre in the cinema, the dominant mass medium of the first half of the twentieth century. As with its successors, television, video and now digital media, the cinema has been haunted by respectable fears about its portrayal of crime and violence (Barker and Petley 2001). The proportion of films about crime has fluctuated cyclically since the Second World War, but there is no long-term increase or decrease (Allen *et al.* 1997). In most years, around 20 per cent of all films are crime movies, and around half of all films have significant crime content.

Radio was the main broadcasting medium of the first half of the twentieth century. Stories about crime and law enforcement were a popular part of radio drama, in Britain and North America, although never as dominant as they subsequently became on television (Shale 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> Pandiani 1978; Carlson 1985; Lichter *et al.* 1994; Powers *et al.* 1996; Allen *et al.* 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Chibnall and Murphy 1999; Leishman and Mason 2002; Rafter 2006; Reiner 2008, 2010 Chap.6; Rafter and Brown, 2011; are just some of the most recent analyses of crime fiction.

Stories about crime and law enforcement have saturated television ever since it became the leading broadcasting medium in the 1950s. By 1959 over one-third of American prime-time television was crime shows (Dominick 1978: 114). Crime shows are just as much a staple of British television. Since 1955 around 25 per cent of the most popular television shows in Britain in most years have been crime or police series. While there are sharp cyclical fluctuations, there is no long-term trend (Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001), but there have been changes in *how* crime and criminal justice are represented.

### **The pattern of crime in fiction**

The pattern of fictional representations of crime is similar to that in news stories—and shows similar discrepancies from the picture conveyed by official crime statistics. Murder and other violent crimes feature vastly more frequently than the property offences that predominate in official statistics. A historical analysis of the crime films that have done best at the British box office since the Second World War (Allen *et al.* 1998; Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001) found that murder was the primary crime (the McGuffin of the plot, in Hitchcock's terminology) in the overwhelming majority of films throughout the period. However, property offences provided the McGuffin in a significant minority of films up to the late 1960s, though seldom thereafter. Sex and drug offences began to appear as central aspects of narratives only after the late 1960s. Since then crime is represented increasingly as an all-pervasive threat, not an abnormal, one-off intrusion into a stable order. Linked to this is the increasing prevalence in films of police heroes, signifying that crime has become sufficiently routine to provide employment for a large bureaucracy, not just a diversion for enthusiastic amateurs at country house weekends.

The representation of violence has become increasingly graphic throughout the period since the Second World War. Up to the early 1970s hardly any films showed more than a minor degree of pain or suffering by victims—even if they were murdered! Since then an increasing proportion of films depict victims in severe torment (Reiner *et al.* 2001: 184; Rafter and Brown 2011).

On television too, fictional narratives have always featured violent crimes most prominently, but are focusing on them even more. Studies of American television suggest that about two-thirds of crime on prime-time shows consists of murder, assault, or armed robbery (Lichter *et al.* 1994; Beckett and Sasson 2000: ch. 6). Ironically, in relation to property crime risks, television has become safer than the world presented in official statistics. Between 1955 and 1984, the average annual rate for serious property offences in the USA increased from 10 to 50 incidents per 1,000 people according to FBI data. However, on television 'the rate for serious

property crimes has remained steady at 20 incidents per 1,000 characters over the thirty years of our study' (ibid.: 284). Thus between 1955 and 1964 the television property crime rate exceeded the official statistics, but since then it has fallen far behind them. There is also a trend for the cinema (and newspapers) to increasingly *understate* the risks of property crime (Allen *et al.* 1998: 65; Reiner *et al.* 2003: 18–19).

The character of crimes depicted in fiction is also vastly different from the officially recorded pattern. While most 'real' murders are extensions of brawls between young men (Dorling 2004), or domestic disputes, in fiction murder is usually motivated by greed and calculation (Allen *et al.* 1998: 69). Rape and other sex crimes are also presented in opposite ways in fiction (or news) and criminal justice statistics (Greer 2003: ch. 7). Most rapes are perpetrated by intimates or acquaintances, but on television and other fiction (and in news stories), rape is usually committed by psychopathic strangers and involves extreme brutality, often torture and murder.

While crime fiction presents property crime less frequently than the reality suggested by crime statistics, those it does portray are far more serious. Official statistics and victim surveys concur in calculating that the overwhelming majority of property crimes involve little or no loss or damage, and no physical threat or harm to the victim—indeed, there is usually no contact at all with the perpetrator. In fiction, however, most property crimes involve tightly planned, high-value, project thefts, and are frequently accompanied by violence.

Related to the disproportionate emphasis on the most serious end of the crime spectrum is the portrayal of the demographic characteristics of offenders and victims. Offenders in fiction are primarily higher-status, white, middle-aged males (Pandiani 1978: 442–7; Garofalo 1981: 326; Lichter *et al.* 1994: 290–5; Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001). Interestingly, the new genre of 'reality' infotainment cop shows such as *Cops* differs from this pattern, primarily presenting offenders as non-white, underclass youth (Fishman and Cavender 1998; Valverde 2006). The social characteristics of fictional victims are similar, but a higher proportion are female. The demographic profile of offenders and victims in fiction is the polar opposite of criminal justice statistics, apart from the maleness of most offenders (Surette 2010 calls this 'the law of opposites')

A final important feature of fictional crime is the high clear-up rate: media cops usually get their man in fifty minutes with commercial breaks. In a representative sample of movies since 1945, there was no film before 1952 in which criminals escaped capture, and hardly any up to the early 1970s. Thereafter, offenders get away with their crimes in an increasing number of films, albeit still a minority (Allen

*et al.* 1998: 185; Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001). Trends on television are similar, with the overwhelming majority of crimes cleared up by the police, but an increasing minority where they fail (Lichter *et al.* 1994: ch. 9.).

The police and the criminal justice system are thus overwhelmingly portrayed in a positive light in popular fiction, as the successful protectors of victims against serious harm and violence. This continues to be so, although with increasing questioning of police success and integrity (Leishman and Mason 2003; Brown 2007; Cavender and Deutsch 2007; Reiner 2008). Although the majority of police characters in films and television shows are represented as sympathetic, honest, and just, there is an increasing portrayal of police deviance. Corrupt, brutal, and discriminatory police officers have become more common since the mid-1960s in films (Powers *et al.* 1996: 113–16; Allen *et al.* 1998: 185–6) and television (Lichter *et al.* 1994: ch. 9), as has acceptance of routine police violation of legal restraints.

