CRIME AND MEDIA

VOLUME 1

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VOLUME 1
Theorizing Crime and Media

Edited by

Yvonne Jewkes

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Editor's Introduction

Theorizing Crime and Media

Yvonne Jewkes

Part 1: Media 'Effects'

Students and researchers of both criminology and media studies have sought to understand the connections between media and crime for well over a century. With new media developments including satellite, digital and interactive technologies, and criminal behaviour evolving to exploit these advances in knowledge and practice, the time seems right to bring together a collection of some of the most interesting and influential readings in the field.

Although both crime and media have 'advanced' over the last century, some longstanding debates about their relationship refuse to go away. One of the most enduring questions in academic and lay circles is the extent to which television programmes, films, DVDs, websites and computer games can be said to cause anti-social, deviant or criminal behaviour. In some academic circles, and certainly in popular discourse, it has become something of a truism that media images are responsible for eroding moral standards, subverting consensual codes of behaviour and corrupting young minds. The relationship between media and audiences is sometimes referred to as the 'hypodermic syringe' model because it is conceived as a mechanistic and unsophisticated process, by which the media 'inject' values, ideas and information directly into the passive receiver, producing direct and unmediated 'effects' which, in turn, have a negative influence on thoughts and actions. But after a hundred years of research into the subject, to what degree can we say with any certainty that media content causes negative effects in audiences?

It is often taken as an unassailable fact that society has become more violent since the advent of the modern media industry. The arrival and growth of cinema, television and, latterly, computer technologies, have served to intensify public anxieties but there are few crime waves that are genuinely new phenomena, despite the media's efforts to present them as such. For many observers, it is a matter of 'common sense' that society has become increasingly characterized by (violent) crime since the advent of broadcasting, resulting in a persistent mythology that the two phenomena – visual media and violent crime – are 'naturally' linked. Yet as Geoffrey Pearson (1983) illustrates, the history of respectable fears goes back several hundred years, and public outrage at perceived crime waves has become more intensely focused with the introduction of each new media innovation. From theatrical productions in the eighteenth century, the birth of commercial cinema and the emergence of cheap, sensationalistic publications known as 'Penny Dreadfuls' at the end of the nineteenth century, to jazz and 'pulp

fiction' in the early twentieth century, popular fears about the influence of visual images on vulnerable minds have been well rehearsed.

Anxieties were frequently crystallized in the notion of 'the crowd' and it became a popular nineteenth century myth that when people mass together they are suggestible to outside influences and become irrational, even animalistic. Fears about how people behave when part of a crowd precipitated 'mass society theory' which was influenced by the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim and developed in the latter years of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This was a protracted period of global turbulence and uncertainty, and mass society theorists held that social upheavals associated with industrialization, urbanization and the Great War had made people feel increasingly vulnerable. The first article in this volume, written by Hadley Cantril, provides a famous example from the United States that appears to support mass society theory's belief in an omnipresent and potentially harmful media consumed uncritically by a susceptible audience. It concerns the radio transmission of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* on Hallowe'en Night in October 1938 and 'the nature and extent of the panic' that ensued. The broadcast was a fictitious drama concerning the invasion of aliens from Mars but many believed they were listening to a *real* report of a Martian attack. People in several parts of the United States fled their homes and telephoned loved ones to say emotional farewells. One in six listeners were said to have been very frightened by the broadcast, a fear that was exacerbated by the gravitas of the narrator, Orson Wells, and by the cast of 'experts' giving orders for evacuation and attack. As one listener said: 'I believed the broadcast as soon as I heard the professor from Princeton and the officials in Washington'.

The example of the *War of the Worlds* broadcast would appear to support the view that the modern media are capable of exerting harmful influences, of triggering mass outbreaks of negative social consequence and of causing damaging psychological effects. Like the invading Martians with their ray guns and poisonous gases, the media might be perceived as alien invaders, dangerous and threatening in their impact on established forms of social and cultural life (O'Sullivan and Jewkes, 1997). However, to characterize the episode as 'proof' of the hypodermic syringe effect of the media would be very misleading. The relationship between stimulus and response was not simple or direct because, quite simply, the panic experienced by some listeners was not without context. It was the time of the Depression, and American citizens were experiencing a prolonged period of economic unrest and widespread unemployment and were looking to their leaders for reassurance and direction. War was breaking out in Europe and many believed that an attack by a foreign power was imminent. It is perhaps understandable, then, that the life-like quality of the broadcast — played out as an extended news report in which the radio announcer appeared to be actually witnessing terrible events unfolding before him — powerfully tapped into the feelings of insecurity, change and loss being experienced by many American people, to produce a panic of this magnitude.

