

Inside Information: prisons and the media

Most people get their information about the police, prisons and courts through the media rather than through direct experience. Joe Levenson of the Prison Reform Trust surveys the distortions but also the benefits of the media focus on criminal justice.

Each day, the police deal with over 25,000 '999' calls, make over 5,000 arrests and carry out 2,200 stop and searches. 4,400 jurors are required to turn up for jury service, over 1,000 witnesses attend court to give evidence and 5,600 defendants are sentenced, of whom 375 enter prison (Home Office, 2001). However, most people only have limited direct experience of the criminal justice system. Instead, perceptions of crime and punishment are derived largely from media portrayals. Crime stories are a major part of media output, whether as news or entertainment. Findings from the 2000 British Crime Survey reveal that the most commonly cited source of information about the criminal justice system is the television or radio news (by nearly three-quarters of people). About half of the people surveyed said that they get information from television documentaries, local and tabloid newspapers. Around a third mention broadsheet papers. Moreover, just six per cent of people think that their main information source about criminal justice is inaccurate (Home Office, 2001). Therefore, what the media says about criminal justice and prisons has a major impact on public knowledge and, in turn, public opinion.

Symbolism of the prison

Crime is a natural subject for the media to cover. As Mike Hough has argued, "News values favour the extraordinary" (Hough, 1996). Because serious crime and severe or lenient punishments are the most extraordinary occurrences, they receive the most media coverage. This means that the media presents a highly distorted picture of the nature and prevalence of crime and punishment in society. Much media coverage about punishment concerns prisons. As Richard Sparks has observed, "in children's - as much as in adult - talk about punishment, the prison remains a focal image. It is the institution that springs most readily to mind when punishment is discussed. Prisons are oddly familiar institutions" (Sparks, 2001). Despite this familiarity, few people are aware of even the basic facts about imprisonment, such as the number of prisoners or the number of prisons, let alone the

realities and routines of prison life. Rather, the familiarity is based on the symbolism of the prison and is fed by media images and portrayals of the prison world in television and film, from *Porridge* to *Prisoner Cell Block H*, *Escape from Alcatraz* to *Shawshank Redemption*. Even the current Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, has said that a BBC documentary series on Strangeways Prison in Manchester "played a big role in my deciding to apply to join the Prison Service" (Prison Reform Trust, 2001).

Enhancing accountability

As Director General, Martin Narey has been aware of the power of the media. He has used the media to provide more visible leadership of the Prison Service, as recommended in the Woolf Report. Speaking at a Conference to mark the tenth anniversary of the Strangeways Riot - ironically, an occurrence that much of the media handled very insensitively and for which sections were criticised by the Press Council - he explained: "I spend a lot of time being grilled in the media. I have had the John Humphries treatment on the *Today Programme*..... And I also try to represent the Service whenever I can with the print media" (Prison Reform Trust, 2001). The media may be used to convey key messages. For example, in the Prison Service's Annual Report 1999-2000, Narey states that "We need to use the media to make more visible our intolerance of racism and send out a clear message not only about the type of people we want but also those we do not want."

This implies that a message through the media is more powerful than anything the Prison Service alone can achieve, although ironically prisoners may not see or hear these messages, as media access for prisoners remains a privilege, not a right.

The media can also be used to enhance the accountability of the Prison Service and the Home Secretary. The cross-examination that Michael Howard, as Home Secretary, received on *Newsnight* from Jeremy Paxman in 1995 in the wake of the dismissal of Derek Lewis as Director General of the Prison Service was far more powerful than anything that Parliament could manage. And media coverage

of reports by the Chief Inspector of Prisons can do much to raise public awareness and, in turn, political concern, about the need for prison reform. Media pressure can also help expose miscarriages of justice. At its best, the media can increase transparency and accountability.

Distortion

At its worst, the media can distort and destroy. Sensationalist media coverage can unfairly present prisons as places of privilege, not punishment. The media can also do much to arouse fear of crime and of criminals. *The News of the World's* 'naming and shaming' campaign against paedophiles last year, following the death of Sarah Payne, led to mass hysteria in parts of the country. However, even when the media is not being grossly irresponsible, it is still the extreme events within prisons that tend to receive media, especially news, coverage, for example, riots, violence and suicides. These are the events which accord with news values. Myra Hindley's continued imprisonment on a life sentence attracts greater media debate than almost any other prison-related story, including the fact that there are more life sentence prisoners in England and Wales than in the rest of Western Europe put together. Similarly, the media only recently - and no doubt temporarily - became interested in the state of young offender institutions (YOIs), when the Lord Chief Justice set the tariffs for Venables and Thompson, the killers of James Bulger, and described YOIs as "corrosive".

New media

Successive sweeps of the British Crime Survey have found that giving people accurate information about crime and the criminal justice system is essential to securing confidence in the system. Because most people find out about the criminal justice system and prisons through the media, any misrepresentations can be very damaging. However, there may be hope ahead. The senior judiciary is committed to doing more to inform the public about crime and sentencing, while the Home Office makes its research and statistics readily available, including on the Internet (www.homeoffice.gov.uk). Indeed, perhaps the new media offers the greatest prospect for providing people with varied and accurate information and knowledge about criminal justice and prisons. Those wishing to find out more about prisons will not have to rely on often sensationalist reporting. A good news website, such as that of BBC News (www.news.bbc.co.uk) covers not only the main story but also provides links to relevant organisations, whilst an internet search could just as easily come up with

the homepage of the Prison Reform Trust (www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk) as with sensationalist newspaper headlines, calling for tough law and order policies. However, for so long as news and entertainment value the exceptional, not the everyday, it will remain an uphill struggle to get crime and punishment fairly represented in the mass media.

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