

The Influence of Media on Public Perception of Crime

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ABSTRACT

“Cinema, radio, television, magazines, are a school of inattention: people look without seeing, listen without hearing.”

- Robert Bresson

The primary experience of crime is rare. The only information furnishing source for the civic society is media. The media has the power to reach to the masses and shape public opinion and therefore this great power demands great responsibility. As a powerful disseminator of information, it holds a considerable sway over how individuals perceive crime and safety in their communities. Furthermore, media delves into various mechanisms which influence public perception, the propagation of misinformation, amplification of fear and the reinforcement of stereotypes.

The majority of the public knowledge about the crime and justice is derived from the media. Their perception of victims, criminals, deviants and the law which was used in the process has a large influence of the media portrayal of the offence. Recently, a survey took place which has given results that mass media like newspapers, social media suffer from a strong bias towards violent sexual crimes. Moreover, the social media messages are not highly correlated with crime. It was further shown that social media was highly useful for detecting trends in crime itself, but what they do demonstrate is rather a reflection of the level of the fear of crime.

Keywords: Disseminator, Stereotypes, Misinformation, Amplification, Media,

INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, the rise of social media has added a new dimension to the influence of media on public perception of crime. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube allow for the rapid dissemination of news and information, as well as the amplification of diverse voices and perspectives. However, social media also presents challenges in terms of verifying information, combating misinformation and navigating echo chambers where like-minded individuals reinforce each other's beliefs.

Sensation is another hallmark of media coverage of crime, with stories of violence and intrigue often garnering the most attention. While sensationalized reporting may capture audience interest, it can also distort perceptions of crime rates and types, leading to an exaggerated sense of fear and insecurity among the public. Furthermore, the representation of certain demographic groups in media coverage of crime can reinforce stereotypes and biases, perpetuating stigmatization and discrimination. Marginalized communities in particular, may be disproportionately portrayed as perpetrators of crime, contributing to

negative stereotypes and systematic inequalities. Understanding the complex interplay between media and public perception of crime is crucial for policy makers, journalists, and citizens alike. By critically evaluating the media portrayals of crime and fostering media literacy skills, individuals can become more discerning consumers of information and contribute to a more nuanced public discourse on crime and justice issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Investigating the relationship between social media consumption and fear of crime- A partial analysis of mostly young adults by Jonathan Intravia:**

This paper talks about whether social media consumption is related to individual's level of fear, controlling for other major forms of media usage. For the past 50 years fear of crime has been recognized as a major issue facing society. Traditionally, it was found that one's environment or perceived surroundings may signal cues of danger and increase fear.

- **Relationship of media usage to attitude towards police by J Glascock:**

This paper talks that much of society learns about crime, policy and the criminal justice system not through personal experience but through media. It examined the contribution of exposure to entertainment and news media to attitudes towards police which has been negative.

- **The media, crime prevention and urban safety- A brief discussion on media influence and areas of further exploration by Viven Carli:**

This paper talks about the impact of media on crime prevention by providing an integrative approach for exploring the multiple roles of media. Media holds an important position for communication, and information sharing and dissemination in society: people rely on images of trends and prevalence made available by the experts and official sources.

- **The news media's influence on criminal justice policy by Sara Sun Beale:**

This paper talks about that commercial pressures are determining news media's contemporary treatment of crime and violence and that the resulting coverage has played a major role in reshaping public opinion.

- **If Torture is wrong, what about 24? By Erin M. Kearns, Joseph K. Young:**

This paper talks about how entertainment media has focused on depictions of counterterrorism practices specifically torture affect public opinion and policy.

RESEARCH GAP

The media is the eyes, ears and nose of the society. It has the same effect on the people as our sense organs do to our body. Therefore, the influence of media on the public perception of crime holds an impactful position and henceforth, there are chances of it being misused and misinterpreted at large scale. It is significant to be vigilant and double check the source before actually accepting the news regarding the crime.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To spread awareness about the misuse of media on how it has influenced the public's perception on crime.
- To acknowledge the power of media and its impact on public regarding crime.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Doctrinal Research:

It refers to a systematic procedure of observing and describing what a subject does without influencing them. It includes surveys, interviews, case studies and observations. It aims at getting answers to what, when, where and how of and achieve an in depth information about the title. It is used best for accumulating unbiased data that reveals behaviors or recurring phenomenon.

Diagnostic Research:

It determines the root cause of the problem and finds the most effective solution. It is used in targeting the area of improvements and potential opportunities for growth. It is used for underlying the causes of an issue and how to address it.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

There are laws to protect the freedom of the press's speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press.

