

Just Noise? Newspaper Crime Reporting and the Fear of Crime

Recent research by **Martin Roberts** and colleagues took a new approach to analysing the media and fear of crime.

The power of the media to cultivate fear has been a recurrent topic in criminological research. So prominent has this theme been that assumed associations between media reporting and fear of crime have become firmly entrenched in academic and popular thinking. In the USA, the evidence of the influential Figgie Report suggested "that crime and news of crime have penetrated the inner recesses of our minds and made us fearful, more fearful than any previous generation." (Research & Forecasts, 1983).

Like the Figgie Report, much of the research on which these assumptions are based relies upon data collected through questionnaire surveys. Studies of television viewing and fear of crime have produced contradictory results that sometimes suggest the existence of a relationship and sometimes do not (Ditton and Farrall, 2000), while surveys concentrating on newspaper readership and fear of crime have found more convincing evidence of a statistically significant relationship (Williams and Dickinson, 1993).

Crime news diaries

There is, however, one major drawback to using questionnaire surveys in the search for explanations for fear of crime. Fear is often an ephemeral emotion, and not something that people are likely to recall with any clarity. Yet questionnaire surveys ask respondents to think back perhaps weeks or months, and assess how fearful they were and what might have caused that emotion. In these circumstances it is too easy for respondents to reply with well-rehearsed answers - perhaps themselves learned from the media - that reproduce expected patterns.

Fear of crime is part of the mundane, day-to-day experience of life - questionnaire surveys are not good at capturing this ordinariness. In a recent project in South-West England an alternative, qualitative approach was used. Volunteers were recruited to keep daily diaries of their experiences and anxieties, and this has proved to be an effective means of accessing the ways in which fear of crime is intricately interwoven into everyday life. Amongst other things, diarists were asked to think about and record their reactions to media coverage of crime, and to comment on the impact they felt the media had on their anxieties. Alongside the diary keeping, a daily record was maintained of crime related newspaper stories in both local and national

newspapers for comparison against diaries.

According to an earlier survey in the area, the clear majority of respondents felt that fear of crime and media reporting were key factors in shaping their safety routines and actions. But our analysis of the in-depth information in the diaries produced a very different picture.

Content analysis

Content analysis of the diaries produced a longitudinal picture of the levels of anxiety and patterns of activity over nine weeks. Comparing this with the record of daily crime reporting in the newspapers revealed no identifiable effects - there was no evidence that short-term variations in the amount of crime in the news affected anxiety. Qualitative analysis of the diary texts helped explain why.

Local newspaper reporting was largely perceived as a background 'noise' that makes little or no impact on the readers, and diarists were generally dismissive of the crime coverage:

"Other crimes in the [local paper] I have forgotten about very quickly, if I read them at all". Despite the local focus of the reporting, diarists rarely felt that the stories came 'close to home' - most coverage was seen as being either spatially or culturally distant and so rather abstract. For instance, one diarist felt that few stories were directly relevant to him, *"[The] usual reports in the local paper of events elsewhere during the past week. Makes one think we are lucky to live where we do and not come in contact with some other people."*

When the local news coverage did make an impact on diarists they tended to react with either surprise - for instance, referring to radio news,

"Heard on the local news that a pub had had a safe stolen, in the 'car chase' after the robbers' car crashed into a barrier in the shopping area. The robbers got away. Not the sort of thing you expect [in this area]" - or with disgust, *"Read in [local paper] about 14 year old being approached at 6.30 in [the town] on a bike and doing her paper round...Felt sickened that a 14 year old was not safe at 6.30 in the morning."* But none of these types of reactions were ever associated with increased levels of anxiety.

Information about very localised events, often acquired through word of mouth rather than the media, was much more significant in influencing diarists' anxiety. The direct intrusion into the lives of people



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they knew made the incidents seem much more real,

“A break in [just round the corner]. A reminder to be vigilant”, and, “Village break-ins made me extra cautious about making everything secure.”

By contrast, crime reported in the national media was too distant and too abstract to have any effect at all on fear of crime. On the contrary, the overemphasis on violent crime in the national press tended to reinforce diarists’ perceptions that their own localities and communities were generally safe - a finding that echoes earlier research (Heath and Petraitis, 1987). Individual responses ranged from sadness to anger and frustration - for instance, *“... the news that a man chasing a burglar is stabbed to death, what animals some people are”*, but no diarist ever expressed any sense of anxiety arising from nationally reported news stories.

So this research appears to demonstrate that media sources are less influential in generating anxieties than some previous studies have suggested. Interestingly, when on just one occasion a diarist did attribute a sense of anxiety to media coverage, this was done in a generalised way and not tied to any particular source: *“I had two late night incidents involving men approaching when I did begin to feel scared; not because of anything they did but because of [an] automatic defensive/suspicious reaction created by media/parents...”*. This diarist was perhaps invoking the taken-for-granted assumption of media influence to explain her sense of anxiety. Like so much of the debate about the media and fear of crime she was falling back on an explanation that is easily proffered but not substantiated on closer examination.



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