

editorial

crime and the media

Editors for this issue Kevin Stenson and Hazel Croall set the theme in context.

This issue presents a rich crop of articles examining the link between the mass media, crime, and criminal justice. In accordance with a new editorial principle, we will not attempt a comprehensive summary of them here. In our diverse, complex and unequal social world, crime has become increasingly politicised and the news and entertainment media have become increasingly focused on crime, providing ever more intimate and disturbing details about crime to people who often have limited if any direct experience of such matters. The media are not simply neutral conduits of information about crime; indeed, the institutional arrangements that organise the media and the rhetorical forms through which crime is represented can play a vital role in shaping and reflecting our deepest personal and cultural fears about crime and insecurity.

The experience of crime vicariously and indirectly through media reports and dramatisations can create a dark form of solidarity among 'respectable' folk in the face of those seen as constituting a criminal threat. In this issue, Robert Reiner traces the historical shift in media depictions of crime away from those evoking some sympathy for offenders and endorsing the value of rehabilitation towards, from the 1970's, an increasing emphasis on the suffering of victims and on criminals as dangerous predators deserving of

harsh retribution. Perhaps with the exception of the more sober world of the broadsheets and TV programmes like *Newsnight*, the media, in Reiner's terms "orchestrate a kind of virtual vigilantism, in which a proxy audience is constructed to celebrate vengeance against the perpetrators of unmitigated evil".

American legal scholar Jonathan Simon (2001) has argued that the role of government in this media-driven climate is increasingly to act as the 'buddy state', helping victims to legitimate, express and

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channel the pleasures of sweet and cruel revenge. The image of the role of the media in all of this looks shabby. It is seen as providing a false, selective picture of the crime problem, exaggerating public, violent and sexual crimes at the expense, for example, of domestic terrors and white collar and corporate crime and the failings of the criminal justice agencies. Many of the articles in this edition illustrate these misrepresentations, some providing evidence from research. Many also raise questions about the effect of

these misrepresentations on public perceptions of crime and penal policy. Proof of the public ignorance generated by biased reporting was vividly represented in the 1998 British Crime Survey which revealed that respondents greatly underestimated the severity of sentencing, reproducing the belief that the law is still too soft with convicted offenders.

The media are also accused of pressing malign emotional buttons with the public and hence generating dangerous moral panics, like the hounding of paedophiles in 1999 and the demonization of 'bogus' asylum seekers. In similar vein the current changes to mental health legislation strengthening provisions for preventive detention were welcomed by the *Sunday People* (21/01/2001) with the headline: '200 VICIOUS PSYCHOS WE LET GO FREE'. For liberals this is the spectre of mob rule, where

channel the red meat of revenge to the ill-informed amounts to a distorted form of democracy, which threatens the delicate, rational and liberal values that make democracy possible in the first place.

Criminologists have described this as creating a 'populist punitiveness', that despite overall reductions in crime has pressured magistrates and judges to push our incarcerated population to over 66,000 (and rising) in conditions that the inspectorate has documented to be often a disgrace to a liberal democracy. In this view, politicians are involved in a spin-obsessed Faustian pact with bigotry and ignorance, pleasing tabloid editors and keeping up the opinion poll ratings with a commitment to the unsustainable war against drugs. Crowd pleasing, ill-considered legislative reactions to events win out over the 'evidence-based', rational approach to

policy-making promised by the crime reduction initiative in 1998 and by New Labour's recently published 10 year crime plan (*Criminal Justice: the way ahead*). Hence, the beleaguered liberal vision presents Home Office staff, criminal justice professionals and criminologists as representing the corner of Reason, valiantly represented by ACPO's warning to the media in January to tone down its demonisation of asylum seekers and an attendant fostering of racism. By contrast, the bulk of the media and the victim lobbies are seen as occupying the corner of Irrationality, with politicians opportunistically dancing between the combatants.

However, as some of our contributors suggest, we should be wary of accepting this bleakly polarised picture. The work of distinguished investigative reporter David Rose reminds us that the media can still perform a significant critical role, not only in documenting problems of crime often neglected by criminologists reluctant to become involved in difficult ethnographies, but also, as he argues here, in providing critical commentary on the work of criminal justice agencies whose practice is often widely at variance with a surface commitment to rational and liberal principles and open government. In addition, and on a more optimistic note, Rob Allen describes here a path breaking initiative by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to raise the level of public and political debate about crime and punishment. If this were to make headway, the media at every level would have to be viewed not simply as the enemy, but as targets for and instruments of change.

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Reference:

Simon, J. (2001) 'Entitlement To Cruelty; neo-liberalism and the punitive mentality in the United States', in Stenson, K. and Sullivan, R. R. *Crime, Risk and Justice, the politics of crime control in liberal democracies*. Cullompton: Willan

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