EAMONN CARRABINE

CRIME, CULTURE AND THE MEDIA

'Carrabine gives us a thorough review of the scholarly literature on the media and crime. If you seek a comprehensive survey of theoretical and empirical work on crime and the media – one that draws on film and literary theory, history and philosophy, as well as psychology and sociology – this is the book.'

Nicole Rafter, Northeastern University

'An informed and refreshing look again at the interface between crime and the media. Carrabine's sociological focus on how crime stories circulate in social life makes it an invaluable guide to students and offers new insights to those who know the field well.'

Ian Loader, University of Oxford

'This book brings to bear a sophisticated synthesis of cultural, social and philosophical theories and empirical research in the analysis of representations of crime in the mass media and popular culture. It covers a wide range of issues, examining the impact of media images of crime on fear and public sentiment, the history of news and fictional crime narratives, and their production. It will be a useful text for students, and also offers many penetrating insights to practitioners and academics.'

Robert Reiner, London School of Economics and Political Science

Why are newspapers and television programmes filled with stories about crime and criminals? Is their portrayal of crime accurate? How do the media transform our attitudes to crime? Is fear of crime, for example, really created by the media?

The relationships between crime and the media have long been the subject of intense debate. From the earliest days of the printing press to the explosion of cyberspace chat rooms, there have been persistent concerns about the harmful criminogenic effects of the media. At the same time, the media are fascinated with crime – on the news, in films and on television there are countless stories about crime, both real and imagined.

In this innovative and readable new book, Eamonn Carrabine carefully untangles these debates and grapples with the powerful dynamics of fear and desire that underlie our obsession with crime. Chapter-by-chapter the book introduces the different ways in which relationships between crime and the media have been understood, including classic debates about the media's effects, news production and moral panics, as well as more cutting-edge studies of the representation of crime in the contemporary media.

Combining empirical research findings with the latest theoretical developments, the book will appeal to advanced undergraduates and graduate students across the social sciences, especially those taking courses in criminology and media studies.

Eamonn Carrabine is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Essex University

9 780745 634654 >

Crime, Culture and the Media

Eamonn Carrabine

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The relationships between crime and the media are many and complex. Indeed the topic has been central to a range of disciplines: criminology, psychology, sociology, cultural and media studies have each contributed distinctive perspectives on how we should understand the issues at stake. Initially attention centred on cinema, radio and television, before turning to computer games and music videos as these later technologies took hold, while the Internet is now attracting much commentary for the ways in which it facilitates new kinds of criminal activity (like hacking, spamming, malicious software and spyware) as well as enabling many old crimes (such as fraud, stalking, smuggling, money laundering and certain kinds of pornography) to flourish.

In criminology at least three distinctive approaches have developed. One assesses whether the media through violent depictions of crime contagiously cause criminal conduct in real life – through imitation, suggestion and identification, as in 'copy cat' crime, or more subtly through sensitization (by shaping expectations of how to act in certain situations). A second examines how the news media create moral panics (Cohen, 1972; Hall *et al.*, 1978) thereby provoking public fear of crime. The third and more recent development attends to a broader consideration of how crime and punishment have been consumed (Carrabine *et al.*, 2002), imagined (Young, 1996) and represented (Sparks, 1992) in popular culture. Each of these approaches tackles important issues and will be covered in what follows. However, the tendency in criminology has been to focus on individual media and their specific impacts on particular emotional states (whether this is increased aggression or fear). Instead, this book offers an account of crime stories in the media that is more interested in their social character: the ways they are produced, circulated and read.

Contents

Introduction

The relationships between crime and the media are many and complex.
Indeed the topic has been central to a range of disciplines: criminology,
psychology, sociology, cultural and media studies have each contributed
distinctive perspectives on how we should understand the issues at
stake. Initially attention centred on cinema, radio and television, before
turning to computer games and music videos as these later technologies
took hold, while the Internet is now attracting much commentary
for the ways in which it facilitates new kinds of criminal activity (like
hacking, spamming, malicious software and spyware) as well as
enabling many old crimes (such as fraud, stalking, smuggling, money
laundering and certain kinds of pornography) to flourish.