In addition to the sociological theory of 'mass society', models of media effects have also been strongly influenced by an approach from psychology known as 'behaviourism' which itself derives from 'positivism', a philosophy which emerged from the natural sciences and which regards the world as fixed and quantifiable. In Criminology, positivism is most often linked to the work

of Cesare Lombroso who believed that the causes of crime are to be found in individual biology. While Lombroso was working on the task of isolating the variables most likely to be found in criminals as distinct from non-criminals, and writing his famous books *The Criminal Man* (1876) and *The Female Offender* (1895), media researchers were also developing new theories based on positivist assumptions and behaviourist methods. The notion that all human action is modelled on the condition reflex so that one's action is precipitated by responses to stimuli in one's environment rather than being a matter of individual agency made the new media of mass communications an obvious candidate for concern. In the context of research into media effects, this approach most often resulted in experiments being carried out under laboratory conditions to try to establish a direct causal link between media images of a violent or potentially harmful nature and resultant changes in actual behaviour, notably an inclination among the research participants to demonstrate markedly agitated or aggressive tendencies.

One of the most famous series of experiments was that conducted by Albert Bandura and colleagues at Stanford University, California in the 1950s and 1960s. Typically, children aged between three and five years were shown a film or cartoon depicting some kind of violent act or, as described here in article 2, were witness to an adult behaving aggressively – and were then given 'Bobo' dolls to play with (these were large inflatable dolls with weighted bases to ensure that they wobbled but did not stay down when struck). Their behaviour towards the dolls was used as a measure of the power of imitation, and when the children were observed behaving aggressively (compared to a control group) it was taken as evidence that a direct relationship existed between observed aggression and imitative behaviour. Bandura et als study also notes that quite complex gender patterns emerge in the imitation of adult aggressive behaviour with both boys and girls approving of and imitating a male adult's physical aggression but that, when it comes to verbal aggression, the greatest amount of imitation occurs in relation to the same-sex adult; indeed the male children had quite strong views about what constitutes gender appropriate behaviour.

Although these studies were undoubtedly influential in endorsing the view that violent media portrayals can cause 'copycat' behaviour, they are hugely problematic for several reasons. They fail to replicate a 'real life' media environment; they reduce complex patterns of human behaviour to a single factor among a wide network of mediating influences and might be said to treat children as unsophisticated 'lab rats'; they are able to measure only immediate responses to media content and having nothing to say about the long-term, cumulative effects of exposure to violent material; they use dolls designed to frustrate; the experimenters praise or reward children when they behaved as 'expected'; and they frequently overlook the fact that children who had not been shown any film stimulus were nevertheless found to behave aggressively towards the Bobo doll if left with it – and especially if they were felt it was expected of them by the experimenter. In article 3 David Gauntlett expands on these criticisms, outlining 'ten things wrong with the "effects model"'. He illustrates how, despite the 'scientific' status they claim, behaviourist methods have been rejected by most contemporary media scholars on the grounds of their great many flaws and inconsistencies. He also underlines the importance of seeking explanations for aggressive and

violent behaviour in forms of social exclusion rather than isolating media from social context for the sake of a convenient scapegoat.

Despite the cogency (in this writer's opinion, at least) of Gauntlett's arguments, the idea of a direct, causal link between media consumption and behaviour is still popularly held and re-emerges whenever particularly serious and shocking crimes occur. 'Common sense' beliefs about harmful media effects usually take one of three forms. The first is a moral or religious concern that exposure to the popular media encourages lewdness, sexual promiscuity and copycat violence. A second anxiety, from the intellectual right, is that the media undermine the civilizing influence of high culture (great literature, art, and so on) and debase tastes. A third concern, which has traditionally been associated with the intellectual left, is that the media represent the ruling élite, and manipulate mass consciousness in their interests. This view was first aired when the fascist and totalitarian governments that emerged across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s used propaganda to win the hearts and minds of the people. The belief that the new media of mass communications were among the most powerful weapons of these political regimes was given academic attention by members of the Frankfurt School – a group of predominantly Jewish scholars who fled Hitler's Germany for the USA.

In academic studies of crime and media, however, a belief in the power of media effects has all but disappeared from scholarship outside of the United States. As Gauntlett intimates, the idea of isolating television, film, or any other medium as a variable and ignoring all the other factors that might influence a person's behaviour (family, education, peer pressure, legality and availability of weapons, etc.) is considered too crude and reductive an idea to be of any epistemological value. Much effects research cannot adequately address the subtleties of media meanings, the polysemy of media texts (that is, they are open to multiple interpretations), the unique characteristics and identity of the audience member, or the social and cultural context within which the encounter between media text and audience member occurs. It mistakenly assumes that we all have the same ideas about what constitutes 'aggression', 'violence' and 'deviance', and that those who are susceptible to harmful portrayals can be affected by a 'one-off' media incident, regardless of the wider context of a lifetime of meaning-making (Boyd-Barrett, 2002). It also ignores the possibility that influence travels the opposite way; i.e. that the characteristics, interests and concerns of the audience may determine what media producers produce.

