

The Role of News Media in the Prevention of Drug Crime

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ABSTRACT

Media messages are endemic in our society through exposure to television and radio, movies, outdoor and point of sale advertising, via newspapers and magazines, on the internet and through books, brochures and posters. News media rely on willing participants, such as police sources, to produce crime stories in an efficient and cost-effective manner. News organizations have offices at police headquarters so reporters are near police sources. This convenient location exposes reporters to official knowledge of crime, selecting a variety of potentially newsworthy crimes from what is known to the police. News media can hold the police accountable to the public by critically evaluating current responses to crime, promoting alternatives, and informing the public. News organizations are in a strategic position to educate the public about the effectiveness of police responses to crime because the public uses media sources to develop opinions about crime.

Keywords: Crime, Drug Crime, News Media, Police.

Introduction

Research on crime in the news media has relied on two different research methodologies (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987). First, most media studies have used content analysis. Studies using this methodology examine the presentation of crime in the news, ignoring how and why certain crimes are selected, produced, or eliminated from presentation. Ethnography is the second type of research method used to study crime in the news media. Studies using ethnography examine the news production process, including decisions made by reporters, editors, producers, and criminal justice sources. Ethnographic research

documents how organizational factors, such as spatial arrangements, employee cultures, and social relationships, influence news presentation. News media improve profits by adapting to the demands of their audience, providing news that will attract consumers and increase advertising revenues. Moreover, the economic health of news organizations depends on their ability to cut production costs. Media use decentralized news beats, wire services, and suburban news bureaus to lower costs and increase the story output of reporters. News media rely on willing participants, such as police sources, to produce crime stories in an efficient and cost-effective

manner. News organizations have offices at police headquarters so reporters are near police sources. This convenient location exposes reporters to official knowledge of crime, selecting a variety of potentially newsworthy crimes from what is known to the police. Furthermore, reporters use police contacts to collect information to produce stories. Content studies have focused on the amount and type of crime presented in the news. These studies firmly establish crime as a popular news topic (Gans, 1979; Graber, 1980; Lotz, 1991). A recent study of Iranian news media contributes significantly to the police-news media literature. Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1989) observed news and source cultures to document the relationship between news personnel and criminal justice, political, and private sources. They found that police departments gave news media access to the police organization to control the images presented, providing documents, interviews, and physical space. They stated: "The police have come to appreciate that the news media are part of the policing apparatus of society, and can be controlled and put to good use in this respect. Ericson, Baranek and Chan's study is important because they acknowledge the news media's role in determining police behavior. They found that the ability of the police to control news content was circumscribed by media formats, media logic, and editing. Police sources transmit an image consistent with news media requirements to get prominently presented, but develop offensive and defensive strategies in order to maximize news content control. They discussed how the police use physical space, government regulations, formal meetings, and public relations personnel to influence what is presented about the police in the news media. For example, police keep some

crime incidents secret, provide some information on others but use their symbiotic relationship with reporters to discourage its disclosure, release partial information, or promote events as propaganda. Some content research has documented the individuals cited as sources within crime stories. Existing research compares the frequency that police are cited as news sources to the citation of other criminal justice officials, government sources, victims, and defendants. For example, Sherizen reported that police sources accounted for over 34 percent of the sources cited and another study reported the police as the primary source of story information when compared to other criminal justice sources (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991:192). Police departments invest their own resources to assist media organizations with the production of news, influencing the presentation of the beginning stages of the criminal justice process. Police departments categorize crimes in a way that is self-promoting and supportive of traditional responses to crime. They decide when story information should be released, limiting access to reports and diverting attention from specific events. In addition, departments assign public relation officers to cultivate relationships with reporters to guarantee consistent news coverage, training these spokespersons how to generate positive news images. The news media's ability to monitor the police and inform the public is limited by their relationship with them. Police officials play a prominent role in each stage of news production and actively submit organizational propaganda. Reporters are generally not critical of the police unwilling to sacrifice the relationship that allows them to produce crime stories. The news organization profits because space is filled with

minimum costs; reporters benefit because they get their stories prominently placed. Numerous police personnel are available to provide comments about an incident, resulting in the frequent citation of police sources in all types of crime stories. Police sources respond to media inquiries to reaffirm their status in the community as enforcers of the law. Individuals cited as sources in news stories are considered "experts," worthy of shaping public perceptions of crime (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989). These sources are given an accepted public forum to define what is important about crime, respond to limitations in their response, and market proposed solutions. Police gain power, authority, and legitimacy by manipulating the news production process in a way that results in positive news presentation.

