

Putting the Emotion Back into Crime: or how we can start to win the war of the headlines

Richard Garside considers how the problems of media distortion of crime and criminal justice issues can be tackled.

Shortly after I joined Nacro, I was asked to arrange the press launch of a new report based on interviews with prisoners in three young offender institutions. The generally favourable coverage was marred slightly by the decision of one Sunday newspaper to report that our findings revealed young offenders found prison to be a positive experience. "Tough sentencing works, say young," was the headline. When I rang the journalist to complain, he admitted that the paper had given a rather partial version of Nacro's report, but reminded me that "this isn't *The Guardian*."

Most of us probably have similar stories of what we consider to be media misrepresentation or distortion, and it's easy to draw the conclusion that

really, it's nothing personal. It's just business.

That said, media coverage of crime matters does not always aid an intelligent and informed debate. The recent convictions of the 'Wonderland Club' internet child-porn ring was covered by one red top under the headline "They'll be back," an interesting echo of Schwarzenegger's menacing one-liner from *The Terminator*. Words like 'vile,' 'monster,' 'sickening,' 'pervert,' 'brutes,' also littered the piece. "The courts have betrayed our children," it concluded. The paper may well have been giving voice to its readers' genuine anger and concern. It's another question altogether whether talk of betrayal and monsters represents a useful contribution to a debate about crime and sentencing, or merely reinforces fear

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journalists in particular, and the fourth estate in general, is not really interested in intelligent debate about crime. They want sensation, mayhem and simple solutions. When that can not be found naturally, they massage facts and figures, events and happenings, to suit their purposes.

Now many journalists would, rightly I think, challenge this picture. Media folk are, like criminal justice folk, professionals doing a job. They have their blindnesses and their bugbears, just like everyone else, but at its best good journalism has the power to touch people's lives and influence the beliefs, attitudes, hopes and aspirations of millions of people. If they do misrepresent or oversimplify, it's generally not intentional. Rather like the mafia

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and cynicism.

Editors and journalists often defend their excitable reporting of crime matters by appeal to the court of the general public. The general public is worried about crime and wants to see tough solutions, so the argument goes. The media merely reflects and give voice to these concerns.

While there is some evidence to back up this claim, the truth is that the public in general is not as hardline or simplistic in its attitudes to crime and how to reduce it as some editors would have us believe. When the News of the World commissioned MORI to conduct a survey, at the height of it's 'Name and Shame' campaign last year, 76 per cent of those questioned felt that local people should know if there was a convicted paedophile living in their neighbourhood. The paper duly reported this figure as proof that the public backed its campaign.

But a closer look at this survey reveals a rather different picture. Asked what could be done to improve the safety of children in their local area, 24 per cent said more policing, 23 per cent suggested speed restrictions and 16 per cent more safe areas for children to play in. Only three per cent offered the public naming of paedophiles as a solution, the same proportion as those who felt more parking wardens

were part of the answer. Again, only three per cent backed tougher sentences, while only two per cent felt we should reintroduce capital punishment.

This is only one survey, but other studies - for example the British Crime Survey and British Social Attitudes - illustrate that while the public might overwhelmingly buy tabloid newspapers, they are not as stupid as some tabloid editors would have us believe. And if criminal justice practitioners are some way ahead of public opinion on how best to reduce crime, the public is not as far behind as we might think.

So where does all of this leave us when it comes to winning the war of the headlines? First of all, we should drop the defensive pose we tend to adopt when it comes to public attitudes towards crime and its solutions. The public are our allies in lobbying for a positive agenda on crime reduction, not our enemies. The fact that some politicians and journalists adopt Neanderthal positions on crime, and to a degree sway public opinion, should not lead us to conclude that the public as a whole is hostile to more sensible, rational and effective solutions. This does place a responsibility on us to engage with their

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concerns, and articulate far more clearly positive solutions to crime. To do so would, I suspect, pay dividends.

Second, we need to be positive about the opportunities presented by effective media work, and dispense with the suspicion or disdain that often characterises our dealings with journalists. Most journalists are professionals trying to do a job, and are as interested in positive solutions to crime as anyone else.

Third, and most important of all, we should pay far more attention to the emotional content of public attitudes towards crime. There is a lot of talk in criminal justice agencies of getting across the facts

about crime. Indeed, talk of 'killer facts' is positively de rigueur. Get the facts across, so the argument goes, and the public will see the virtue of the positive agenda on crime. There is obviously something in this. Anyone who claims that prison works is confronted by the startling statistic of a reoffending rate of more than 80 per cent for young adults leaving prison, for example. But at the end of the day people often intellectualise from an emotional base, and this is as true of crime - such an inherently emotional subject - as of anything else. Killer facts are important, but if getting the facts across was going to work, it would have done so by now.

A couple of weeks ago I was listening to a radio piece about a man who had become a full-time caregiver for his wife, after she had been struck down by a debilitating illness. He talked about how his wife had deteriorated over a period of months and about the conflicting emotions of wanting to care for her, while having to cope with seeing the woman he loved change beyond all recognition. At one point it all became too much for him and he ran away. The piece was very short - a couple of minutes at most - but it conveyed to me more about the dilemmas and difficulties of caring for someone you love than any number of facts, figures and statistics. It is this emotional engagement with the subject that is often lacking in the discussion around crime and its solutions.

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"We should pay more attention to the emotional content of public attitudes towards crime". Masthead from the News of the World's 'For Sarah' campaign website.