Reporting crime

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The role of the media in shaping our views of crime and law and order needs critical analysis.

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Does the *reporting* of crime affect the way in which we think about crime and law and order issues generally? Certainly the causal relationship is difficult to trace definitively, as concluded in a study by Berk and others of *Los Angeles Times* editorials.[1] There are two schools of thought on the subject. The first is the idea that we are shaped and led by the media to a certain opinion which they espouse. The argument is that the media establish and control the 'law and order' discourse; they have the power to focus on certain issues, define 'deviance', and suggest 'appropriate' solutions — like greater police numbers and powers, or harsher punishments. On this view, the media are required to exercise their manipulative power responsibly so they do not threaten the freedom that allows them to publish at all.

The other school of thought suggests that individuals are not easily swayed by the media, but rather seek out material from many sources that will confirm their prejudices and support their status in their social grouping. The only sin of the mass media, on this view, is that they are constantly reinforcing previously held attitudes rather than changing them. The public is not seen as being merely a malleable and passive audience but active participants in the process.

I do not know which school of thought prevails currently. I will leave that question for the students of the media process generally. There is probably some truth in both. That is, for the most part, we are led to certain conclusions, which may or may not be warranted because we are constrained within a number of dominant ideologies. However, at the same time, we are usually quite discerning consumers. Having said that, I want to concentrate, nevertheless, on the former argument, and explore the possibility that the crime debate is dominated by certain forces and pressures and discuss the various ramifications.

Pressures which may affect crime reporting

Researchers have isolated a number of pressures which are placed upon media sources when reporting crime. Each of these pressures is reflected in the chameleon-like product that finally reaches the consumer. They include:

* production pressures;
* organisational pressures and convenience; and
* commercial pressures.

Production pressures

Production pressures have the capacity to distort information quite independently of any deliberate bias. The mere fact that the media scatter snippets of information into the public arena determines which part of an entire incident consumers will see, read of or hear. The range of material from which the media may choose is enormous, given the explosion of technology in the field of instantaneous nationwide and worldwide coverage of thousands of newsworthy events each day. Electronic media have to communicate quickly, and also fit within time frames. Editors clip 'newsworthy' events within the number of seconds available to them. The print media presentations have to be cut within the limitations of the page, and, under the sub-editor's eye, within the limitations of an attention-grabbing headline.

The mere fact that a piece of information has to be selected and presented within these specific frames often militates against comprehensive, fair and accurate reporting. The result is that items, news and information for consumers are often reduced to their lowest common denominator for easy consumer digestion, and, in the process, a superficial and shallow image of the real event emerges. For example, the Melbourne *Sun* newspaper (15.7.87) reported a speech given by Victorian Prosecutor Jim Bowen. In that speech he made the following statement: 'Unless determined realistic efforts are undertaken to control the rate of increase in serious crimes against persons and property, then one in every four Victorians will have become a victim of serious crime by the end of the present decade'. In summarising the speech, the *Sun* synopsis was brief: 'This week, Crown Prosecutor Mr Bowen said Victorians stood a one in four chance of being *raped, bashed or robbed* by 1990' (my emphasis). These three offences, however, constitute only 2.05% of all of the offences included in the Major Crime Index and so to simplify the statement was to distort it.[2]

Production pressures also demand that crime stories are often reported without relevant and necessary background, so it appears that they erupted out of nowhere. Such a report, in order to have an immediate impact, must gloss over the often long build-up of events which culminated in the 'newsworthy' item. Such transitory exposure does little to enhance understanding. For example, the headlines of the race 'riots' in Redfern, Sydney, became news long before any reference was made or analysis done of the decline in relations between police and Aboriginal residents. A similar situation arose in the reporting of the Bathurst motor racing spectator violence which carried the innuendo that the assaults perpetrated against police were unprovoked and unexpected.[3]

Organisational pressure and convenience

There are certain organisational pressures which may have a distorting influence. Considerations of personal safety and convenience lead film crews covering riots typically to film from behind police lines, which structures the image of the police as a vulnerable 'us' confronting the menacing 'them'. The information is provided by the nearest person to the camera, invariably the police, not those of the 'insurgents' on the other side of the barricades. These factors may lead to an inadvertent 'pro-police' stance, once again, quite independently of any conscious bias.

Furthermore, organisations with input from American and British news sources will find those influences informing our view of crime and justice issues in this country, notwithstanding that the social, religious, racial and political structures of those societies are very often quite different from our own. As Paul Wilson points out in an interview in a *Time* magazine article (12.8.91, p.18), New York City has a population of 7.5 million, and 2000 murders occurred there in 1990. Australia has 17 million and the number of murders for the same period was approximately 300. It would be a mistake therefore to transplant all American issues into an Australian environment. I contrast this article with one by *Time* magazine's Michael Gawenda three years earlier (3.10.88, pp.12-27) where the author asserted that 'throughout Australia, crime is out of control . . . [W]e are no longer safe. In the war between good and evil, between the law-abiding and the lawless, the bad guys are winning.' Such shallow reporting does very little to foster a responsible debate on the subject in an Australian context.

