YVONNE JEWKES

MEDIA & CRIME

KEY APPROACHES TO CRIMINOLOGY

SAGE

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For my brothers, Michael and Martin,
and my sister, Sarah

Preface

The last decade has seen the rise, not just of university-taught criminology degrees in general, but also of specialist modules teaching 'Media and Crime' to undergraduate and postgraduate students. These developments are to be welcomed by those of us who have been teaching such courses for some time, especially as it means that there is a new, emerging literature on all things related to media and crime which will hopefully continue to inspire students and lead to further research in these areas. My own contribution is aimed predominantly at students on criminology degrees who are studying specialist courses in media and crime, and related subjects, or who are conducting their own research for dissertations in areas that are covered in this volume.

I hope that *Media and Crime* will also stand up to scrutiny by scholars in media studies, cultural studies, sociology, gender studies and law, whose interests lie at the intersections of crime and media. While the book is intended to explore controversies and debates of historical, contemporary and future relevance in a critically and, at times, theoretically challenging way, it is nonetheless primarily a textbook. It therefore includes a number of pedagogic features (overviews, key terms, summaries, study questions, suggestions for further reading, and a glossary) which, it is hoped, will make it engaging and accessible–as well as being stimulating and intellectually challenging – to students and researchers alike. Key terms are also highlighted at their first appearance in the chapter.

The book is organized into seven chapters. The first two chapters provide the foundation for what follows, and many of the themes and debates introduced here are then picked up and developed in relation to specific subjects and case studies in the remainder of the volume. Chapter 1 brings together theoretical analysis from criminology, sociology, media studies and cultural studies in order to provide a critical understanding of the relationships between these areas of academic study, and to synthesize their contributions to our understanding of the relationship between media and crime. Chapter 2 then discusses the 'manufacture' of crime news, and considers why crime has always been, and remains, so eminently 'newsworthy'. The chapter introduces a set of 'news values' which shape the selection and presentation of stories involving crime, deviance and punishment in contemporary news production. Although the chapter concentrates solely on news, these criteria – which alert us to the subtle biases that inform public perceptions of crime – extend beyond the newsroom, and underpin much of our mediated picture of crime in contemporary Britain.

The remaining chapters of the book illustrate the extent to which crime and justice are constructed according to prevailing cultural assumptions and ideologies

by examining a number of different issues that have gained significant media attention. Although divergent in terms of subject, the overriding theme of the book is that contemporary media deal only in binary oppositions, polarizing public responses to criminals and victims of crime, perpetuating psychically held notions of 'self' and 'other' and contributing to the formation of identities based on 'insider' and 'outsider' status. The book thus argues that the media, in all its forms, is one of the primary sites of social inclusion and exclusion, a theme that is explored in Chapter 3 in relation to 'moral panics'. So influential has Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* been (now in its 3rd edition, 1972/2002), that a book about media and crime could not have omitted the concept he made famous. The moral panic thesis is therefore discussed, but in such a way as to move beyond the faithful re-writing of Cohen's famous study of Mods and Rockers that is favoured by many commentators, and problematize moral panics as they have traditionally been conceived.

Chapter 4 develops the previous chapter's examination of moral panics over youth, by considering the extent to which, in today's media landscape, children and young people are viewed both as folk devils, and as the victims of folk devils – notably paedophiles. The chapter discusses the extent to which mediated constructions of children in the 21st century are still seen through the lens of 19th century idealized images of childhood as a time of innocence – a (mis)representation that only serves to fuel public hysteria when children commit very serious offences or are themselves the victims of such crimes.

Chapter 5 is also concerned with constructions of offenders (and, peripherally, victims) which remain curiously embedded in the Victorian age, only here the focus is on deviant women, especially those who murder and commit serious sexual crimes. Using psychoanalytical and feminist theories, this chapter introduces a psychosocial perspective to argue that the media reinforce misogynist images of females who fail to conform to deeply-held cultural beliefs about 'ideal' womanhood. For such women their construction as 'others' renders them subject to hostile censure and their crimes can come to occupy a peculiarly symbolic place in the collective psyche.