Victims have moved from a shadowy and purely functional role in crime narratives to a pivotal position. Film and television stories focus increasingly on the plight of victims, whose suffering is portrayed more graphically and often constitutes the driving force of the story (Allen *et al.* 1998; Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001). Support for law enforcement and criminal justice is increasingly constructed in narratives by presenting them as defenders or avengers of victims with whose suffering the audience is invited to identify.

### **Media representation of crime: a summary**

1. News and fiction stories about crime are prominent in all media. While there is evidence of increasing attention to crime in some parts of the media, overall this fascination has been constant throughout media history.
2. News and fiction concentrate overwhelmingly on serious violent crimes against individuals, albeit with some variation according to medium and market. The proportion of different crimes represented is the inverse of official statistics.
3. The demographic profile of offenders and victims in the media is older and higher status than those processed by the criminal justice system. Child victims and perpetrators are also represented disproportionately.
4. The risks of crime as portrayed by the media are both quantitatively and qualitatively more serious than the official statistically recorded picture, although the media underplay the current probabilities of victimization by property crimes.
5. The media generally present a very positive image of the success and integrity of the police, and criminal justice more generally. However, in both news and fiction there is a clear trend to criticism of law enforcement, in terms of both its effectiveness and its justice and honesty. While in the past the unbroken media

picture was that *Crime Does Not Pay* (the title of a series of short films produced by MGM between 1935 and 1947), this is increasingly called into question in contemporary news and fiction.

6. Individual victims and their suffering increasingly provide the motive force of crime stories.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF MEDIA IMAGES OF CRIME

A vast body of (mainly positivistic) research has sought to measure two possible consequences of media representations (which are not mutually exclusive): criminal behaviour (especially violence); and fear of crime (for a detailed critical survey see Howitt 1998: chs 1, 5–8, 10–11).

There are many possible links in criminological theory between media representations and crime. The media may impact on how crimes are labelled; the motives, means and opportunities for offending; and the formal and informal controls militating against crime.

### *Labelling*

For an act to be 'criminal' (as distinct from harmful, immoral, antisocial, etc.) it has to be labelled as such. This involves the creation of a legal category. A recorded crime also requires the labelling of the act as criminal by citizens and/or law-enforcement officers.

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. Becker's seminal *Outsiders* analysed the 1937 passage of the US Marijuana Tax Act, showing the use of the media as a tool of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics' moral entrepreneurship (Becker 1963: ch. 7). Jock Young analysed how media representations amplified the deviance of drug-takers (Young 1971). 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' (Cohen 1972). Hall *et al.*'s analysis of the 1973 moral panic about a supposedly new type of robbery, 'mugging', emphasized the crucial part played by the media. Newspapers stimulated public anxiety, producing changes in policing and criminal justice that became a self-fulfilling spiral of deviancy amplification (Hall *et al.* 1978).

Many subsequent studies have illustrated the role of the media in shaping the boundaries of criminality by creating new categories of offence, or by changing perceptions and sensitivities, leading to fluctuations in apparent crime. For example, Roger Graef's celebrated 1982 fly-on-the-wall documentary about the Thames Valley Police was a key impetus to reform of police treatment of rape victims. This also contributed, however, to a rise in the proportion of victims reporting rape, and thus an increase in the recorded rate. Many other studies have documented media-amplified 'crime waves' and 'moral panics' about law and order.<sup>3</sup>

### *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. Probably the most influential sociological theory of how criminal motives are formed is Merton's version of anomie theory (Merton 1938; Messner and Rosenfeld 2006; Reiner 2007: 9, 14-5, 84-5; Special Issue of *Theoretical Criminology* 11/1 2007; Rock, Chapter 2 in this volume). The media present 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. Psychological theories of the formation of motives to commit offences also often feature media effects as part of the process. 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 (Livingstone 1996: 308).

### *Means*

It has often been alleged that the media act as an open university of crime, spreading knowledge of criminal techniques. This is frequently claimed in relation to particular *causes célèbres* or horrific crimes. A notorious case was the allegation that the murderers of Jamie Bulger had been influenced by the video *Child's Play 3* in the manner in which they killed the unfortunate toddler (Jewkes 2010: 16). 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 (Hayward 2004: 172-3, 193-4). Despite much discussion, the evidence that these are major sources of crime is weak (Young 2004; Hargrave and Livingstone 2006).

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<sup>3</sup> e.g. Recent overviews include: Critcher 2003, 2006; Carrabine 2008 Chap.8; Greer 2009 Part 5; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009; Special Issue of *British Journal of Criminology* 49/1 2009; Jewkes 2010 Chap.3; Special Issue of *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 7/3 2011.

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 (Wall 2001, 2007; Jewkes 2003, 2006; Yar 2006; Jewkes and Yar 2009).

### *Opportunity*

The media may increase opportunities to commit offences by contributing to the development of a consumerist ethos, in which the availability of tempting targets of theft proliferates (Hayward 2004; Hallsworth 2005: 62–3, ch. 7; Hall, Winlow and Ancrum 2008). They can also alter ‘routine activities’, especially in relation to the use of leisure time, which structure opportunities for offending (Cohen and Felson 1979). The domestic hardware and software of mass media use—TVs, videos, radios, CDs, personal computers, mobile phones—are the common currency of routine property crime, and their proliferation has been an important aspect of the spread of criminal opportunities.

### *Absence of controls*

Motivated potential offenders, with the means and opportunities to commit offences, may still not carry out these crimes if effective social controls are in place. These might be *external*—the deterrent threat of sanctions represented in the first place by the police—or *internal*—the still, small voice of conscience—what Eysenck has called the ‘inner policeman’.

A regularly recurring theme of respectable anxieties about the criminogenic consequences of media images of crime is that they erode the efficacy of both external and internal controls. They may undermine external controls by derogatory representations of criminal justice, for example ridiculing its agents, a key complaint at least since the days of Shakespeare’s Dogberry, with the perennial popularity of comic cops and constables. Serious representations of criminal justice might undermine its legitimacy by questioning the integrity and fairness, or the efficiency and effectiveness of the police. Negative representations of criminal justice could lessen public cooperation with the system, or potential offenders’ perception of the probability of sanctions, with the consequence of increasing crime.