In criminology at least three distinctive approaches have developed.
One assesses whether the media through violent depictions of crime
contagiously cause criminal conduct in real life – through imitation,
suggestion and identification, as in 'copy cat' crime, or more subtly
through sensitization (by shaping expectations of how to act in certain
situations). A second examines how the news media create moral
panics (Cohen, 1972; Hall *et al.*, 1978) thereby provoking public fear
of crime. The third and more recent development attends to a broader
consideration of how crime and punishment have been consumed
(Carrabine *et al.*, 2002), imagined (Young, 1996) and represented
(Sparks, 1992) in popular culture. Each of these approaches tackles
important issues and will be covered in what follows. However, the
tendency in criminology has been to focus on individual media and
their specific impacts on particular emotional states (whether this is
increased aggression or fear). Instead, this book offers an account of
crime stories in the media that is more interested in their social char-
acter: the ways they are produced, circulated and read.

Investigating the ways in which the press and broadcast news report crime is now an established field in criminology and owes much to the pioneering work of figures like Stan Cohen, Stuart Hall and Jock Young who have been concerned with how the media ideologically distort the reality of crime. Robert Reiner (2007:303–15) has provided an extensive review of the vast literature analysing media content and it is clear that crime stories are, and always have been, prominent in all parts of the media. Moreover, the pattern of crime in the news tends to concentrate overwhelmingly on violent and especially sex crimes. A major claim of these studies is that the media tend to exaggerate the likelihood that one might be a victim of crime. For instance, Williams and Dickinson (1993:40) found that in one month in 1989, 65 per cent of British newspaper stories dealt with personal violent crime, which they compare to the British Crime Survey's (Mayhew, 1989) finding that only 6 per cent of crime involves violence. Studies of the provincial press indicate similar forms of exaggeration – Smith (1984:290) observed that offences such as robbery and assault accounted for less than 6 per cent of known crimes in Birmingham, but occupied 52.7 per cent of the space devoted to crime stories in the local press. Similarly a content analysis of Scottish newspapers over a one-month period found that 'crimes involving violence and crimes involving sex together constituted 2.4 per cent of real incidence yet 45.8 per cent of newspaper coverage' (Ditton and Duffy, 1983:164).

There is little doubt that the mass media are selective over the kinds of crimes, criminals and circumstances they report, but Richard Ericson (1991) not only wonders why this should come as a surprise to these researchers but also queries why anyone would expect the cultural products of the mass media to reflect the social reality of crime. He is thus critical of studies that compare media representations of crime with officially recorded statistics. As he explains, police statistics do not mirror the reality of crime but are themselves 'cultural, legal and social constructs produced by the police for organizational purposes' so that what is presented is one symbolically constructed reality compared to another (Ericson, 1991:220). His crucial question then is why do media organizations focus on particular events and privilege particular classifications and interpretations of these events over others? Answering this calls for an understanding of how institutions make the news and interact with events that occur in an uncertain world.

One of the earliest and most influential books making this point is Stan Cohen and Jock Young's (1973) edited collection, *The*

Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media, which draws together a number of essays on the dynamics of news production processes and has set the parameters of much subsequent debate. Here they identify two polarized traditions in media research. One they define as a 'Mass Manipulative model' which regards the public as 'an atomized mass, passive receptacles of messages originating from a monolithic and powerful source' (Cohen and Young, 1973b:10). Adherents of the political Left argue that the media serve the powerful, stifle dissent and reinforce dominant views, whereas Conservatives condemn the role of the media in glamorizing wrongdoing, undermining morality and encouraging permissiveness. In either case the media are understood to be all-powerful and harmful.