Our gendered analysis continues in Chapter 6, which considers the ways in which victims, offenders and the police are constructed on British television. The chapter concludes that, in the main, crime narratives are constructed around female victims (usually either very young or elderly), male offenders (often black, usually strangers), either in the victim's home (increasing the impression of personal violation and female vulnerability) or in public places ('the streets', where we are all at risk), and are investigated and brought to a successful and 'just' conclusion by a caring and efficient police force that can trace its lineage back to everyone's favourite policeman, PC George Dixon. The salience of this archetypal narrative is explored via a detailed study of *Crimewatch UK*, which also gives rise to a discussion about the extent to which media texts such as this amplify fears about crime, especially among certain sections of the audience.

Chapter 7 continues developing the theme of demonized 'others' in its examination of the extent to which surveillance technologies are employed as repressive forms of regulation and social control – but only in relation to certain sections of society. This suggestion is ultimately challenged, but it does raise important questions about social exclusion and 'otherness' which are especially meaningful given the preponderance of surveillance images on television and in popular culture. It also forcefully brings home an issue that is finally debated in the Conclusion to the book, which is that the media's stigmatization – not only of offenders, but also of those who simply look 'different' – is a necessary counterpoint to their sentimentalization and even sanctification of certain victims of the most serious crimes, and their families. Without 'others', 'outsiders', 'strangers' and 'enemies within', the media would not succeed in constructing the moral consensus required to sell newspapers, gain audiences and, most importantly, maintain a world at one with itself.

Acknowledgements

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Contents

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Theorizing Media and Crime

Chapter Contents

OVERVIEW

Chapter 1 provides:

- An overview of the theoretical contours that have shaped the academic fields of criminology and media studies during the modern period.
- A discussion of the 'media effects' debate; its origins, its epistemological value and its influence on contemporary debates about media, crime and violence.
- An analysis of the theories – both individual (behaviourism, positivism) and social (anomie, dominant ideology) – which have dominated debates about the relationship between media and crime within the academy.
- An analysis of the theories (pluralism, left realism) which have emerged from within the academy but which have explicitly addressed the implications of theory for practitioners and policy-makers.
- An exploration of new, emerging theories which can broadly be called 'postmodern', including cultural criminology.

KEY TERMS

anomie
behaviourism
crime
criminalization
critical criminology
cultural criminology
'effects' research
stereotyping
functionalism
hegemony
hypodermic syringe model
ideology
Marxism
mass media
mass society
mediated
paradigm
pluralism
political economy
positivism
postmodernism
realism (left and right)
reception analysis

It's a cold November night as I pull up on their turf, heading towards my destiny. A sense of dread comes over me as I approach the abandoned warehouse. There's no going back now. I'm in too deep. I have to see this through to the end, no matter what. The silence is eerie – only broken by my rapid heartbeat which shows no signs of slowing. I pause to check the gun, knowing that this is the moment I've been chasing for three years, ever since the day they took everything from me. It's payback time.

NOW!! I kick the door down and burst in. They don't expect me, they're just sitting round a table smoking and drinking. Round after round flies, empty cartridges hit the floor and the screams of the wounded ring out.

> Some of them go down, others scatter across the floor. I dive behind some boxes to my right, taking a moment to recompose myself. I see blood spilling from my left shoulder. The adrenaline's kicked in, there's no pain and no time to think about it now. Rage engulfs my mind and I come out running. Bullets fly all around my head but I keep shooting. I'm hit again. My chest fills with lead. Everything's going black and I know it's all over. Those infuriating little words fill the screen once more. GAME OVER!
>
> (Thanks to Michael Jewkes for permission to use this.)