Commercial pressures

There are, of course, commercial interests which drive the media and their clients. On some accounts, '[t]he overwhelming priority is whether the "journalism" will attract an audience that advertisers want to reach'.[4] Whether it is an overwhelming priority is hard to judge, but there is no doubt that commercial spin-offs are part of the production equation. For example, the now defunct Adelaide *News* ran a series on crime prevention during May and June 1991 laced liberally (up to 33% of column space) with advertisements for security services, burglar alarm installation and insurance. There is little doubt that these businesses and indeed the Adelaide *News* all continue to generate sales through providing crime stories which fuel the need for security systems, and vindicate consumer purchases of security systems.

There is a great deal of debate about whether the media incite the salacious appetites of consumers or whether they merely respond to them. There is an argument, although not a conclusive one, that the more crime and law and order news that the media report, the more customers will come to the media market-place. According to one Melbourne television news editor, crime stories are 'very important. They would rank in the top two or three stories for our bulletin'.[5] Thus the temptation is there for the media to present an abundance of crime stories and perhaps inadvertently over-state the crime problem in order to compete for market prominence. There is the ever-present danger that this may create ' . . . a level of fear amongst members of the public about crime — based mainly upon stories about major crimes and their victims — that is both unrealistic and unjustified'.[6]

Journalists often seek out the drama of any incident to the exclusion of other less dramatic features. This may be for any number of reasons including the competitive edge that that journalist or his or her organisation may gain over their rivals. The Adelaide *News* carried a headline on 18 January 1989 which read '35 children gunned down at school: "Army" madman strikes in playground'. This provides a good example of the way in which the misfortunes of others may easily become grist for the print media mill. The *News* could have better portrayed the violence in a manner which was less calculated to serve its own ends and more sensitive to the six children who died and the 29 who were injured.

The Report of the National Inquiry into Racial Violence cited the case of the Perth *Daily News* (29.11.89) which portrayed Geraldton as a town 'under siege' by Aboriginal youth, describing a 'Black Terror' and a 'Black crime wave'.[7] Likewise, the Australian Law Reform Commission recently challenged the media to act to reduce racist violence.[8] A majority of Commis-sioners recommended that the Broadcasting Act be amended to prohibit the broadcast of material that is 'likely to incite hatred or hostility against or gratuitously vilify any person or group on the basis of, at least, colour, race, religion or national or ethnic origin'.

Media reporting and victim issues

Victims of crime, caught up in the media treatment of their case may become victims twice over.[9] There are some safeguards in place already. The media have adopted a commendable voluntary code of restraint in the reporting of suicides. Living victims of sexual attacks are protected by, amongst other State statutory provisions, s.71a of the *Evidence Act* (SA) and there are similar provisions in some other States. But the families of deceased victims, and victims of non-sexual crimes are not so protected in the absence of any legislation (such as the *Privacy Bill* which remains — at August 1992 — before the South Australian Parliament or a broadening of the ambit of the federal Privacy Act) that would prevent media intrusion on private grief. In many instances, the media reveal names, information and details of the deaths of victims against the wishes of grieving relatives.

Another case in point in South Australia was that of the murder-suicide involving businessman Craig Stock and his victim, Melinda Marshall, early in May 1991. For three days, 15, 16 and 17 May, the Adelaide *Advertiser* carried the details of the career of Stock, his dreams and successes, his failed business dealings, his impending trial for fraud, his relationship with Marshall, and the son who survived her. On 23 May the *Letters* column carried four responses concerned with the *Advertiser's* 'she drove him to it' stereotype of domestic killings which 'helps perpetuate the myth that men's crimes of domestic violence are somehow not their own fault'. The author of this remark, Suzanne Callinan, Acting Women's Adviser to the Premier, was, that same day, interviewed by Philip Satchell on the ABC along with the editor of the *Advertiser*, Peter Blunden. The editor was unrepentant. Callinan again made the point that

the *Advertiser's* reporting of this victim made 'no mention of her life merits, hopes and future dreams [as it had her killer's] . . . she was just the unfortunate cause of some of this man's stress'.

