

Media and the Shaping of Public Attitudes

Marie Gillespie and Eugene McLaughlin summarise their research into how the public's knowledge and attitudes are determined by the media's treatment of criminal justice.

Research funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation's 'Rethinking Crime and Punishment' initiative analysed how public knowledge about, and attitudes towards, different types of sentencing are shaped by the media - television and radio in particular. Focus groups consisting of both regular viewers of crime programmes and those who rarely or seldom watched such programmes were used to investigate what kinds of knowledge and competence are or might be provided by crime fictions, docu-dramas, reconstructions, chat shows, news, current affairs and documentaries. We took into particular account the seemingly incidental narratives of crime and sentencing in mainstream fictional programmes such as soap operas and tv dramas, and assessed their impact on public knowledge and attitudes. Questionnaires were also used to gather further data on the patterns and extent of viewing of television crime stories in different genres.

Informants' views

Almost all informants regarded the criminal justice system with contempt and cynicism. It stood accused of being ineffective and 'soft on crime' at a moment when crime was perceived as not only on the increase but spiralling out of control. Focus group discussions indicated that there were considerable gaps in informants' knowledge and understanding of the workings of the criminal justice system. Sentencing and sentences was one of informants' greatest areas of ignorance. There was a strong demand for consistency of sentencing, based on a wish for 'objectivity' and for certainty about the justice of sentences, coupled with awareness that just sentencing must fit the individual case. However, what limited information is available, whether in fictional or factual genres, appears to give an impression of over-leniency, inconsistency and injustice.

The notably punitive rhetoric expressed by over half of our informants was articulated in emotive terms and was passionately felt rather than necessarily thought through carefully. It was noticeable that punitive attitudes were often expressed in the idioms and vocabularies of tabloid headlines. Indeed these headlines insinuated themselves into the kinds of punitive sound bites that characterised the opening discussions in the focus groups. But 'knowledge' of the ineffectiveness of imprisonment as a deterrent, drawn from the media

and sometimes also from personal experience, made respondents think quite positively about alternative community based sanctions for many categories of crime and certain offenders. Furthermore, in group discussions of media narratives that were non-threatening and non-personalised, informants worked through some of the contradictions in their views and opinions and displayed shifts in opinion. However, there was little or no awareness or knowledge of non-custodial options or indeed of such issues as prison conditions. Notions of restorative justice or rehabilitation were not very well developed in the minds of most informants until they were prodded on these issues.

The media as a source of knowledge

In line with existing research we found that personal experience has a major impact on how media representations of crime and punishment are interpreted. These experiences shape and inflect readings of crime narratives in significant ways. The fact of mediation - media selection, distortion, bias - was recognised in principle, but ignored in practice. Respondents agreed that the media provides them certain forms of knowledge, but were very resistant to the view that the media affected their views and opinions. However, in-depth discussions showed clearly that media representations of crime and punishment played at least some part in the formation of opinions and attitudes.

Regular viewers of crime narratives on non-fiction programmes - news, current affairs, documentaries, chat shows - did not appear to exhibit any better awareness and understanding of the criminal justice system than viewers who seldom or rarely watch such programmes. Nor did they appear to be better informed than viewers who prefer to consume crime stories in dramatic or fictional form. The blurring of the boundaries and conventions between crime fictions and crime news and current affairs suggests that the collaborative processes of story construction and reconstruction, in local circuits of communication, are very similar regardless of genre. Crime stories consumed in news and current affairs genres may offer a lot of information about different types of crime, and sometimes sentencing and punishment, but much of this information is quickly forgotten unless something 'hooks' the details into one's memory. Nor do crime news stories seem to develop any broader knowledge of the criminal justice system. Often attitudes towards the system depend

on a broader political world view and on personal experiences, direct or indirect. Therefore it may well be that the media have very little impact on such fundamental perceptions.