The contrasting 'Commercial Laissez-Faire model' developed largely as a critique of the manipulative picture and its conspiratorial implications – unsurprisingly it is the view most often held by those who work in the industry itself (editors, journalists and sources) and they point to the diversity of opinions found in the media to challenge charges of manipulation. In this more pluralistic perspective the effects of the media 'are seen as less awesome than in the Manipulative model: people's opinions might be reinforced, but rarely changed in an opposite direction and moreover the primal source of attitude formation and change is personal experience and face-to-face contact' (Cohen and Young, 1973b:11). I draw attention to their distinction in these opening remarks because they go on to describe their fleeting involvement in the landmark *Oz* obscenity trial held in 1972 over the countercultural magazine, so as to demonstrate some of the complexities behind these standard approaches to media power, and then describe some of the subsequent debates surrounding pornography to introduce some of the central issues covered in the book.

At the *Oz* trial the different sides took position:

> Here the one side was arguing that the contents of the particular edition of the magazine would corrupt its younger readers. Advertisements for homosexual contacts, features presenting a tolerant attitude towards certain forms of drug use, cartoons depicting school authority in an obscene and derogatory way, articles and advertisements drawing attention to sexual deviation – all would have a harmful effect on values and behaviour. The opposed position drew attention to the selective nature of the audience (not everyone would buy the magazine) and the unlikelihood that the objectionable messages would actually have any effect on individuals not already committed toward the particular line of thought.
> (Cohen and Young, 1973b:339)

Indeed, Cohen and Taylor were approached as potential witnesses for the defence. They had impeccable radical credential themselves and would easily have found fault with the prosecution's case.

But doubts soon surfaced following an initial briefing with the defence lawyers. As they go on to explain:

> We were being asked to support an extreme laissez-faire model which we knew in this case to be patently absurd. Clearly the publishers and editors of *Oz had* intended to change people's values and opinions, otherwise why produce the magazine at all? (ibid., emphasis in original)

Once the defence lawyers saw they were unable to overcome their misgivings, Cohen and Taylor soon found themselves dropped from the courtroom line-up. Their concerns remain important, for while the trial has now passed into history the issues posed by media effects, state censorship and liberal tolerance continue to structure much debate – as the controversies surrounding pornography exemplify.

The Politics of Pornography

From the 1970s onwards there has been much debate within and beyond feminism over the question of pornography. Of course, the production of sexually explicit imagery is as old as human history and the Victorian era, which is often thought to have had a particularly repressive attitude towards sexuality, actually witnessed a thriving industry around pornography (Sigel, 2002). The permissiveness of the twentieth century can be traced from the early silent 'stag' cinema through to magazines like *Playboy*, *Mayfair* and *Penthouse* and now the Internet, where one recent estimate has calculated that there are around 4.2 million pornographic websites (12 per cent of all sites), with over 372 million pornographic pages (Yar, 2006:107). Up until the 1970s the main objection to pornography focused on its power to deprave and corrupt decent moral and aesthetic standards that were enshrined in obscenity legislation (and had brought about the *Oz* trial, among other things). But the emergence of a strong feminist movement at this time and its uneasy alliance with the conservative moral critique of pornography provided a new radical political condemnation, this one emphasizing how it harmed women.

The slogan 'pornography is the theory and rape is the practice' (Morgan, 1980) caught the mood of the new feminist radicalism. By exposing how pornography is central to women's oppression the

conventional lines drawn between the 'decent' and 'indecent', 'family viewing' and the 'obscene', 'clean' and 'smutty' images were all challenged. At the same time campaigns were launched opposing 'the irrelevant use of women's bodies in advertising, and against the cultural stereotypes which insisted that women must always be young, slender, blonde and white if they were to be considered beautiful' (Wilson, 1992:16–17). The leading representatives of this feminist radicalism included Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin and Catherine MacKinnon, who argued that pornography is, in itself, violence and circulates in a broader cultural climate where 'acts of sexual hostility directed against women are not only tolerated but ideologically encouraged' (Brownmiller, 1976:395).