Every day newspaper headlines scream for our attention with stories about crime designed to shock, frighten, titillate and entertain. Politicians of every political party campaign on law and order issues, reducing complex crime problems to easily digestible 'sound bites' for the forthcoming news bulletins on radio and television. Crime is ubiquitous in film genres from the Keystone Cops of the 1920s to the gangster-chic flicks of today. Video and computer games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *The Getaway* (narrated above) allow us vicariously to indulge in violent criminal acts, while contemporary popular music such as rap and hip hop frequently glorify crime and violence both in the music itself and in the street gang style adopted by the artists. The Internet has fuelled interest in all things crime-related, providing both a forum for people to exchange their views on crime and facilitating new ways to commit crimes such as fraud, theft, trespass and harassment. 'Reality' television shows, in which the police and television companies form unique partnerships to try to catch offenders, are proliferating in number, as are those which employ a 'hidden camera' to record unwitting citizens being robbed, defrauded or otherwise swindled by 'cowboy' traders. Soap operas regularly use stories centred around serious and violent crime in order to boost ratings, and the court trial has become a staple of television drama. Television schedules are crammed with programmes about the police, criminals, prisoners and the courts, and American detective shows from *Murder, She Wrote* to *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* are syndicated around the world. How do we account for their popularity? Why are we – the audience – so fascinated by crime and deviance? And if the media can so successfully engage the public's fascination, can they equally tap into – and increase – people's fears about crime? Is the media's interest in – some would say, obsession with – crime *harmful*? What exactly *is* the relationship between the mass media and crime?

Students and researchers of both criminology and media studies have sought to understand the connections between media and crime for well over a century. It's interesting to note that, although rarely working together, striking parallels can be found between the efforts of criminologists and media theorists to understand and 'unpack' the relationships between crime, deviance and criminal justice on the one hand, and media and popular culture on the other. Indeed, it is not just at the interface between crime and media that we find similarities

between the two disciplines. Parallels between criminology and media studies are evident even when we consider some of the most fundamental questions that have concerned academics in each field, such as 'what *makes* a criminal?' and 'why do the mass media *matter*?' The reason for this is that as criminology and media studies have developed as areas of interest, they have been shaped by a number of different theoretical and empirical perspectives which have, in turn, been heavily influenced by developments in related fields, notably sociology and psychology, but also other disciplines across the arts, sciences and social sciences. Equally, academic research is almost always shaped by external forces and events from the social, political, economic and cultural worlds. Consequently we can look back through history and note how major episodes and developments – for example, Freud's 'discovery' of the unconscious, or the exile of Jewish intellectuals to America at the time of Nazi ascendancy in Germany – have influenced the intellectual contours of both criminology and media studies in ways that, at times, have synthesized the concerns of each. In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of both subject areas and their shared origins in the social sciences, has meant that, since the 1960s when they were introduced as degree studies at universities, a number of key figures working at the nexus between criminology and media/cultural studies have succeeded in bringing their work to readerships in both subject areas – Steve Chibnall, Stanley Cohen, Richard Ericson, Stuart Hall and Jock Young to name just a few.

The purpose of this first chapter is to introduce some of this cross-disciplinary scholarship and to develop a theoretical context for what follows in the remainder of the book. The chapter is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of all the theoretical perspectives that have shaped media research and criminology in the modern era – an endeavour that could fill at least an entire book on its own. Instead, it will draw from each tradition a few of the major theoretical 'pegs' upon which we can hang our consideration of the relationship between media and crime. These approaches are presented in an analogous fashion with an emphasis on the points of similarity and convergence between the two fields of study (but remember that, in the main, scholars in media studies have worked entirely independently of those in criminology, and vice versa). In addition, the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter are presented in the broadly chronological order in which they were developed, although it is important to stress that theories do not simply appear and then, at some later date, disappear, to be replaced by something altogether more sophisticated and enlightening. While we can take an overview of the development of an academic discipline and detect some degree of linearity in so far as we can see fundamental shifts in critical thinking, this linearity does not mean that there were always decisive breaks in opinion as each theoretical phase came and went. In fact, there is a great deal of overlap in the approaches that follow, with many points of correspondence as well as conflict. Nor does it necessarily indicate a coherence of

opinion within each theoretical position or, even any real sense of progress in our understanding and knowledge of certain issues. As Tierney puts it:

> There is always a danger of oversimplification when trying to paint in some historical background, of ending up with such broad brushstrokes that the past becomes a caricature of itself, smoothed out and shed of all those irksome details that confound an apparent coherence and elegant simplicity. (1996: 49)

However, notwithstanding the fact that what follows is of necessity selective, condensed and painted with a very broad brush, this chapter seeks to locate the last 40 years of university-taught media studies and criminology within over 100 years of intellectual discourse about the theoretical and empirical connections between media and crime. The theoretical perspectives that will be discussed in this chapter include strain theory and anomie; Marxism, critical criminology and the dominant ideology approach; pluralism and ideological struggle; realism and reception analysis; and postmodernism and cultural criminology.

However, it is with one of the most enduring areas of research that our discussion of theory begins: that of media 'effects'.

Media 'effects'

One of the most persistent debates in academic and lay circles concerning the mass media is the extent to which media can be said to cause anti-social, deviant or criminal behaviour: in other words, to what degree do media images bring about *negative* effects in their viewers? The academic study of this phenomenon – 'effects research' as it has come to be known – developed from two main sources: ***mass society*** theory and ***behaviourism***. Although deriving from different disciplines – sociology and psychology respectively – these two approaches find compatibility in their essentially pessimistic view of society and their belief that human nature is unstable and susceptible to external influences. This section explores the combined impact of mass society theory and psychological behaviourism and outlines how they gave rise to the notion that has become something of a truism: that media images are responsible for eroding moral standards, subverting consensual codes of behaviour and corrupting young minds.

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 film, television and, latterly, computer technologies, have served to intensify public anxieties but there are few *crime* waves which 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

crime – especially violent crime – since the advent of film and television, resulting in a persistent mythology that the two phenomena – media and violent crime – are 'naturally' linked. Yet as 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 18th century, the birth of commercial cinema and the emergence of cheap, sensationalistic publications known as 'Penny Dreadfuls' at the end of the 19th century, to jazz and 'pulp fiction' in the early 20th century, popular fears about the influence of visual images on vulnerable minds have been well rehearsed in this country and elsewhere. Anxieties were frequently crystallised in the notion of 'the crowd' and it became a popular 19th-century myth that when people mass together they are suggestible to outside influences and become irrational, even animalistic (Murdock, 1997; Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). The most influential exponent of this view was Gustave Le Bon, a French royalist writing at the time of the revolution, who believed that when a man forms part of a crowd he 'descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation' (Le Bon, 1895/1960: 32). Le Bon himself alluded to the persuasive powers of the media of the day when he said that:

> Crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images. It is only images that attract them and become motives for action ... Nothing has a greater effect on the imagination of crowds than theatrical representations ... Sometimes the sentiments suggested by the images are so strong that they tend, like habitual suggestions, to transform themselves into acts. (1895/1960: 68)

This statement was one of the first public airings of a view that rapidly gained credibility with the significant advancements in photography, cinema and the popular press which occurred at the turn of the 20th century. Put simply, it became increasingly common for writers and thinkers to mourn the passing of a literate culture, which was believed to require a degree of critical thinking, and bemoan its replacement, a visual popular culture which was believed to plug directly into the mind without need for rational thought or interpretation (Murdock, 1997).

Mass society theory

Fears about 'the crowd' precipitated mass society theory, which developed in the latter years of the 19th century and early 20th century, becoming firmly established as a sociological theory after the Second World War. Mass society theory usually carries negative connotations, referring to the masses or the 'common people' who are characterized by their lack of individuality, their