The effects of news media on prevention of drug crime

All news media distort official knowledge of crime by overemphasizing violent crime and underemphasizing property crime (Chermak, 1994, 1995; Graber, 1980; Marsh, 1988; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Murder, robbery, and rape are more likely to be presented than burglary, shoplifting, and motor vehicle theft. The news presentation of victims and defendants has been less frequently examined, but not completely ignored (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980). The review has been undertaken as a first step toward gaining a better understanding of a range of contextual factors, including media, in influencing trajectories of youth smoking. In the federal system and in every state, sentences for adult offenders were substantially increased and in many instances made mandatory. Policies were adopted to make the conditions of incarceration more onerous for adult

offenders, and every state adopted provisions allowing more juvenile offenders to be prosecuted and punished as adults. The result is a system that is significantly more punitive than that of any other Western democracy, and an incarceration rate that is-by a large margin-the highest in the world. Throughout this period crime was a highly salient political issue, and the policies in question had widespread public support. Police crackdowns often take place in highly political contexts, usually in response to a crime problem seen as increasingly serious, and requiring something beyond "business as usual" policing. Given such a context, these efforts are often closely scrutinized by media, speedily proclaimed as successful by their sponsors, and critically questioned by political opponents. Extensive crackdowns often require considerable additional financing as well from already hardpressed city coffers, ratcheting up further the levels of concern and scrutiny, and the pressure for payoffs. The public depends on the media for its pictures of crime. Three quarters (76%) of the public say they form their opinions about crime from what they see or read in the news, more than three times the number who state that they get their primary information on crime from personal experience (22%). In a Los Angeles Times poll, 80% of respondents stated that the media's coverage of violent crime had increased their personal fear of being a victim. A 1998 report by Public Agenda found that daily TV news viewers were more likely to think that crime and drugs were Baltimore's number one problem than were those who watch the news less frequently (67% vs. 42%). These survey results are consistent with communications research finding that the news media largely determine what issues

we collectively think about, how we think about them, and what kinds of policy alternatives are considered viable.¹⁹ News portrayals of juvenile justice issues are significant for how they influence policy makers and the public regarding what should be done to ensure public safety. Issues are not considered by the public and policy makers unless they are visible, and they are not visible unless the news brings them to light. Most people have little or no personal experience with juvenile crime because adults commit most of the crime in the nation: about 89% of all crimes cleared by arrest are committed by adults. The public depends on the media even more for its pictures of crime done by or to minority youth, since most of the public has no direct personal experience with crime by minority youth. The definition of who may legitimately claim victim status is profoundly influenced by social divisions including class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and sexuality, and, as such, remains a point of contention and debate. Such debates are framed and inflected, to a significant extent, in the news media. This chapter, then, is concerned critically to explore how the status of victim, and different acts and processes of criminal victimization, are defined and represented in the news media. It is now widely acknowledged that, across news and entertainment formats, media focus overwhelmingly on the most serious examples of crime and victimization, foregrounding images of violent and frequently sexual interpersonal offending (Marsh, 1991; Reiner et al., 2000a). By contrast, lower-level property offences that make up the significant majority of recorded crime, and white-collar and corporate offences that place a major social and financial burden on society are given sparse attention, if not ignored altogether. However, the mass

media focus on violent crime is also highly selective. Ferrell points out that news media representations highlight 'the criminal victimization of strangers rather than the dangerous intimacies of domestic or family conflict. Stanko and Lee note that violence in the media is constructed 'as 'random', wanton and the intentional acts of evil folk'. News reporting of crime and, further, of the particular types of crime on which journalists disproportionately focus, is selective and unrepresentative. News reporting of crime victims is equally so. Critically exploring media representations of crime victims is important because, over the past few decades, victims have taken on an unprecedented significance in media and criminal justice discourses, in the development of crime policy, and in the popular imagination. Indeed, as Reiner and colleagues have noted, the foregrounding of crime victims in the media is one of the most significant qualitative changes in media representations of crime and control since the Second World War (Reiner et al., 2000a, b, 2003). Not all crime victims receive equal attention in the news media. Occasionally, intense media coverage may be devoted to victims who can be discredited on the basis of, for example, a criminal, promiscuous or otherwise questionable past. More often, however, media recourses are allocated to the representation of those victims who can be portrayed as 'ideal'. Christie the 'ideal victim' as 'a person or category of individuals who when hit by crime most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim'. This group includes those who are perceived as vulnerable, defenseless, innocent and worthy of sympathy and compassion. Elderly women and young children, it is suggested, are typical 'ideal victims', whereas young men, the homeless, those with drug problems, and others existing on

the margins of society may find it much more difficult to achieve legitimate victim status, still less secure a conviction in court (Carrabine et al., 2004). In this sense, there exists a hierarchy of victimization, both reflected and reinforced in media and official discourses. At one extreme, those who acquire the status of 'ideal victim' may attract massive levels of media attention, generate collective mourning on a near global scale, and drive significant change to social and criminal justice policy and practice (Greer, 2004; Valier, 2004). At the other extreme, those crime victims who never acquire legitimate victim status or, still worse, are perceived as 'undeserving victims' may receive little, if any, media attention, and pass virtually unnoticed in the wider social world. In the end, little was resolved, but the brief bout of mediatized claim and counter-claim usefully illustrated the complexity of the problem. Demographic characteristics such as class, race, gender, age, and sexuality can at times determine news media interest in a fairly straightforward manner. But they can also cut across each other and interact with other variables in nuanced and unpredictable ways that do much to invalidate blanket claims that 'the press' or, still worse, 'the media' are institutionally prejudiced. The influence of victim demographics needs to be considered within the wider context of the news production process, the other elements of the case, and the prevailing cultural and political environment at that time. In order to unravel this complexity a little further, it is helpful to explore the concept of newsworthiness.

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