The argument is that men have colonized female sexuality to gain power and use this power to maintain domination through a rule of terror. The connection drawn between sex and violence is that male power works through the depersonalization, objectification and degradation of women. Their apocalyptic critique is not so much in terms of there being a direct causal connection between media representations and violent behaviour, but that pornography helps to sustain a culture where the violent and sexual exploitation of women is the norm. Nevertheless, the kind of pornography they allude to is of the highly extreme kind that depicts violence against women and children – which most people would find wholly abhorrent – and described as 'Dachau brought into the bedroom and celebrated' (cited in Segal, 1992:7). Even where pornography does not directly involve representations of violence (and much of it does not), the argument is that women are still objectified and reduced to sex objects for the gratification of men while placing women in relations of inferiority – existing purely to service male desires.

This strand of radical feminism has proven to be highly influential and has entered into controversial alliances with neo-conservatives to denounce pornography by generating a new form of 'legal moralism'. This has been particularly successful in the United States, where campaigners like Andrea Dworkin have proposed legislation censoring anything deemed to be 'offensive' as a violation of women's civil rights (Watney, 1997:62). Other feminists have pointed to the problems and contradictions inherent to the anti-pornography position. Elizabeth Wilson (1992) has accused the movement of fundamentalism: intolerance, denial, preacher-style harangues, living life through repressive rules, and above all else a profound suspicion of sexuality. Moreover, it has been argued that anti-pornography feminism was based on an unhelpful distinction between male sexuality as violent and lustful and

female sexuality as gentle and tender, which upholds the 'notion that women are victims of sex and that sex is degrading to women but not to men' (Turley, 1986:89). The author Angela Carter (1979a:37) was one of the earliest to put 'pornography in the service of women' while others have sought to show how the guilty pleasures derived from 'bawdy traditions may embody a masculine view of the world, but they may also mock and undermine it' (Attwood, 2002:94).

One of the problems facing the feminist left is the question of how far to take censorship while preserving democratic freedoms, since anti-pornography campaigns have attracted strong criticism from gay and lesbian groups because such legal regulation can easily be extended into other areas of social life. Of course, today much public concern is focused on the Internet where the problems of children viewing obscene imagery and the harms posed by child pornography itself dominate attention. Criminologists recognize that there are many difficult moral questions surrounding pornography, but would emphasize that there are different kinds of content found on websites and its varying legal status:

> The majority of internet based pornography is adult consensual pornography, whether it is soft-core sexual imagery or even hard-core imagery depicting penetration and other sexual acts. Although subject to moral strictures, its consensual nature leaves it largely non-contentious within most western jurisdictions, and with some caveats, within the boundaries of law. Even 'extreme' pornographic materials depicting acts on the borders of consensuality are unlikely to be prosecuted so long as the acts are consensual . . . It is only where there is clear evidence of violence against one or more parties by the other that an investigation may take place, and then usually only after a formal complaint has been made to the police. (Wall, 2007:107–8)

However, it is the fear that children will be unwittingly exposed to such material that causes much alarm and has led to the growth of Internet filtering software that is at best only partially effective in blocking access to explicit content – suggesting that there are no easy technological or legislative remedies here given the supply of and demand for illicit material.

When considering the problems posed by on-line child pornography it is important to recognize that the abuse is not new and there is a long history of commercial production (O'Toole, 1998), but that the Internet has transformed the ways it is produced, distributed and consumed (O'Donnell and Milner, 2007). It also forces criminologists to rethink the ways social problems are constructed, as the

following admission from one of the leading studies on the subject makes clear:

> Despite activists' claims to the contrary, child porn is extremely difficult to obtain through non-electronic means and has been so for twenty years, so I believed it was equally rare on the Web. I was wrong. It is a substantial presence, and much of the material out there is worse than most of us can imagine, in terms of the types of activity depicted and the ages of the children portrayed. This is not just a case of soft-core pictures of precociously seductive fifteen-year-olds. Having spent a decade arguing that various social menaces were vastly overblown – that serial killers and molestors did not lurk behind every tree, nor pedophile priests in every rectory – I now found myself in the disconcerting position of seeking to *raise* public concern about a quite authentic problem that has been neglected. (Jenkins, 2002:9, emphasis in original)

Philip Jenkins's overall position has been one that draws attention to the socially constructed nature of reality – how problems become defined and created by assorted claims makers (victims, politicians, professionals, social movements and the media) each attempting to develop frames of understanding that categorize troubling events. As he explains, there are many versions of social constructionism. The 'strict' constructionist is not especially interested in the truth or accuracy of a problem, but instead concentrates on the collective work involved in claims making (with sociology being one further voice pressing definitional claims on the world). In contrast, the 'contextual' constructionist adopts a more moderate line and is not simply concerned with debunking but recognizes that there is a real, plausible problem out there. The questions then are why some issues become perceived as social problems in certain times and places (but not others) and what methods are used to establish claims (Jenkins, 1998:5). Examining the changing frames in which a problem is understood can capture how issues are stirred up through the mass media as well as showing why some issues are not taken seriously enough. These are issues explored in some detail over the following chapters.

Crime, Entertainment and Representation

In this book I also explore why wrongdoing becomes an occasion for storytelling. Narratives that claim to describe, respond to or displace crises in the moral order are always structured by social conflict (between heroes and villains, good and evil, self and other, fate and

choice, home and abroad among others). Crime stories, even when
they are explicitly and obviously intended to uphold the authority of
the law, can appeal to forbidden desires as political warnings are
played out in uneven fields of cultural struggle. Moreover, the narra-
tive structure itself is often devoted to the task of unmasking facades
and resolving mystery. The reader of detective fiction soon learns that
appearances are not what they seem and downmarket newspaper
editors are well aware of how sex sells – from the sexualization of
mundane events, through the detailing of celebrity sex scandals, to the
salacious reporting of violent sexual crime.

It has been argued that crime stories are universally popular as they
address the universal problem of human mortality:

> Millions are fascinated daily by reports about crime and by crime
> stories. They flock to films whose two main themes are crime and mis-
> fortune. This interest and this fascination are not merely the expression
> of bad taste and a craving for scandal, but correspond to a deep yearn-
> ing for the dramatization of the ultimate thing in human life, namely life
> and death, through crime and punishment, struggle between man and
> nature. (Fromm, cited in Mandel, 1984:9)

The point here is that rather than dismiss the enduring popular fasci-
nation with crime and punishment we must seek to understand it.

Even though their task may well be clarifying and sharpening the
normal boundaries of daily life, stories of transgression are absolutely
central to every society's imaginary origins. For instance, in Greek
mythology Prometheus stole from the gods the gift of fire and in ret-
ribution Zeus created the first woman, Pandora, to seduce and harm
mankind. A more familiar account of the 'Fall of Man' is to be found
in Genesis which tells how the first man and woman, Adam and Eve,
succumb to temptation and are expelled from paradise. The birth of
the novel in the eighteenth century is utterly dependent on the indi-
vidual deviance of key protagonists. One example is *Moll Flanders*
(1722), which is widely regarded as one of the first English novels. It
vividly describes 'midnight' Moll's outlaw adventures and struggles to
escape the constraints of identity before ultimately repenting in
Newgate prison to begin a new life as a reformed penitent. Indeed,
the developing literary form is so rich in wayward figures that it has
been claimed that 'the whole project of the novel, its very theoretical
and structural assumptions, were in some sense criminal in nature'
(Davis, 1983:123). Since the plots include deeds which breach con-
ventional codes of normality the novels were castigated for morally

corrupting readers. These concerns echoed earlier attacks by the great and the good on the corpse-strewn stages of Elizabethan playhouses, which were condemned for inciting the unruly passions of audiences.