- Mark Twain

The influence of media on public perception of crime is profound and far reaching, shaping how individuals perceive the prevalence, nature, and the severity of the criminal activity in their communities and beyond. The pervasive nature of media coverage, means that its portrayal of crime can have far reaching implications on public attitudes, policy making, and societal dynamics. Media outlets, including traditional news sources, social media platforms, and entertainment media, play a significant role in shaping these perceptions through various mechanisms:

- ✓ Agenda setting
- ✓ Framing
- ✓ Sensationalism
- ✓ Representation
- ✓ Fear of crime
- ✓ Confirmation bias

AGENDA SETTING

The agenda setting theory posits that media outlets have the ability to influence which issues and topics the public perceives as important by deciding what to cover and how prominently to feature them. When it comes to crime, the agenda setting function of the media can significantly shape the public perception in several ways-

• **Highlighting certain crimes:**

Media outlets often prioritize certain crimes for coverage based on factors such as the severity, novelty, or proximity of the incident. By giving extensive coverage to specific crimes, the media can lead the public to perceive them as more prevalent or important than they might actually be.

For example – a series of high profile violent crimes in a particular neighborhood might create the impression that the area is particularly unsafe, even if the crime rates are relatively low overall.

• **Setting the narrative:**

The way in which the media frames the crime stories can influence how public interprets them. By emphasizing certain aspects of a crime- such as the identity of the perpetrator, the motives behind the crime, or the impact of the victim- the media can shape the narrative surrounding the incident.

For example- a focus on the criminal background of the offender might lead the public to perceive the crime as a indicative of broader social issues related to crime and punishment.

- **Shaping policy priorities:**

Extensive coverage of a spate of burglaries in a community might lead to increased calls for law enforcement resources or changes to local crime prevention strategies. Similarly, media attention to high profile criminal trials or legislative debates can shape public opinion on specific policy proposals related to crime and justice.

FRAMING

Framing in the media refers to the way in which news stories are presented, emphasized certain aspects while downplaying or omitting the others. When it comes to crime, framing can significantly influence public perception-

- **Emphasizing certain aspects:**

Media framing can draw attention to specific aspects of a crime story, such as the identity of the perpetrator, the motives behind the crime, or the impact on the victim.

For example: a story that focuses on the personal background or the upbringing of the criminal may lead the public to perceive the crime as a result of individual pathology or social dysfunction.

- **Stereotyping the bias:**

Media framing can perpetuate stereotypes and biasness about a certain group of people based on race, caste, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status.

- **Implications for policy and action:**

The way in which crime is framed in the media can influence public attitude towards crime prevention and criminal justice policy.

For example: framing crime as a problem of individual morality or personal responsibility may lead to call for tougher law enforcement measures or harsher sentencing policies.

SENSATIONALISM

Indeed, sensationalism in media can significantly influence public perception of crime. Sensationalism refers to the practice of presenting information, especially new stories, in a manner intended to provoke interest or excitement, often at the expense of accuracy or fairness. When applied to crime reporting, sensationalism can have several notable effects on public perception-

- **Exaggerated perception of crime rates:**

Sensationalized crime stories tend to receive more attention from the media, creating the impression that crime rates are higher than they actually are. This can lead the public to believe that they are at the greater risk of becoming victims of crime, even in relatively safe communities.

- **Distorted understanding of crime trends:**

Sensationalized reporting often focuses on isolated, extreme, or unusual crimes, rather than providing context about broader crime trends or patterns. As a result, the public may develop a distorted understanding of the types of crimes that are most common or prevalent in their communities.

- **Emotional response and polarization:**

Sensationalized crime reporting tends to evoke strong emotional responses from audience, which can lead to polarization and sensationalism of public discourse. This can make it difficult to have rational, evidence-based discussions about crime prevention, criminal justice policy, and community safety.

- **Distrust of institutions:**

Sensationalized reporting can erode trust in institutions such as law enforcement, the judiciary, and the media itself. When the media outlets prioritize sensationalism over accuracy or fairness, it can undermine public confidence in the reliability and integrity of news sources.

REPRESENTATION

The representation of crime in the media has a profound influence on public perception, shaping attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to crime and justice. Recognizing the role of media representations in shaping public opinion is essential for promoting media literacy, challenging stereotypes, and fostering more nuanced understandings of crime and its complexities.

- **Selective portrayal:**

Media outlets may selectively report on crimes involving certain demographics or types of offences, leading to an inaccurate portrayal of crime trends.

For example- if the media, disproportionately covers crimes committed by immigrants, it may create the perception that immigration is closely associated with criminality, despite evidence to the contrary.

- **Exaggeration of violence and danger:**

Media coverage of violent or sensational crimes can exaggerate the prevalence of such incidents and create a perception of heightened danger in society. This can contribute to fear and anxiety among the public, even if crime rates are declining overall.