Yet notwithstanding the obvious flaws in traditional effects research, the legacy of Bandura and his colleagues is still strongly felt in much commentary on the subject and behaviourist assumptions about the power of the media to influence criminal and anti-social behaviour (ironically) underpin discussions within the popular media in most countries. Of particular salience in the public imagination is the notion that media content may lead to copycat acts of violence. This view is prominently aired when spree killings occur, especially those on school and college campuses perpetrated by disaffected students, and when new films and computer games are released that are clearly aimed at consumers younger than the official classification awarded them. For example, in the UK, much social commentary was generated by the release of *Grand Theft Auto IV* in April 2008 because of its violent content and themes. Despite being awarded an 'adult-only' 18-certficate, several national newspapers published reviews of the game written by children as young as twelve.

Debates about 'effects' are not restricted to trying to establish a direct, causal link between media content and imitative behaviour. A different, yet equally enduring thesis on the influence of the media is the concept of 'moral panic' popularized by Stanley Cohen in his book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, from which article 4 is taken. Although the concept has become something of a catch-all used to describe public reaction to *any* unpleasant phenomenon from paedophiles to flu epidemics, Cohen's original discussion of moral panic refers to public and political reactions to minority or marginalized groups, usually young people, who appear to be some kind of threat to societal values and interests. The subjects of Cohen's analysis are mods and rockers; two rival youth groups who emerged in England in the 1960s and whose different styles of dress, taste in music, and preferred modes of transport (scooters and motor bikes respectively) marked their sense of tribalism and antipathy towards each other. In article 4, Cohen describes what happened when the two groups met on the beaches of several English coastal towns on a public holiday in May 1964. Scuffles and fights occurred which were subsequently over-reported by the press, who described it in terms such as 'day of terror' and 'orgy of destruction'. Over the course of a few days, the actual deviance that took place became amplified to a level where a sense of collective panic set in similar, in Cohen's view, to the kind of mentality that prevails when a disaster takes place. The response of the authorities also mirrors that which occurs in time of disaster: first there is a short period characterized by disorganization and panic; then follows an 'inventory' phase during which those exposed to the disaster take stock, assess their own condition and make predictions about future calamities.

While Cohen's study of moral panics has proved to be one of the most influential and enduring studies in the history of media and crime scholarship, it is not without its critics (although it should be emphasized that it was never Cohen's intention to present a fully-formed thesis; the concept of 'moral panic' was exploratory, yet took flight in a manner probably not anticipated by the author). Regarded by many media scholars as reactionary, paternalistic and overly media-centric, the model is highly problematic in numerous respects (Jewkes, 2004). To take just a few shortcomings: society is not as monolithic and functionalist as implied and youth cultures may be far more knowing about the likely reaction to their deviant activities than is sometimes suggested; the genuine, deep-seated anxieties at the root of reaction, and the 'outsiders' onto whom these anxieties are displaced, have become secondary concerns amidst all the rhetoric about the persuasive powers of the media; the desire to search for a single causal explanation for undesirable moral or social changes – television for the 'disappearance' of childhood; adolescents for a suspected decline in social morality; the Internet for facilitating the activities of paedophiles – almost certainly serves to deflect attention away from other possible causes; the concentration on symptoms, rather than causes or long-term effects, leads to a somewhat superficial analysis of crime and deviance and frequently negates the fact that those who commit crimes are not 'others', they are 'us' and are of our making (Jewkes, 2004); and in a multi-mediated world where global media events vie for public attention with interpersonal forms of communication within small groups of friends, the idea of macro-level responses have declined in probability. Above all, the construction of crime and deviance as moral panic designed to sell newspapers, signifies a shift from

'hard' news towards the safe territory of sensationalised reporting and public entertainment. Consequently, a faithful adherence to the moral panic thesis may make it impossible to arrive at a balanced and reasonable estimation of the real role of media in people's lives and the true impact of crime on society.

It is for these kinds of reasons that Angela McRobbie and Sarah L. Thornton urge us to 'rethink' moral panics in article 5. Although one of several much-cited commentaries on Cohen's work, and of undoubted influence in the development of the moral panic thesis in a context of a proliferating and fragmenting media, McRobbie and Thornton's piece was published at a time when the UK media had undergone deregulation resulting in a plurality of magazine titles and broadcast channels becoming available, but before internet news services and social networking sites took off and the social world became truly multi-mediated. That said, in the current context of 24-hour rolling news and audience-participation (via reality television, audience phone-ins, talk radio etc), their observation that moral panics have ceased to be events that happen 'every now and then' (See article 4) and have become the standard way of reporting news in an ever increasing spiral of hyperbole and 'ridiculous rhetoric' (p. 560) designed to grab our attention in a crowded media marketplace, is indisputable.