Probably the most frequently suggested line of causation between media representations and criminal behaviour is the allegation that the media undermine internalized controls, by regularly presenting sympathetic or glamorous images of

offending. In academic form this is found in psychological theories of disinhibition and desensitization (Wartella 1995: 309-12).

### **Criminogenic media? the research evidence**

In a comprehensive review of the research literature, Sonia Livingstone noted that 'since the 1920s thousands of studies of mass media effects have been conducted' (Livingstone 1996: 306). She added that even listing the references to research in the previous decade would exhaust the space allocated to her article (some twenty pages). Reviews of the literature regularly recycle the apotheosis of agnosticism represented by the conclusion of one major study from the 1960s: 'for some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial' (Schramm *et al.* 1961: 11).

This meagre conclusion from the expenditure of countless research hours and dollars is primarily a testimony to the limitations and difficulties of empirical social science. The armoury of possible research techniques for assessing directly the effects of media images on crime is sparse, and suffers from evident and long-recognized limitations.

The archetypal technique has been some version of the classic experiment: a group of subjects are exposed to a media stimulus—say a film—and the response is measured, by comparing behaviour or attitudes before and after. In a characteristic example, children of four to five were shown a five-minute film in the researcher's office, and then taken to a room with toys and observed for 20 minutes through a one-way mirror (Bandura *et al.* 1961, 1963). The children were randomly assigned to watch one of three films, enacting scenarios in which a boy who attacked another boy and some toys was depicted as being rewarded, or punished, or neither. The children (especially the boys) who saw the film about the boy rewarded for his attack by getting all the toys, were observed to carry out twice as much imitative aggression as the other groups, but no more non-imitative aggression.

This example shows all the problems of inferring conclusions about links between media and violence from laboratory-style experiments. Are the results a Hawthorn effect arising from the experimental situation itself? For instance, were the more aggressive children who saw a film in which aggression was rewarded influenced by their perception that the experimenter approved of such behaviour? How far can results from one context of viewing be extrapolated to others? Do experimental results exaggerate the links in the everyday world by picking up short-term effects of

media exposure that rapidly evaporate? Or do they underestimate the long-term cumulative effects of regular, repeated exposures by measuring only one-off results?

Given the huge number of such experimental studies (using different forms of stimuli and different types of measures of response, for different sorts of subjects, at many different times and places) it is hardly surprising that there are variations in the extent of effect shown, if any. However, most studies do show *some* effect, and the few that conducted follow-ups over time found that while effects diminished by about 25 per cent over the fortnight or so after an experiment, they do not disappear (Livingstone 1996: 309–10). There are many suggestions in the experimental literature about what determines the degree of effect caused by media exposures. These include the perceived realism of the representation, whether violence or deviance was seen as justified, punished, or rewarded, whether the viewers identified with the perpetrator, the variable vulnerability or susceptibility of the viewer, and so on (*ibid.*).

Typically, however, the effects of exposure to media stimuli in experimental situations are small. Interestingly, most of the research has looked at supposed negative effects of media, such as violence. The few studies that have examined the effects of 'prosocial' images suggest that these are much larger (Livingstone 1996: 309).

Given the limitations of laboratory experiments, some studies have tried to assess the effects of media exposure in 'natural' everyday situations. One method has been by looking at the introduction of some form of medium (usually television) in an area where it did not exist before. This was most frequently done in the 1950s, when the spread of television ownership, first in the USA, then in the UK, provided the opportunity of a once-and-for-all natural experiment. One study of matched sets of 34 US cities in the early 1950s found that larceny increased by about 5 per cent in those cities where television was introduced for the first time, compared to cities without TV or those that had been receiving it for some time (Hennigan *et al.* 1982). However, British research in the same period does not find similar effects on deviance (Livingstone 1996: 312–13). Since the virtually universal availability of television, such natural experiments are seldom possible. One rare example found that children's verbal and physical aggression increased in a Northern Canadian town after television was introduced, compared to two towns with established television (Williams 1986). While such natural experiments do not suffer from the artificiality of their laboratory counterparts, they are of course less completely controlled: the possibility can never be ruled out that differences between areas (even if roughly matched) were due to factors other than television.

Several studies have compared the viewing patterns of known offenders and (supposed) non-offenders. Some have concluded that more exposure to television is related to greater aggressiveness (Wartella 1995: 307–9); others that the viewing preferences of delinquents are remarkably similar to the general pattern for their age (Hagell and Newburn 1994). Neither conclusion is free from the possibility of other, unmeasured factors explaining either the association or the lack of it.

There is also evidence that abuses of power by police and other criminal justice agents may be affected by media representations. One study of 'reality' television programmes such as *Cops* suggested that the police may adopt forms of entrapment or illicit punishment of offenders to ensure good video footage for such shows (Doyle 1998: 110–12, 2003).

Conversely, the influence of reality and fictional forensic and crime science programmes – *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* being the prime example – on public expectations of criminal justice has been the subject of much speculation, and some research. The key concern is that that jurors who see the high-quality forensic evidence presented on *CSI* have increased expectations in real trials, where the actual available evidence tends to be much more uncertain. Though evidence of a *CSI* effect on trial juries is at best equivocal (Tyler 2006), research does indicate some impact on public expectations of the police, leading to unrealistic requests for hi-tech investigative miracles at crime scenes (Huey 2010).

### **The big fix: the media-crime connection**

Reviews of the research literature generally 'conclude that there is a correlation between violence viewing and aggressive behaviour, a relationship that holds even when a variety of controls are imposed' (Wartella 1995: 306). However, the overall negative effects of media exposure seem to be small compared to other features in the social experience of offenders. Thus 'the question that remains is not whether media violence has an effect, but rather how important that effect has been, in comparison with other factors, in bringing about major social changes such as the post-war rise in crime' (ibid.: 312).