- **Under representation of context and causes:**

Media representations of crime often focus on the immediate details of the incident without providing broader context or exploring underlying causes. As a result, the public may lack understanding the socio economic, political, or systematic factors that contribute to crime, leading to simplistic or misguided perceptions of the issue.

- **Impact on policy and public disclosure:**

Media representations of crime can influence public attitudes towards crime prevention strategies, criminal justice policies, and social interventions. Biased sensationalized reporting may lead to punitive responses that prioritize punishment over prevention or rehabilitation, perpetuating cycles of crimes and incarceration.

FEAR OF CRIME

Fear of crime in media refers to the phenomenon where media coverage, particularly of sensational or violent crimes, contributes to heightened levels of fear and anxiety among the public. This fear can influence public perception of crime several ways-

- **Perception of crime rates:**

Media coverage tends to prioritize stories of violent or sensational crimes, which can create the impression that such crimes are more prevalent than they actually are. As a result, individuals may perceive crime rates to be higher than they truly are, leading to heightened levels of fear and concern about personal safety.

- **Vicarious trauma:**

Continuous exposure to graphic or alarming crime stories in the media can lead to vicarious trauma, here individuals experience emotional distress and anxiety as a result of witnessing or hearing about traumatic events. This can further contribute to fear of crime and a sense of vulnerability among the public.

- **Impact on behavior:**

Fear of crime can influence individual behavior and lifestyle choices, such as avoiding certain neighborhoods or public spaces perceived to be unsafe, investing in home security measures, or altering daily routines to minimize the perceived risk. These behavioral changes can have social and economic consequences, shaping community dynamics and resource allocation.

- **Social amplification:**

Media coverage of crime can contribute to the social amplification of risk, where heightened levels of fear and anxiety are spread through social networks and collective discourse. Fearful individuals may seek reassurance and validation from others, leading to the reinforcement and amplification of shared anxieties about crime and safety.

CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias in media refers to the tendency of individuals to seek out and interpret information in a way that confirms their existing beliefs or biases. When it comes to crime reporting, confirmation bias can significantly influence public perception in the following ways-

- **Selective exposure:**

Individuals are more likely to consume media content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes about crime.

For example: someone who believes that certain demographic groups are more prone to criminal behavior may seek out news stories that confirm this belief, while ignoring or dismissing information that contradicts it.

- **Interpretation of information:**

Even when presented with the same set of facts, individuals may interpret crime-related information in a way that confirms their existing biasness.

For example: Two people reading news article about a crime may come away with vastly different interpretations based on their preconceived notions about the perpetrator's race, socio economic status, or motives.

- **Polarization of public opinion:**

Confirmation bias can contribute to the polarization of public opinion on crime related issues, as individuals become more entrenched in their own beliefs and less willing to consider alternative viewpoints. This can hinder constructive dialogue and compromise on matters related to crime prevention, criminal justice reform, and community safety.

- **Resistance to contradictory information:**

Individuals affected by confirmation bias may be resisted to information that challenges their existing beliefs about crime, even when presented with compelling evidence to the contrary. This can lead to the perpetuation of misinformation and misconceptions, further shaping public perception in ways that may not align with reality.

VARIOUS MEDIA ORGANISATIONS THAT PLAY A VITAL ROLE IN DISSEMINATING THE KNOWLEDGE TO THE PUBLIC

- Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India

- Press Council of India: It directs the media that I should give unreasonable publicity parallel to the victim, accused, witnessed and also not to disclose any information that is confidential which may hamper or prejudice the process of investigation.
- First Press Commission (1952-1954)
- Second Press Commission (1970-1982)
- Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI)
- Broadcasting Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI)
- Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF)
- Indian Newspaper Society (INS)
- Indian Federation of Working Journalists (IFJW)
- Indian Journalists Union (IJU)
- The news Broadcasters Association (NBA)
- Advertising Agencies Association of India (AAAI)
- Indian Women's press Corps
- Press Information Bureau
- Children Film Society of India
- National Film Development Corporation.

SIGNIFICANT CASE LAWS IN WHICH MEDIA HAS INFLUENCED PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION OF CRIME

- ***Siddharth Vashish @ Manu Sharma v. State NCT Delhi (Jessica Lal Murder Case)***

In 1999, Jessica Lal working in a restaurant owned by socialite Boma Ramani in Mehrauli, South Delhi's was shot dead by Manu Sharma, son of Congress former Union Minister Venod Sharma after Jessica refused to serve liquor to him and his friends. This was acquitted by the media trail. This case became one of the top cases where the public pressure and media compelled the justice system to take a second look at this case.