alienation from the moral and ethical values to be gained from work and religion, their political apathy, and their taste for 'low' culture. In most versions of the theory, individuals are seen as uneducated, ignorant, potentially unruly and prone to violence (McQuail, 2000). The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a period of tremendous 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. Within this atomized society, two important strands of thought can be detected. First, it was believed that as communities fragmented and traditional social ties were dismantled, society became a mass of isolated individuals cut adrift from kinship and organic ties and lacking moral cohesion. An increase in crime and anti-social behaviour seemed inevitable, and as mass society took hold – in all its complex, over-bureaucratized incomprehensibility – citizens turned away from the authorities who were seen as remote, indifferent and incompetent. Instead they sought solutions to crime at a personal, community-orientated, 'micro' level, which included vigilantism, personal security devices and, in some countries, guns. The second significant development that emerged from conceptualizations of mass society was that the media were seen as both an aid to people's psychic survival under difficult circumstances (McQuail, 2000) and as a powerful force for controlling people's thoughts and diverting them from political action.

Mass society theory has been described as more a diagnosis of the sickness of the times than a fully coherent social theory (McQuail, 2000); a fact borne out by the paradox that it views society as both 'atomized' and centrally controlled, and individuals as similar and undifferentiated, yet isolated and lacking social cohesion. However, the importance of mass society theory in the current context is that it gave rise to a number of theoretical and empirical models claiming that the mass media can be used subversively as a powerful means of manipulating vulnerable minds.

Behaviourism and positivism

In addition to mass society theory, models of media effects have been strongly influenced by a second strand of research – behaviourism – an empiricist approach to psychology pioneered by J.B. Watson in the first decade of the 20th century. Deriving from a philosophy known as ***positivism***, which emerged from the natural sciences and regards the world as fixed and quantifiable, behaviourism represented a major challenge to the more dominant perspective of ***psychoanalysis***. Shifting the research focus away from the realm of the mind with its emphasis on introspection and individual interpretation, behavioural psychologists argued that an individual's identity was shaped by their responses to the external environment which formed stable and recognizable patterns of behaviour that could

be publicly observed. In addition to emulating the scientific examination of relations between organisms in the natural world, Watson was inspired by Ivan Pavlov, who was famously conducting experiments with dogs, producing 'conditioned responses' (salivating) to external stimuli (a bell ringing). The impact of these developments led to a belief that the complex structures and systems that make up human behaviour could be observed and measured in a generalizable manner so that predictions of future behaviour could be made. In addition to stimulus-response experiments in psychology and the natural sciences, developments were occurring elsewhere which took a similar view of human behaviour. For example, the modern education system was being established with learning being seen as something to be tested and examined. The consumerist society was also just beginning to take hold amid rising levels of affluence, and advertisers were to become regarded as the 'hidden persuaders' who could influence people to purchase consumer goods almost against their better judgement.

Meanwhile, in criminology, the search for objective knowledge through the positive application of science was also having a significant impact. The endeavour to observe and measure the relationship between 'cause and effect' led to a belief that criminality is not a matter of free will, but is caused by a biological, psychological or social disposition over which the offender has little or no control. Through gaining knowledge about how behaviour is determined by such conditions – be they genetic deficiencies or disadvantages associated with their social environments – it was believed that problems such as crime and deviance could be examined and treated. The most famous name in positivist criminology is Cesare Lombroso, who published *The Criminal Man* (1876) and *The Female Offender* (Lombroso and Ferrero, 1895), outlining his commitment to the notion that the causes of crime are to be found in individual biology. An Italian physician whose ideas were much influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, Lombroso studied the bodies of executed criminals and came to the conclusion that law-breakers were physically different to non-offenders. He claimed that criminals were atavistic throwbacks to an earlier stage of biological development and could be identified by physical abnormalities such as prominent jaws, strong canine teeth, sloping foreheads, unusual ear size and so on. Although in more recent years positivist forms of criminology have become theoretically more sophisticated (see, for example, the work of Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985), Lombroso's rather crude approach to biological criminology is still evident today, particularly in popular media discourses about women and children who commit serious and violent crime (see Chapters 4 and 5).

While criminologists in the early decades of the 20th century were concerning themselves with isolating the variables most likely to be found in criminals as distinct from non-criminals, media researchers were also developing new theories based on positivist assumptions and behaviourist methods. The notion