One problem with most of the effects debate and research is that it has often been directed at a rather implausible notion (Brown 2003: 27–9). What has been at issue is the will-o'-the-wisp of a 'pure' media effect. The implicit model was of the media as hypodermic syringe, injecting ideas and values into a passive public of cultural dopes. Audiences are not passive recipients, however, but active interpreters, in a complex process of interaction with other cultural and social practices (Livingstone *et al.* 2001). Changes in media representations do not come fully formed from another planet and affect behaviour patterns *ex nihilo*, but reflect ongoing changes in social perceptions and practices. Changing media images are interpreted by

different audiences in various ways, which may reinforce or alter emerging social patterns. The relationship between developments in the media and in the wider society is a dialectical one. While this makes the isolation and measurement of pure media effects chimerical, it certainly does not imply that media representations have no significant consequences. 'Most media researchers believe that the media have significant effects, even though they are hard to demonstrate, and most would agree that the media make a significant contribution to the social construction of reality. The problem is to move beyond this platitude . . . The study of enculturation processes, which work over long time periods, and which are integral to rather than separate from other forms of social determination, would not ask how the media make us act or think, but rather how the media contribute to making us who we are' [Livingstone 1996: 31–2].

A further limitation of the effects literature is that it has been almost exclusively concerned with the consequences of violent and other representations of deviance. The theoretical connections examined earlier suggest that media representations of non-law-breaking behaviour, for example advertising and other images of consumerist lifestyles, may increase anomie and hence offending. The most plausible criminogenic implications of media representations concern how they impact on material aspirations and conceptions of legitimate means of achievement, not how they depict crime or violence directly.

### **The media and fear of crime**

In recent years policy debates have identified fear of crime as an issue potentially as serious as crime itself (Ditton and Farrell 2000; Hope and Sparks 2000; Jackson 2004; Ditton *et al.* 2004; Chadee and Ditton 2005). Concern is not just about the unnecessary pain of excessive anxiety, nor even the damage done to trust and social relations by fear and the prevention strategies it encourages.

In the 'cultivation analysis' tradition which Gerbner and his associates have been developing for thirty years, media images of crime and violence are a threat to democracy (Gerbner 1970, 1995). Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures—both political and religious. They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities and other anxieties (Signorielli 1990: 102). When reel-world violence is compared to real-world crime as measured by official statistics, it appears that the media images exaggerate the probability and severity of danger. This is said to 'cultivate' a misleading view of the world based on unnecessary anxiety about levels of risk from violent crime (*ibid.*: 96–102).

There has been extensive criticism of the empirical and theoretical validity of these claims (Howitt 1998: ch. 4; Greer 2009 Part 5). How much of the association between measures of exposure to the media and of fearfulness survives the introduction of other control variables such as class, race, gender, place of residence, and actual experience of crime (Doob and MacDonald 1979; Chadee 2001; Roberts 2001)? Could any association between viewing and fearfulness result from the opposite causal process, that is, do more fearful viewers watch more television rather than vice versa? More generally, it appears that 'cultivation' does not export well. British attempts to replicate the Gerbner findings have failed to do so (Wober 1978; Gunter 1985).

Although the debate about the empirical validity of the cultivation hypothesis continues, there is only limited evidence from other studies to confirm the plausible idea that exposure to media images is associated with fear of crime. An extensive multivariate analysis concluded that there was a significant relationship between reading newspapers with more emphasis on violent crime and measures of fearfulness expressed in a survey (Williams and Dickinson 1993). This association survived control by a number of demographic variables, such as socio-economic status, gender, and age. However, this association was not found with behavioural concomitants of fear, such as going out after dark. Neither could the study rule out the possibility that fear led to heavier readership of newspapers with more crime, rather than vice versa. On the empirical issue, while it remains a reasonable hypothesis that much public fear of crime is created or accentuated by media exposure, the research evidence remains equivocal about the strength, or even existence, of such a causal relationship (Ditton *et al.* 2004; Chadee and Ditton 2005). Most studies have not examined how frequently people experience fear, as opposed to their responses to particular surveys (Farrall and Gadd 2004).

Much of this inconclusiveness is rooted in the theoretical limitations of positivist content analysis (Sparks 1992: ch. 4). Items of violence are collated according to operational definitions used by observers, without reference to the narrative contexts within which they are embedded. Most stories have conclusions concurring with Miss Prism's celebrated definition of fiction: 'The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily' (Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act II). Although there is a trend towards greater ambivalence and ambiguity, most crime stories still have an underlying emphasis on just resolutions of conflict and violence (Zillman and Wakshlag 1987; Reiner *et al.* 2000 and 2001). It is not obvious that exposure to high degrees of violence en route to a happy ending has a fear-enhancing effect. 'When suspenseful drama featuring victimisation is known to contain a satisfying resolution,

apprehensive individuals should anticipate pleasure and enjoyment' (Wakshlag *et al.* 1983: 238).

Quantitative assessments of the relationship between 'objectively' measured units of media content and survey responses cannot begin to understand the complex and dynamic interdependence of the differential experiences of crime, violence, and risk of different social groups and their subjective interpretations of the meaning of texts. The subtle intertwinings of differential social positions and life experiences with the reception of media texts is only beginning to be addressed by studies of content and interpretation. These use qualitative methods and ways of reading that seek to be sensitive to the complexities of analysing meaning (Sparks 1992, 2000, 2001; Schlesinger *et al.* 1992; Livingstone *et al.* 2001; Ditton *et al.* 2004). As with the issue of the effects of media images on criminality, so too with fear, the issue is not whether media representations have consequences. Hardly anyone would deny this. The agenda is the unravelling of the complex interrelationship of media content and other dimensions of social structure and experience in shaping offending behaviour, fear of crime, and the politics of law and order (Sasson 1995; Beckett 1997; Girling *et al.* 2000; Cavender 2004; Reiner 2007: 141-51).

## **THE CAUSES OF MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIME**

Theoretical perspectives come and go, and drift in and out of academic favour. Theoretical concepts, in contrast, exist independently of the various perspectives within which they may be situated. One concept utilised by almost all crime news studies, regardless of other methodological and theoretical differences, is that of 'newsworthiness'. This concept, therefore, provides a useful starting point for understanding the causes of media representations of crime.

