

The Rise of Virtual Vigilantism: crime reporting since World War II

Robert Reiner reviews a major research project illustrating a changing discourse of crime stories in which offenders are demonised and the menace of crime stressed.

During the last thirty years law and order has moved sharply to the forefront of the political agenda, and it is clear that it will be a central issue in the forthcoming General Election. There can be no doubt that the mass media have played a large part in this development, although there has been extensive debate and research for many decades on the vexed question of the effects of the media on crime and concern about crime. News stories about crime are the most direct channel by which the mass media contribute to the politics of law and order, although in the longer term crime fiction and entertainment are arguably of even greater significance. Many studies have demonstrated the prominence of crime stories in all news media, the exact proportions varying according to how widely crime is defined, and between different media and market sectors. This is scarcely surprising, for as a major study of news production in Toronto remarked "deviance is the defining characteristic of what journalists regard as newsworthy" (Ericson, Baranek and Chan).

Features of crime news

A plethora of studies have demonstrated that crime news follows particular patterns that are systematically different from the picture of crime conveyed by either official statistics or criminological research (Reiner 1997 offers a survey of the literature on this). The following features of crime news have been identified by most of the very large number of content analyses that have been conducted:

- News stories are overwhelmingly about serious violent crimes against individuals, primarily murder.
- Offenders and victims portrayed by news stories are generally higher status and older than those processed by criminal justice agencies.
- The risks of crime are presented as more serious quantitatively and qualitatively than the probabilities of victimisation suggested by official statistics or victim surveys.
- The effectiveness and the integrity of the police, and the criminal justice system more generally, are presented in an overwhelmingly favourable light. Police deviance or failure tend to be presented within narrative frameworks that do not fundamentally impugn police legitimacy, for example by stressing that corrupt police officers are exceptional 'bad apples'.
- Crime news focuses primarily on reports of specific cases, and there is little about wider trends, causes, or policy issues.

Whilst these features characterise crime news in general, there are clear variations between different media and markets (Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1987). There are systematic differences between print and broadcast media, for example, and between 'quality' and 'tabloid' newspapers. The primary purpose of this article is to ascertain whether crime news has also varied systematically over time. It is based on a wider study of changing media representations of crime since the Second World War (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2000a and b). It was supported by a grant from the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain (L/210/25/2029), for which we express our thanks. The study included analysis of two newspaper samples. A random 10 per cent sample of 'home' news stories from *The Times* and *The Mirror* was analysed to ascertain the proportion of all stories devoted to crime or criminal justice. A more detailed qualitative analysis was conducted for a smaller random sample of stories. Ten days were selected randomly from these papers for every second year from 1945-91. In those issues all front-page stories and the most prominent stories concerning crime on the home news pages were analysed, as were all crime-related editorials, 'op-ed' features, and letters to the editor. The two newspapers selected, *The Times* and *The Mirror*, clearly offer a sharp contrast in terms of market and political inclination - 'high-brow' versus popular, Conservative versus Labour respectively.

Changing patterns

Our sample, over the half-century, confirms that many of the broad features of news reporting of crime indicated by earlier research have remained largely stable. There are, however, some major developments, amounting to fundamental shifts in the discourse about crime and criminal justice, with profound implications for public policy debate. The general characteristics of news representations of crime identified above are repeated in our sample as a whole. Thus the proportion of news stories that are about crime and criminal justice is substantial for most of our period, fluctuating only slightly around 20 per cent from the late 1960s to the 1990s. However, this represents a clear increase from the 1940s to the mid-1960s, when the proportion had usually been about 10 per cent. The trend is similar overall for both newspapers. Homicide is by far the most common type of crime featuring in news stories in both papers throughout the period, accounting for about one-third of all crime stories. Other violent crimes are the next most common, in both papers, for most of the years studied. There are significant shifts in the proportion of stories concerning other types of