Consequently, it is important to recognize that worries over the harmful effects of popular culture has been a recurring theme since at least the sixteenth century and continues in the current anxieties surrounding video nasties, computer games and Internet pornography. Each development in media technology has been accompanied by much alarm over the dire consequences of exposure to this or that medium. From the earliest days of the printing press to cyberspace chat rooms there have been persistent concerns raised over the criminogenic effects of the media. Yet at the same time the media are fascinated with crime. This takes many diverse forms, whether as 'entertainment' in such staples as cop shows, crime novels, 'true crime' stories and films or as 'news' in television documentaries, newspaper articles and broadcast bulletins, while the rapid growth in 'reality TV' over the last decade has further blurred the boundaries between fact, fiction and entertainment. Under this kind of postmodern 'hyperreality' it has been argued that the boundary separating reality from its representation has 'imploded', leaving images with no real-world referents (Baudrillard, 1988). However, the boundaries between fact and fiction have always been fairly fluid. For instance, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both novels and news reports were seen as neither entirely factual nor clearly fictional (Davis, 1980, 1983). We will see in chapter 6 that for what we now regard as a news story to appear in the press during the eighteenth century it would frequently have to be cast in the form of fiction. Some would say little has changed!

It should be clear from these opening remarks that this book will argue that history matters. In the most obvious sense, current representations of crime in the media bear traces of earlier codes and practices. Recognizing this past enables a more sophisticated understanding of the present – especially since many current controversies have much longer histories than is usually acknowledged. This is not to suggest a long line of steady continuity stretching back from the earliest forms of oral, face-to-face storytelling to the latest mediated technology that encompasses the lives of millions around the world. Instead, the argument is that understanding changing forms of representation requires an attention to how developments in communication media are themselves integral to the formation of modern societies. As John Thompson (1995:4) puts it, once 'individuals use communication media, they enter into forms of interaction which differ in certain respects from the type of face-to-face interaction

which characterizes most encounters of daily life'. These processes have had important consequences, which I now briefly introduce.

Media, Spectacle and Amusement

It is often said that we live in a media-saturated world. In attempting to grasp the profundity of this now familiar observation characterizations like information age, information society or even information revolution (to draw parallels with the earlier seismic consequences of the industrial revolution) have been used to describe this apparently recent transformation. Yet information is only part of the story. Likewise, the tendency to refer to 'the media' in the singular obscures the diversity of media forms (film, television, magazines, newspapers, the Internet, books and so on) that surround us. The word media is the plural of medium, which was initially used to refer to the materials used for communication (Briggs and Burke, 2005:5). From the papyrus, clay and stone of the ancient world to the plastic, metal and wire of modern media it is clear that the technologies of communication have an immense influence, ranging from the most inner dimensions of personal experience to the organization of power, political practice and social control.

Although the current extent of media saturation is quite unprecedented it is something with which many of us are very familiar and find commonplace. Todd Gitlin describes this phenomenon well:

> The flow of images and sounds through the households of the rich world, and the richer parts of the poor world, seems unremarkable today. Only a visitor from an earlier century or an impoverished country could be startled by the fact that life is now played out against a shimmering multitude of images and sounds, emanating from television, videotapes, videodiscs, video games, VCRs, computer screens, digital displays of all sorts, always in flux, chosen partly at will, partly by whim, supplemented by words, numbers, symbols, phrases, fragments, all passing through screens that in a single minute can display more pictures than a prosperous seventeenth-century Dutch household contained over several lifetimes, portraying in one day more individuals than the Dutch burgher would have beheld in the course of years, and in one week more bits of what we have come to call 'information' than all the books in all the households in Vermeer's Delft. (Gitlin, 2002:14)

Indeed, one of the themes running through this book is that the media form part of the fabric of everyday life in ways that are both routinely