### **CRIME NEWSWORTHINESS**

News content is generated and filtered primarily through reporters' sense of 'newsworthiness', what makes a good story that their audience wants to know about. The first academic exploration of newsworthiness was conducted by Norwegian media researchers Galtung and Ruge (1965), and resulted in the identification of twelve 'news values' that work collectively to inform the selection and production of events as news. Core values include immediacy, dramatization, personalization, titillation, and novelty (see also Chibnall 1977: 22-45; Jewkes 2010: ch. 2 offers an elaborated set). The primacy of these news values explains the predominant emphasis on violent and sex offences, and the concentration on higher

status offenders and victims, especially celebrities. It also accounts for the tendency to avoid stories about crime trends and patterns. These news values also encourage the presentation of political violence or disorder in terms of individual pathology rather than ideological opposition; as discrete criminal events, not manifestations of structural conflict (Halloran *et al.* 1970; Hall 1973; Lawrence 2000: ch. 3).

'Whatever the influences on new organizations that affect their selection and rejection of particular stories, daily newsreaders have an independent fascination with the stories that are published' (Katz, 1987: 48). An alternative reading of crime newsworthiness focuses on the symbolic relevance and psycho-social utility of crime news for media consumers. From this perspective, crime is not newsworthy because it shocks, frightens or titillates. Rather, its reporting offers consumers the opportunity to engage in daily ritual moral workouts to test their own moral fortitude. Crime news 'speaks dramatically to issues that are of direct relevance to readers' existential challenges, whether or not readers are preoccupied with the possible personal misfortune of becoming victims to crime' (Katz, 1987: 68).

While a grasp of newsworthiness is crucial to understanding the reporting of crime, it is insufficient on its own to explain the content of crime news. For a deeper understanding of the processes and priorities that produce the pattern of representation of crime, researchers have turned to analysing the news production process.

## **CRIME NEWS AS HEGEMONY IN ACTION**

Most of the early studies of crime news production supported a version of the hegemonic or control model. Control approaches are influenced by Marxist and critical theory, and stress the unequal distribution of economic and cultural power throughout society. From this perspective, the role of news media is to reproduce dominant ideology, legitimate the capitalist system, and promote the interests of the ruling elite to the extent that their ways of seeing the world become 'hegemonic'. In addition to the important role of news values, the key drivers of news production are seen as: the political ideology of the press, and; the structural-cultural determinants of news-making.

### **The political ideology of the press**

The majority of newspapers have a more or less overtly C/conservative political ideology, and individual reporters are aware of this whatever their personal leanings. The broadcasting media, especially the BBC, are characterized by an ethic of political

neutrality and professional objectivity in performing a public service of providing news information. In practice, however, this becomes a viewpoint which takes for granted certain broad beliefs and values, those of moderate, middle-of-the-road majority opinion—what Stuart Hall succinctly called a ‘world at one with itself’ (Hall 1970). The master concepts of this worldview include such notions as the ‘national interest’, the ‘British way of life’, and the ‘democratic process’ as epitomized by Westminster.

The implications of this prevailing worldview informed critical research in the 1970s which sought to demonstrate how broadcast and press reporting of crime, deviance and control marginalises dissenting voices and reinforces ruling class interests. Halloran, Elliott and Murdock (1970) analysed press and television reporting of the 1968 Vietnam demonstrations in London’s Grosvenor Square to illustrate the media’s role in ‘defining the situation and in cultivating the assumption that *this is the way it is*’. The demonstrations were defined early on as likely to involve violence between the forces of law and order (the police) and the forces of anarchy (the demonstrators). Though the protests turned out to be largely peaceful, the event was still reported in line within the ‘framework of violence’, and thus it was the issue of violence, minimal though it was, that provided ‘the news’. In their analyses of television news coverage of industrial disputes, The Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980; see also Eldridge, 2006) found a dearth of alternative viewpoints and concluded that journalists ‘actively embrace’ the dominant ideological viewpoint ‘in a way that would be hard to justify as impartial’. Their activities include ‘not only the agenda-setting functions we have described, but also a systematic partiality in the reporting and interpretive use of government statistics’ (1980: 401). Hall et al (1978) explored the generation of a ‘moral panic’ (see also Cohen 1972/2002) around ‘mugging’ in the midst of deep economic recession and an emergent crisis in state hegemony. They show how sensational media coverage simultaneously tapped into existing fears around law and order, race and social decline, and created a ‘folk devil’ – the young black street criminal – against whom all ‘respectable’ people could unite. These exceptional times called for exceptional measures. The moral panic created the right conditions for the state to step-in while simultaneously stepping-up its authoritarianism, re legitimating itself and re-establishing hegemonic control by cracking down hard on the perceived crime problem (*Crime Media Culture Special Issue 2008*).

These early studies demonstrated that crime reporting is not only highly selective, but also politically oriented toward the reproduction of dominant ideology. The ‘manufacture of news’ (Cohen and Young 1973/1981; Sherizan 1978) for a mass audience involves a simultaneous narrowing of otherwise distinct behaviours and practices into a simplified category of crime. Political and industrial conflict tend to

be viewed as being perpetrated by 'mindless militants' manipulated by extremist minorities seeking 'anarchy' and subversion, with only the 'thin blue line' to save the day for law and order (Chibnall 1977: 21; see also Greer and McLaughlin, 2010). Politically subversive behaviours are depoliticised and assimilated to routine crime: both are portrayed as pathological conditions unrelated to wider social structures (Clarke and Taylor 1980; Hillyard 1982; Iyengar 1991; Lawrence 2000: 57–60).

Furthermore, traditional crime reporters explicitly saw it as their responsibility to present the police and the criminal justice system in as favourable a light as possible. As one put it: 'If I've got to come down on one side or the other, either the goodies or the baddies, then obviously I'd come down on the side of the goodies, in the interests of law and order' (Chibnall 1977: 145). This of course did not mean that even the most pro-police crime reporter would not pursue stories of police malpractice as assiduously as possible. But it generated a tendency to present these within a 'one bad apple' framework (*ibid.*: ch. 5).

### **Structural-cultural determinants of news-making**

The reporting of crime, deviance and control is further influenced by variety of concrete organizational pressures that have unintended consequences, bolstering the law and order stance of most crime news stories. For example, concentrating personnel at institutional settings like courts, where newsworthy events can be expected to recur regularly, is an economic use of reporting resources. But it has the unintended consequence of concentrating on cleared-up cases, creating a misleading sense of police effectiveness (Ericson et al, 1991; Leishman and Mason, 2003).