offences, however. In particular there is a marked decline in the proportion of stories featuring 'volume' property crimes such as burglary in which no violence occurred - the category that constitutes the overwhelming majority of recorded offences. In the 1940s and 50s a substantial proportion of crime stories were about routine property offences: 21 per cent in *The Times* and 16 per cent in *The Mirror*. After 1965 this declined to 5 per cent and 8 per cent respectively. There are also some significant differences in the pattern of crimes reported in the two papers, with fraud offences being much more frequent in *The Times* than *The Mirror* (about 13 per cent of all crime stories compared to 4 per cent). Identified offenders and victims tend to be higher status in both papers than the official statistical picture, in which crime is broadly an under-class phenomenon. The majority of offenders or victims portrayed in news stories are middle-class, with relatively few in manual working-class occupations or designated as unemployed. Offenders are disproportionately middle-aged or older people. However, the most frequent age group of victims is children under 18 (and often much younger) in both papers, in all periods, but with a clearly rising trend. Offenders are overwhelmingly male, but female victims are more frequently reported in stories, although still a minority. The police are portrayed overwhelmingly as successful and honest, although to a declining extent. Most stories report crimes that are cleared up. But the clear-up rate for stories in *The Times* fell from 80 per cent in 1945-64 to 64 per cent in 1981-91 (and from 75 to 70 per cent in *The Mirror*). Stories about police

later (27 February 1945) a case was reported in *The Mirror* that featured the quintessentially sympathetic victim, a two-year old girl, illustrated by a sweet picture of her. The injuries inflicted on her are detailed in a deadpan, forensic way: black eyes, bruises, "red weal marks". This itself is likely to arouse sympathy of course. But the only explicit statements in the story calculated to gain sympathy are for the perpetrator, her mother's lover. It is claimed that "he had been torpedooed three times and his nerves were very bad" so he couldn't stand the baby's crying. These primarily offender-centred stories can be contrasted with a story from *The Times* on November 25th 1989. The headlines declare "Martial arts fanatic gets life for killing daughter aged five: Girl died from a combination of pain, shock and exhaustion after vengeful beating". The pictures portray a smiling child, a sullen and sinister looking man, and a weeping woman. All are clearly black. The story graphically details the fear and suffering of the girl, and undermines any excuse of 'bad temper' offered on behalf of the accused. He is depicted as a strong, violent man, with a previous criminal record. The only dilution of his responsibility for the offence is a discussion of the failure of social services to prevent the tragic murder. The story is clearly victim-centred, and demonises the offender (and to a lesser extent social services). These stories illustrate vividly the changes implied by the statistical data. Crime stories fifty years ago took for granted that crime was wrong independently of whether suffering was inflicted on sympathetic victims. The burden of the story was to make the perpetrator comprehensible,

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deviance increased considerably (approximately tripling) in both papers over the period. Most stories in both papers were about individual cases rather than overall trends or criminal justice policy. But this varied a little between the papers and over time. *The Times* featured more stories about trends and policy, and the latter in particular increased, from 17 per cent of all crime stories in 1945-64, to 26 per cent in 1981-91 (reflecting the politicisation of law and order).

The growing menace

The most marked trend in the reporting of crime over the half-century studied was the increasingly accentuated portrayal of crime as an all-pervasive menace, threatening ordinary people who constituted the point of identification for a rising number of stories, and in particular harming exceptionally vulnerable individuals. One quantitative index of this is the growth of stories featuring child victims. The style of reporting shifts markedly, from a degree-zero description largely in legal terms only, to vivid accounts of the fear and suffering of the victims with whom the reader is invited to identify. A trio of stories can illustrate the contrast. On January 19th 1945 *The Daily Mirror* reported the trial of a "strip-tease dancer" and an American paratrooper for the murder of a hire-car driver. The story is spread over two pages with banner headlines and many pictures (rare in those days of paper shortage), and was a sensational case of the day, glorying in one of the detective-story titles often given to such cases: the "cleft-chin murder". What is striking from the coverage are a number of absences: no account of the details of the murder itself, of the injuries suffered by the victim, or any fear he might have experienced. Apart from his chin lending its name to the case there is no portrayal of the victim at all or anything that might arouse a passion for punishment. A month

often thereby invoking a degree of compassion on their behalf. This fitted well with the rehabilitative conception of the purpose of punishment that was explicitly argued for in many stories. During the 1950s and 1960s the focus gradually shifted to an increasingly sensationalistic dwelling on the details of crime (especially violent offences). After the mid-1970s crime was increasingly presented as a widespread menace threatening everyone, and stories became increasingly victim-centred. Offenders became demonised as dangerous predators whose vicious actions called for harsh but justified retribution on behalf of the vulnerable innocents they savaged. Crime news stories increasingly orchestrate a kind of virtual vigilantism, in which a proxy audience is constructed to celebrate vengeance against the perpetrators of unmitigated evil.

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