- ***Mukesh v. NCT of Delhi (Nirbhaya Rape Case)***

The brutal gang rape on the night of 16 December 2012 of a 23 year old physiotherapy intern who besides being raped was tortured and beaten in a private bus in which she was travelling with her male friend. Including the driver, six men on the bus who raped her and her friend. She was admitted to the hospital and after 11 days she was shifted for an emergency hospital in Singapore but died after two days. This incident inflamed extensive national and international coverage. The incident was criticized widely, both in India as well as abroad. Thereafter, there were multiple protests in different parts of the country against the central and state Government for failing to provide proper security for women. Due to this case there were multiple amendments in the laws including the Juvenile Justice Act, Indian Penal Code, where for the heinous crime the age for punishment had been reduced to from eighteen to sixteen.

- ***Vikas Yadav. State of U.P (Nitish Katara murder case)***

This was a case of honour killing, Vikas Yadav, son of famous politician DP Yadav had brutally murdered Nitish Katara. Nitish had an affair with Bharti Yadav who was the sister of Vikas Yadav, Vikas never approved of their love. At the mutual friend's wedding where both Vikas and Nitish were present, Vikas took the opportunity and killed Nitish by taking him for a ride. Vikas was sentenced to

life imprisonment. Sometimes in media trial accused was not given proper conviction which he is entitled to.

- ***Surrendra Koli v. Sate of UP (Nithari Kand)***

In 2007, dead bodies of children and adults were found in the house of Mohinder Singh Pandher situated in Nithari village of Noida. The Allahabad High Court commuted Surender Koli's death sentence to life imprisonment. After that, the CBI Court had pronounced both Surendra Koli and Mohinder Singh Pandher guilty in the attempt to rape and murder of Pinki Sarkar who was 20 year old. This was eighth murder by them out sixteen murder cases in which judgment has been delivered. The case got highlighted by the media and the accused was served the punishment.

- ***M Siddhiq(D) Thr Les v. Mahant Suresh Das and Ors (Ayodhya Dispute)***

It is one of the most discussed and famous cases in India. The case has strong religious, historical and political roots. The dispute revolves around a piece of land in the birthplace of Lord Ram. The critical issues in this case were between the Hindu and Muslim communities regarding this piece of land that carries some religious beliefs between the community Hindu and Muslims. This case has been tried long by the media and showing little disputes over the media and irrelevant things related to the case which just worked as feeling the disputes between the two communities all over India.

- ***Dr. (Smt.) Nupur Talwar v. State of UP and Ors.(Arushi Hemraj Murder Case)***

This case gained a lot of media attention and was in the news for a very long time. Arushi was murdered along with her household worker Hemraj in May, 2008. Initially, a lot of names occurred on the suspect list. The sensational media coverage was criticized by many as a trail by the media, which involved salacious allegations on Arushi's character as her affair with Hemraj, though no provident evidence has been found for such. The parents were convicted for the murder of their daughter and sentenced to life imprisonment in November 2013. But it was argued by many critics that the case was based on very evidence, the evidence was not strong enough to fully blame parents for the murder, there were other suspects too but because of media trail interference, it raised questions in minds of people. In Allahabad High Court, the decision was challenged by the Talwar's, which later in 2017 acquitted them as giving them benefit of doubt and calling the evidence as unsatisfactory.

- ***K M Nanavati v. State of Maharashtra***

This was landmark case in the history of the Indian Judiciary. The case received unprecedented media coverage and inspired several books and films. It was also the last case to be heard a jury trial in India, since the Government abolished the jury system as a result of the case.

CONCLUSION

Media was once a boon that enlightened people and made them aware of what is going in the world. It assumed the role of public educators and makes education possible at a large scale by imparting formal and non-formal education particularly in the developing world, where all forms of modern communication like television and other kinds are not available to all the sections of the society. The objective of the press is to boost the public interest by publishing opinions and facts without which the responsible judgment cannot be made by a democratic electorate. Newspapers which are purveyors of news and views of the people have a bearing on public administration and frequently carry material which would not be pleasing to Governments and other authorities.

It has now transformed itself into a Janta Adalats or public court and started intervening in the proceedings of the court. The vital gap between the convict and accused is completely overlooked by the

media by keeping at stake the cardinal principles of ‘presumption of innocence until proven guilty’ and ‘guilt beyond reasonable doubt’. Now what is being observed is a separate investigation done by the media itself which is called a media trial.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a broad scope for future research as still there are various cases in which media has influenced the public’s perception on crime that they have lost their cognizance to analyze and contemplate. The Whatsapp University and other social media platforms have created a blockage in the mind of people that they get easily carried away with the information broadcasted there. There is a strong need to educate people and make them realize what is the real news and what is fake and that they should let judiciary do their task.

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