The police and the criminal justice system control much of the information on which crime reporters rely, and this gives them a degree of power as essential accredited sources. News production is structurally oriented, in the name of journalistic 'objectivity' and 'impartiality', to appeal first to accredited experts who command cultural and institutional power. This places powerful groups in the position to establish 'an initial definition or *primary interpretation* of the topic in question' (Hall et al, 1978: 58; Lawrence, 2000: ch. 8). Once the primary definition has been established it is extremely difficult to override, and future debate is contained within a forum of 'controlled discourse', governed by the primary definers. Crime reporters tend to develop a symbiotic relationship with the contacts and organizations they use regularly, especially the police (Chibnall 1977: ch. 3 and 6), as the recent revelations about the Murdoch newspapers have underlined. But 'the journalist is always in an inferior negotiating position – the journalist who cannot get information is out of a job, whereas the policeman who retains it is not' (Chibnall, 1977: 155).

The need to produce reports to fit the time schedules of news production contributes to their event-orientation, the concentration on specific crimes at the expense of analysis of causal processes or policies (Rock 1973: 76–9; Lawrence 2000: ch. 8). Considerations of personal safety and convenience lead cameramen covering riots typically to film from behind police lines, which unintentionally structures an image of the police as vulnerable ‘us’ threatened by menacing ‘them’ (Murdock 1982: 108–9; Schlesinger et al. 1993).

In sum, the control model sees news content as the largely unintended but determined consequence of the structure, culture and political economy of news production. ‘Journalists are not *necessarily* biased towards the powerful—but their routine assumptions make them willing conduits of that power’ (McNair 2009: 59).

## **CRIME NEWS AS NEGOTIATED CONTROL**

### **Organisational interdependence and contingency**

From the 1980s researcher sought to develop a deeper and more nuanced appreciation of the news production process. Empirical studies were based on interviews with reporters and other creative personnel, or the police (e.g. Fishman 1981; Ross 1998; Mawby 1998, 1999, 2001, 2002; Innes 1999, 2001; Greer 2003), and/or observation (Ericson et al. 1987, 1989, 1991; Schlesinger et al. 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber 1992, 1993, 1994; Chermak 1995, 1998; Skidmore 1996; Doyle 1998, 2003). This research suggests that the deterministic implications of the hegemonic model require qualification. The underpinning idea that, in the last instance, the news media operate as a ‘largely uncritical conduit for official views’ (Schlesinger et al. 1983: 166) has been a particular point of contention.

Earlier research consistently reaffirmed the asymmetrical relations between journalists and powerful sources because it was ‘grounded in the perspective of journalists’ (Ericson et al. 1987: 125), thus overlooking the important levels of ‘convergence’ between media and source organisations. Consideration of source perspectives reveals that the police, for example, are constrained by news discourses just as journalists are constrained by police discourses: ‘police-reporter transactions entail controls from both sides, and interdependency’ (Ericson et al. 1989: 125). Whilst the police ‘controlled the primary definitions of the subject of address (crime, criminality and its control by the police), they sensed a loss of control over the specific terms of the communication process’ (Ericson et al. 1989: 123).

There is also greater diversity, negotiation, and contingency in the use of sources. These range far beyond the accredited agencies of the formal criminal justice institutions (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Greer 2003: 32–3). Groups critical of the establishment (such as penal reform or civil liberties groups) *are* given a voice, depending in part on their organizational and presentational skills, their hold on interesting knowledge, and on medium and market differences.

News stories vary in character. Many are routine fillers, where a clearly established paradigm is followed, albeit with new names, dates, and details each time. But there are also systematic variations between news stories in different media and markets. This is partly because they have different variants of political and professional journalistic ideology according to patterns of ownership (state versus private, for example) and perceived audience (business or policy elites, other opinion leaders, liberal professionals, or a mass public seeking entertainment; local or national). These are interconnected with differences in technological resources, budgetary limitations, and the different ‘grammars’ of written and spoken language, still and moving pictures.

There is always a tension between two contradictory pressures. The highest journalistic accolade is the ‘scoop’, reporting a high-news-value story that has not yet been reported. This exerts pressure to be ahead of the pack, to seek out sources that no rivals have yet found. However, the worst possible scenario is to miss important information that everybody else has. This generates a tendency to hunt with the pack, mining the same sources as rivals. The fear of failure usually prevails over the lure of the scoop, on minimax principles, which is why front pages tend to be so similar.

In recent years the production of crime news (like news in general) has been transformed by a decline in the use of specialist reporters, including court and crime correspondents. This is due to the increasing news emphasis on celebrities, and the increasingly commercial orientation of the multimedia conglomerates that own most news outlets, which has restricted editorial budgets severely. Many crime and criminal justice stories, cases, and issues now fail to get aired prominently or perhaps at all, even in the sensationalist manner that used to be a core news staple (Davies 1999). Crime news increasingly shares in the dominant celebrity culture. Stories with famous victims or perpetrators are the acme of news value. Some crime victims achieve celebrity through media coverage of their cases. The global phenomenon that has been the disappearance of Madeleine McCann is one case in point.

There is thus scope for flexibility and judgement in the selection and production of crime news; the newsroom is not characterized by normative consensus but by negotiation and conflict between reporters, editors, and sources. In this context, the dominance of any ideological position should be considered an 'achievement rather than a wholly structurally determined outcome' (Schlesinger, 1989: 79).

While empirical analyses of news production emphasize its contingency and fluidity, they do not fundamentally challenge the hegemonic model. They confirm the structuring of news-gathering and presentation around a sense of news values and other criteria leading to the selection of particular types of stories and perspectives. These constitute a 'vocabulary of precedents': not hard and fast rules, but 'what previous exemplars tell them should be done in the present instance' (Ericson *et al.* 1987: 348). Journalists and sources engage in 'legitimation work' in the representation of crime and justice. News contributes to the formation of a stable 'symbolic canopy', based on but not restricted to dominant ideology, that helps to reinforce the 'consensual paradigm' for society as a whole (Ericson *et al.* 1987: 27-43). News may be a competitive arena of conflicting viewpoints, but it is also culturally and structurally loaded. For all the fluidity and contingency observed in the process of production, in the final analysis 'the news media are as much an agency of *policing* as the law enforcement agencies whose activities and classifications are reported on' (Ericson *et al.* 1991: 74). They reproduce order in the process of representing it.