It is clear that certain branches of the media have failed to understand that responsible journalism needs to focus on issues concerned with stopping violence rather than blaming victims for it.
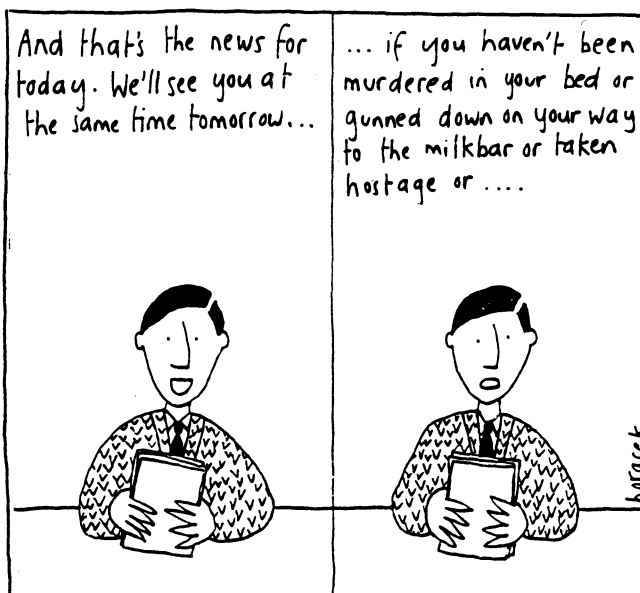
Crime reporting and criminology

I suggest that the difference between crime reporting which is banal and that which is incisive is found in the ability of the reporter to understand the issues. An editor does not send a science writer to do a story on sport, or a non-economist to report on the Australian budget. According to some research, crime reporting credentials, however, are little more than an ability to create a favourable relationship with sources.[10]

The first sign that something is amiss is when the media presents the findings of its own 'research'. For the most part these so-called studies are no more than self-selected subscribers of print media, self-selected phone callers to electronic media and interviews with so-called convenience samples, that is, people stopped at locations convenient to the reporter. The presentation of these 'survey results' is rarely differentiated from the presentation of more *bona fide* studies. The implication is that all research carries the same weight, no matter how well or poorly it is collected and interpreted.[11]

Better training of journalists in statistics and evaluation techniques would improve the ability of reporters to be discerning when fed figures from politicians and police sources. In 1987, the South Australian Government 'decriminalised' (by an expiation system) the personal use of small amounts of cannabis. There were allegations by the Opposition that cannabis use, based upon police figures of the number of expiation notices issued, 'doubled' in the second month of operation of the scheme, thereby suggesting that the Government had encouraged the use of cannabis. Later enquiry revealed that a number of notices had not been processed in the first month because of difficulties with the procedures.

On 24 May 1991, the Adelaide *News* headline was 'Crime Rate Soars' and the

And that's the news for today. We'll see you at the same time tomorrow...

... if you haven't been murdered in your bed or gunned down on your way to the milkbar or taken hostage or ....

opening paragraph spoke of '*shocking statistics leaked from the SA Police Department*' (my emphasis). The *News* again on 12 August 1991 reported on the front page 'Huge Jump in Youth Crime' and the Adelaide *Advertiser* reported that juvenile crime was 'Out of Control' according to figures, presumably based on police data, released by the Opposition spokesperson. I am not so much concerned by the fact that Opposition spokespersons want to make political mileage from these figures, but that gullible reporters or their editors accept them, and their interpretations of them, without question.

Even the most novice journalist must realise that great caution should accompany the reporting of statistics. Blandly pointing to the rise in 'crime rates' ignores a number of fundamental issues. What were the sources of the data? If they were police-generated, is it not relevant to suggest that reporting practices may have had an influence on the figures? For example, have there been any changes in reporting methods and communication, computerisation, insurance requirements, legal definitions, victim support groups, or police campaigns or strategies? How do police figures compare with the results of other data, like victimisation surveys? Do police statistics record the number of offen*ces* or offen*ders*, and how may the differences in definition and categorisation of data differ from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and from time to time? Finally, were these data placed in the context of long-term trends? In other words, if there has been a rise this year, was there a decrease in previous years? Was there a smaller rate of increase this year than in previous years? These questions are rarely addressed.

But while I have concerns about the ability of many reporters to differentiate between valuable research and poor research, and while I am amazed that many reporters parrot statistics without comment from statisticians, I am most concerned that editors rarely show a willingness to broaden their reporting of crime into a wider social and political context. We have realised that the excesses of corporate entrepreneurs, the collapse of financial institutions, and the dangers of industrial pollution and work-related accidents do enormous harm to our collective well-being. Research indicates that many more deaths may be caused by inadequate occupational health and safety precautions than by the more traditional forms of violence such as murder and manslaughter.[12] These comparisons are rarely made in the media or if they are they scarcely appear on page one. Consider the following attitude of one Canberra editor:

> A good (sic) rape or a good shooting or mugging — that's a piece of cake. I mean you need three backs and a good imagination to write those yarns. But the company collapses and frauds are very difficult to write. They take a very skilled journalist, because you've got to have a background in a whole range of things. You've got to have a smattering of commercial law. You've got to have a smattering of accounting and bookkeeping, because you've got to be able to understand what a balance sheet means. You've got to have a little knowledge of the *Companies Act*. You've got to understand how the stock exchange operates. And you've got to understand how each of these things relates to the other to be able to write a story about a company collapse.[13]

So burglaries and assaults remain the mainstay of editorial indignation, while tax rorts, trade practices violations and breaches of equal opportunity legislation are presented less frequently and with less opprobrium. Illegal drugs continue to incite media moral outrage, notwithstanding that Valium and Mogadon have caused a host of serious psychological and physical problems[14] with few headlines from the media outside the ABC's *Law Report*. Heroin deaths comprise less than 1% of all drug-related deaths in Australia although heroin receives the bulk of media drug coverage. I saw very little media attention given to the study on violence in Australia in 1989 which indicated that the group most at risk

from homicide in our society is children under one year of age, mostly at the hands of parents or extended family.[15]

This is not to blame the media entirely for these trends, for the initiative has been set by the modern Australian conservative political agenda to distance governments from the view that there is a collective responsibility for crime (for example, to look askance at what pressures social welfare cuts may place on families), and to place it firmly, like the classicists of yesteryear, with the individual.

My concern is that crime reporting has become complacent about these issues. The media appear to be merely stepping into line with the conservative political view at precisely the time that they should be taking the bold step of challenging it.

> The media reproduce a common image that 'real' crime is crime on the streets, crime occurring between strangers, crime which brutalises the weak and defenceless and crime perpetrated by vicious young men, and the imagery is of war . . . These crimes exist, but this imagery becomes the only view of crime which people will take seriously because it is the only view the media give. The media report 'unusual' incidents, including violent crime against the aged, because of their newsworthiness, thus perpetuating the general perception of crime.[16]

An example of this can be found in McCulloch's description of the reports by the Melbourne *Sun* of three cases of fatal shootings of suspects by police.

> It is clear that in the aftermath of fatal police shootings, there have been attempts to publicly link those shot with serious violent crimes and at times misrepresent the circumstances of the shootings. This strategy shifts public focus away from the circumstances of the shooting and the actions of the police officers involved, and reduces public sympathy for the victim . . . The coverage . . . demonstrates not only the ability of police to manipulate the media but the willingness of some sections of the press to support police interests at the expense of fair and accurate reporting.[17]

Editors continue to excuse themselves by saying that if they react too strongly against police interpretations there is always the possibility that they will be cut off from both official and unofficial sources of information. But one cannot resist the conclusion that journalists, like police, have become merely willing instruments — albeit unconsciously — of political campaigns on law and order issues and therefore reinforce an unsatisfactory perception of crime. One can understand why police 'fall into line', because they are agents

of the state (and I do not mean that pejoratively) and for whom the Minister for Emergency Services is accountable. While the media pride themselves on their fierce independence, and indeed frequently *do* expose corruption and graft among the powerful and rich, their reporting of crime events very largely coincides with the definition provided by the legitimated power holders. This is more likely in an environment of concentrated media ownership such as exists in Australia currently. My conclusion is that journalists cannot escape the responsibility for poor crime reporting if they allow themselves to become subservient to the information-providers and pass up the opportunity to improve their own knowledge of the field, and challenge the status quo where it requires challenge.

Of course, I am mindful of the fact that criminologists have not been presenting a united front, and it may be accurate to suggest, as some do, that the paucity of good criminological theory only serves to encourage poor reporting of it.[18] So the blame cannot be left entirely with the media. There are few criminological commentators prepared to tackle these most fundamental issues in a way which is palatable and interesting enough for the average media consumer. Young chastises his contemporaries for allowing the 'rot' to set in.

> [Criminology] is the very staple of the mass media, a major focus of much day to day public gossip, speculation and debate. And this is as it should be. But during the past decade the subject has been eviscerated, talk of theory, causality and justice has all but disappeared and what is central to human concern has been relegated to the margins. It is time for us to go back to the drawing boards, time to regain our acquaintanceship with theory, to dispel amnesia about the past and adequately comprehend the present.[19]

The task of improving the situation is thus in many hands.

Conclusion

Media reporting of crime issues could adopt the Dutch view, which, according to Brown, 'demonstrates that there is considerable restraint exercised in the coverage of crime and prison issues in that country. Individual crimes in particular are dealt with by the press in a restrained manner and metaphysical and emotive language is kept to a minimum.[20] Reporting could then become more selective, more critical, more incisive and thus more appealing to the consumer. In short, journalists can play a key role, not an obsequious one, in the crime debate, and especially in matters

concerning violence in Australian society.[21] Evidence from Canada indicates that it may be happening there.[22] I look forward to similar conclusions from Australian researchers in the years to come.

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