McRobbie and Thornton outline the trajectory of moral panics from the work of Becker (1963) and Wilkins (1964) who developed theories of labelling and deviancy amplification respectively, through the work of Jock Young (1971), Geoffrey Pearson (1983) and Stuart Hall et al. (1978). Sharing a Marxist theoretical vocabulary, all these 'classic' studies aim to demonstrate how moral panics act on behalf of those in power to elicit public support for increasingly repressive measures of social and legal control. McRobbie and Thornton further comment on more radical developments of, and departures from, the moral panic model, including Watney's (1987) study of media responses to HIV and AIDS which calls for a more sophisticated understanding of human motivations for marginalizing certain groups.

In article 6 David Garland also reassesses the moral panic thesis but from the vantage point of the twenty-first century. His theoretical framework is the sociology of social reaction, and he charts the trajectory of moral panic from its foundations in the Durkheimian tradition to the criticism voiced in the 1980s by left realists led by Jock Young. Garland argues that there has been a shift away from moral panics as traditionally conceived (involving a vertical relation between society and a deviant group) towards 'culture wars' (a more horizontal conflict between social groups). This implies a much more multifaceted and politically attuned approach to understanding the nature of power in society. It also reminds us that, far from bowing under the weight of collective anxiety and endless, cyclical panicky-ness – a state that, as Richard Sparks (1992) has argued, is ontologically unsustainable – there is some excitement and enjoyment to be had from passionate mass public outrage.

In article 7 Sparks joins McRobbie, Thornton and Garland in arguing for a more complex and nuanced interpretation of the role of the media in informing public perceptions of crime and punishment. Employing three of the most discussed and debated terms in the social sciences of recent years, 'populism', 'risk' and 'fear', Sparks explores the relationship between media and audiences but argues that the lines of influence – 'effects' as they have traditionally been conceived – are far more complicated and multi-directional than frequently characterized. He draws

on several empirical examples, including research he conducted with Evi Girling and Ian Loader into public perceptions of fear, risk and crime in an English town (see article 11 in Part 2 of this volume), to analyse how local and global influences intersect and diverge to create a multifaceted and complex picture of crime and perceived risk of victimization. It may have become fashionable to regard the media as purveyors of highly emotive and punitive rhetoric exploited by opportunistic politicians to manipulate populist sentiment, but Sparks suggests that individuals will always make sense of global transitions and transformations, including crime and crime control, from within the context and contours of their local community. Quite simply, mediatized 'fear of crime' becomes substantially more intelligible in the light of a deeper contextual understanding of time and place. As such, any recourse to the concept of moral panic must be tempered by a knowledge and understanding of blames attributed and solutions sought at a local level (though Sparks counsels against reiterating the usual stand-off between moral panic and 'realism'). That is not to say some crime stories do not exist on a global plane; as Lynne Chancer argues (see article 26) certain events transcend 'crimes' and become representative of much larger social anxieties. But Sparks reminds us that the fact that such cases evoke universally emotional responses neither detracts from the locally constituted lens through which we view them, nor makes the public necessarily gullible, reactionary or punitive.

Part 2: Audiences, Punitiveness and Fear of Crime

In Part 2 we continue exploring the role of media in influencing people's ideas and opinions about crime and take our lead from Sparks in the last article of the previous section by focusing on fear and anxiety in 'risky' times. It is increasingly being recognized that the media are situated within, and fully interwoven with, many other social practices, to the extent where crime, criminals and criminal justice cannot be separated from their media representations (Sparks, 1992). While we should be cautious not to make sweeping claims about media 'effects' or the media being responsible for 'causing' fear of crime and creating hard-line punitive attitudes, we should remain alert to the ways in which media are integral to the processes of meaning-making by which we make sense of our everyday lives.

Article 8 by Anna King and Shadd Maruna suggests that punitive public attitudes to offenders are fuelled by news stories that support such responses. Drawing upon empirical research that was informed by psychosocial perspectives on identity, King and Maruna found that individuals who held strongly punitive views sought out stories that provided clear examples of right and wrong with which they could align their own worldview. Not only does this arguably provide justification for the media's adherence to a binary oppositional view of the world (highlighted by Jewkes and Chancer in articles 23 and 26 respectively) but, according to King and Maruna, it finds parallels with the way that these audience members conduct their own lives and regard themselves. By contrast, less punitive individuals were drawn to 'subversive' media stories that highlighted government and corporate corruption, or the 'legitimate' breaking of rules. By providing qualitative examples of the differences between individuals who hold highly punitive views on offending, and those who score low on the punitiveness scale, King and Maruna are able