## **CRIME NEWS, SOCIAL DIVISION AND RISK**

The control model has been diversified to explore the ideological legitimization of inequalities not only in terms of class, but also gender, race and other social divisions.

With the development of critical feminist research on crime reporting the control model underwent some conceptual reconfiguration. Here, dominant ideology is no less important, but it is framed primarily in terms of gender, and relates to the tendency of news reports to reinforce gender stereotypes that maintain unequal power relations in a patriarchal society (Cameron and Fraser 1987; Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995; Soothill and Walby 1991; Chancer 2003;). Given the cultural saturation of myths about gender, sex and rape, women in sex crime cases can be polarised into 'virgins' or 'whores' by even the most well meaning journalists (Benedict 1992: 26). Reporting of everyday, non-celebrity violence against women, when deemed newsworthy, is informed by 'traditional notions of appropriate gender roles' that institutionalise women's inequality and subjugation (Meyers 1997: 3). In

stark contrast, the demonic nature of criminal women can be amplified by, for example, the disproportionate use of visual images and sensational headlines, even when they are not the main protagonists in crime cases (Jones and Wardle 2008; Humphries 2009; Seal 2009, 2010).

Research on the news construction of race, ethnicity and crime have evidenced similarly reductive reporting habits. The criminalisation in the news media of visible minorities has been evidenced in myriad studies (Barlow 1998; Chiricos and Eschholz 2002; Law 2002; Cottle 2005; Dixon and Linz 2006; Stabile 2006; Gannon 2008; Brotherton and Barrios 2009), though few have looked in depth at production processes. Prevailing stereotypes regarding race and ethnicity make it more difficult for visible minority crime victims to secure media attention, public sympathy and legitimate victim status. Indeed, given the high levels of racialisation in the news, black and minority ethnic crime victims may need to be 'deracialised' – that is, represented in a way that obscures 'race' to the point of writing it 'out of the script' – to become 'legitimate' victims worthy of widespread public sympathy (McLaughlin 2005a). As with gendered crime reporting, the racialisation of crime news cannot adequately be understood through blanket accusations of institutionalised media prejudice (Greer 2007). It is more often, though no less problematically, the product of structurally and culturally embedded myths and newsroom practices that promote the marginalisation of certain values and interest and the promotion of others.

For 'risk society' theorists, the transition from modernity to late-modernity has been characterised by a shift away from the focus on economic inequality and toward the nature, patterning and control of 'risk' (Beck 1992). In this context, the control paradigm's focus on the class-based interests of a ruling elite and the media reproduction of dominant ideology loses purchase. Reiner, et al (2000, 2001) adopt a 'risk society' framework in their research on media representations of crime and justice in the post-War era. They find that over time news reports of criminal offending include less acknowledgement of possible structural causation and more condemnation of what is presented as individual evil. Portrayals of criminal justice remain broadly supportive, but are increasingly complex and critical, focusing more, for example, on police ineffectiveness, systemic corruption, and conflict between official institutions. And, in the most significant change, crime victims shift from being incidental characters to becoming the central focus for highly emotionalised news stories built around their experiences of suffering (Reiner et al. 2000: 187). The risk society thesis provides a useful theoretical framework for exploring media representations of crime and justice, and the changing political and cultural sensibilities that shape the late modern condition.

## THE PRODUCTION OF CRIME FICTION

Although there have been many studies of the production of crime news, there has been little comparable research on fiction. All we have is memoirs of writers, directors, and other creators of crime fiction, and fan-oriented biographies or accounts of the making of particular films or programmes (see for example, Bennett 2006; McLaughlin 2005b). The sole exception is an interview study of Hollywood writers, directors, and producers of television shows and cinema films (Lichter *et al.* 1994: Part IV; Powers *et al.* 1996: ch. 3). This depicts them as former 1960s radicals on a 'long march' through the institutions. Their ideology combines acceptance of the economic and political institutions of America, to which they owe their status and privileges, with a libertarian stance on issues of personal and sexual morality that they have carried since their youth. They feel a mission to put as much of this into their work as is compatible with the overriding priority of keeping the audience ratings high and the networks happy. How this expressed ideology translates into actual creative and production practices has not been studied, however, in any body of research analogous to that on crime news. A recent ethnographic study of the long-running series *The Bill* does demonstrate the significance of shifting political-economic pressures and the related cultural changes amongst productive personnel for developments in storylines and representations of policing (Colbran 2007, 2009a and b).

## OBSERVERS OR PLAYERS? THE MEDIA AND CRIME IN POSTMODERNITY

In the introduction to this chapter two competing concerns about media representations of crime were outlined: the 'respectable fear' that they were subversive and desubordinating; and the radical anxiety that they were a means of social control and discipline. The review of research suggests that there is a complex interplay between media representations of crime, criminal behaviour, and criminal justice.

With variations according to medium and market, mass media news and entertainment are saturated with stories about crime. These disproportionately feature the most serious and violent crimes, but strip them from any analytic framework. The emphasis is on crime as the product of individual choice and free-floating evil, diverting attention from any links to social structure or culture (Sasson 1995; Reiner *et al* 2001; Greer 2007). There is strong evidence that media images *can*

influence criminal behaviour, but overall their direct effect is small relative to other factors. This is largely because people vary in their interpretation of representations according to demographic, generational, and other life-course factors. There is a variety of ways theoretically in which media representations could influence crime rates and patterns. For example, the overall volume of property crime is likely to be affected by media portrayals of material success as the acme of the good life in a context of structural inequalities of opportunity, as Mertonian strain theories suggest. It is unlikely to be an accident that the remorseless rise of volume property crime after the mid-1950s in Britain coincided with the advent of commercial television. Research on media effects has mainly assessed the consequences of representations of crime, using rather inadequate models and methods, not the theoretically more plausible criminogenic implications of other aspects of the media, for example the celebration of consumerism.

The disciplinary role of media stories about crime, reproducing as well as representing order, is supported more clearly by the research. This is partly because media representations exaggerate the threat of crime and in the main promote policing and punishment as the antidote. Because of organizational exigencies as much as ideological reasons, the media present viewpoints on crime and criminal justice policy which—though not monolithic—are loaded towards official definitions. They tend to frame crime issues increasingly in a ‘law and order’ perspective so other approaches become marginalized (Beckett 1997; Altheide 2002; Cavender 2004; Reiner 2007).

The present trends indicate a growing symbiosis between media images, criminality, and criminal justice. In Simon Lee’s words, ‘The media are no longer, if they ever were, observers of the scene, they are players in the game’ (cited in Peay 1998: 8). This accentuates past patterns to an extent amounting to a qualitatively new stage. The insecure borderline between purportedly factual and fictional narratives is eroding. A growing variety of criminal justice lobbies and pressure groups seek to influence, if not construct, the news. At the same time technological developments interact with cultural changes to produce more ‘reality’ broadcasting (Fishman and Cavender 1998).

The current stage of development reflects the impact of the more general features of ‘postmodernity’ on the relationship between media, crime, and criminal justice (Brown 2003). The space–time distanciation between criminal cases and their reporting in the media, and the reciprocal feedback of images on practice, are eroding rapidly (Giddens 1984; Thompson 1995). ‘We live in a dramatised world’ (Ericson 1991: 235), where the media are participants in the processes they represent. An ever-wider range of participants in the criminal justice process are not

only seeking to influence representations but are creating 'spectacles' specifically for the media. Events such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots or the O. J. Simpson case, are broadcast around the world literally as they are happening. The tragedy of 11 September 2001 is simply the most vivid and dramatic example of these developments to date, when thousands of people were murdered in front of the eyes of television audiences around the globe, in a way calculated to achieve the maximum possible media impact (Castells, 2004; Young 2007).

The mass media are important not only because of their ideological significance. Media technology plays an increasingly direct role in social control, above all through the growth of CCTV and other forms of surveillance (Norris and Armstrong 1999; McCahill 2003; Jewkes 2010: ch. 7; Coleman 2005; Norris and McCahill 2006; Lyon 2009; Lippert and Wilkinson 2010; Koskela 2011). Media technology can also be used to control the controllers, to make authorities more accountable, as the use of CCTV and other recording devices in police stations shows (Newburn and Hayman 2001).

Criminal justice agencies thus seek to tailor their activities in a public relations-friendly way that plays well in the news. Police investigate (sometimes instigate) all the crimes fit to print. Crimes and legal processes are not only reflected in reporting with greater rapidity, they may be created for news stories. Offences have been incited by law-enforcement agencies in order to have the successful investigation televised (as in the Azscam entrapment case analysed by Altheide 1993). Since the 1960s, protesters and police act with self-conscious awareness that 'the whole world is watching' (Gitlin 1980). In the hi-tech, high surveillance context of contemporary public order events, accusations of police violence can no longer simply be denied away. The routine, real-time filming of policing activities by citizen and professional journalists is subjecting the institution to unprecedented levels of media and public scrutiny, and transforming how the police manage public order situations (Greer and McLaughlin, 2010; HMIC 2009).

Mass media technologies make the model of contemporary social control a *Synopticon* (Mathiesen 1997): they provide the means for the many to see the few, offsetting the Benthamite paradigm of the few observing the many. However, this reciprocal process of surveillance between elites and masses remains highly unbalanced (Lyon 2003). The greater vulnerability of the powerful to exposure and scandal does not fundamentally change structures of power and advantage. Indeed Mathiesen argues plausibly that the illusion of intimacy with elites, provided by contemporary media surveillance of their activities, gives people a misleading sense of empowerment which acts as a more complex process of discipline than traditional forms of legitimization. It is possible, he argues, 'that the control and discipline of the "soul", that is, the creation of human beings who control themselves through self-

control and thus fit neatly into a so-called democratic capitalist society, is a task which is actually fulfilled by a modern Synopticon' (Mathiesen 1997: 215).

The growing interdependence of media representation and social 'reality' raises the spectre of 'a media spiral in which the representations of crime and the fear of crime precisely constitute . . . the hyperreal' (Osborne 1996: 36; Ferrell et al, 2008).

Certainly these developments vastly complicate the vexed question of how images and narratives that are felt to be undesirable can be regulated or influenced.

Perhaps hope lies precisely in the greater openness of the media to a diversity of inputs and influences. Past experience, however, suggests the more pessimistic prediction that although contemporary mass communications present 'an appreciably open terrain for struggles for justice' (Ericson 1991: 242), the dice are loaded in favour of dominant interests—even if they have to struggle harder for their hegemony.

#### **SELECTED FURTHER READING**

Chris Greer (ed.) *Crime and Media: A Reader* London: Routledge, 2009) is an annotated collection of key contributions covering all the issues discussed in this chapter. Richard Sparks's *Television and the Drama of Crime* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992) offers a theoretically sophisticated critique of content analyses of crime fiction, and their relationship to fear of crime. Illuminating studies of the production of crime news are the trilogy by R. Ericson, P. Baranek, and J. Chan, *Visualising Deviance*, *Negotiating Control*, and *Representing Order* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987, 1989, 1991 respectively); P. Schlesinger and H. Tumber's *Reporting Crime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); C. Greer, *Sex Crime and the Media* (Cullompton, Devon: Willan, 2004) and 'News-Making Criminology' in E. McLaughlin and T. Newburn (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Theory* (London: Sage, 2010). Useful reviews of the research on media effects can be found in: S. Livingstone, 'On the Continuing Problem of Media Effects', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society* (London: Arnold, 1996); D. Howitt, *Crime, The Media and the Law* (London: Wiley, 1998); and from a fundamentally critical perspective, M. Barker and J. Petley (eds), *III Effects*, 2nd edn, (London: Routledge, 2001). Excellent recent texts on crime and media are S. Brown, *Crime and Law in Media Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003); E. Carrabine *Crime, Culture, and the Media* Cambridge: Polity; Y. Jewkes, *Media and Crime* (London: Sage, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. 2010). Useful edited volumes offering a rich diversity of research papers on media and crime are: R. Ericson (ed.), *Crime and the Media* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1995); D. Kidd-Hewitt and R. Osborne (eds), *Crime and the Media: The Post-Modern Spectacle* (London: Pluto, 1996); P. Mason (ed.), *Criminal Visions* (Cullompton, Devon: Willan, 2003). The journal *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*

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