However, our data suggests that more punitive views tend to be expressed in response to programmes like 'Crimewatch'. One way of explaining this is to examine the genre conventions of such crime programmes. In order to mobilise viewers to come forward with relevant information to the police, the genre must do all it can to encourage very close identification with the victim and the police, and at the same time stimulate sentiments of revulsion and repugnance towards the offender. Thus the framing and staging of the programme are more likely to elicit or reinforce punitive views, based on the kind of information and knowledge presented. Talk shows, like 'Kilroy', tended to elicit more awareness of criminals as individuals, and the possible relevance of the offender's background and the context in which particular crimes may have been committed, among those who are already predisposed to such attitudes. However, any sympathetic identification with the offender tends to be disrupted by the much greater vocal presence and space given to the victim support lobby. The adversarial framing of the debate tends to confirm rather than shift pre-existing views and dispositions. So it is just as likely that punitive views would find confirmation as more liberal lenient views. It is quite common for viewers to seek out programmes that may initially disrupt views but which ultimately secure their confirmation.

Crime dramas

Survey data indicated that the most widely watched fictional crime genre was the detective series. From the data it is clear that the working practices of detectives and police are closely interwoven in viewers' imaginations: clear generic distinctions between detective and police series are not maintained. There was a general consensus that detective/police programmes

offered no information at all on punishment or sentencing issues and consequently had no effect on people's views on the type or appropriateness of sentences. In fact, most agreed that the detective programme usually ends where the punishment begins. Either a prison door bangs shut, or someone is taken down from the dock and a door slams behind them. Arguably the closing door signifies justice has been achieved. However it also closes down any consideration of punishment or sentencing on the part of the viewer. Police series such as 'The Bill' were not very popular among our informants whilst prison dramas were deemed unrealistic by the very few of our informants who discussed them. Courtroom dramas, not a regular feature of the TV schedules, were thought capable of disseminating detailed information about attribution of guilt and punishment. Yet the genre somehow failed to live up to that task.

Soap operas

The majority of respondents were regular viewers and/or listeners of at least one soap opera. Discussion revealed that most relevant information on all aspects of the criminal justice system was derived from soap operas. In addition, opinions and attitudes to crime and sentencing in all the focus groups revolved, to a significant extent, around scenarios portrayed in the soaps. Recall of information about crimes and punishments was higher among soap viewers than viewers of any other genre even if details such as precise sentences eluded the memory of most.

It was above all discussions of soaps that demonstrated that in drawn-out discussion, viewers might not be able to maintain the punitive views they initially expressed. This is especially the case if a programme is able to provide relevant information about character and circumstances in such a way that extremely punitive views are challenged to the point of being untenable.

continued on page 23...



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As a member of the public, albeit an informed one, working within institutionalised criminal justice and court environments, I was grateful that my role was clearly defined. Training, suggested plans for interviews and support from CPSI staff were crucial, and I felt I had had received the appropriate tools for the tasks prescribed.

As my understanding of the system grew so did my desire to probe further, for instance, to ask more questions of CPS and court staff. However, I felt it would be difficult to do so successfully without a clearer understanding by everyone involved in the inspection of the lay inspector's role. There would also need to be a wider acknowledgement of the involvement of lay members of the public in the criminal justice system, which is only used to seeing members of the public as jurors, defendants, victims and witnesses. In one of my inspections I saw the latter's needs put below those of the court. It is therefore difficult to imagine that same court might welcome those witnesses as inspectors.

The lay inspector role within the CPSI is at an early stage in its development. I have seen it to be effective in bringing about change. Lay inspectors do identify problem areas that may otherwise go unnoticed or identify more sharply the impact these may have on the general public. It is clear to me that with more training and support, and better briefing for the local area team and court staff, the role of the inspector can develop further.

As lay inspectors develop in knowledge and confidence over a number of inspections, so will the depth of their scrutiny. The strength of the lay inspector lies with their detachment from the system and their ability, with training, to bring their own experience to the inspection. Drawing from as many different backgrounds as possible will result in inspections being more searching than ever, but to do this careful thought needs to be put into training for those inspectors whose knowledge of criminal justice procedures may be limited. My own experience demonstrated the problems that someone unfamiliar with the detail of the system might have. However, I believe careful recruitment, training and support can overcome this. ■

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continued from page 9...

So despite the punitive rhetoric displayed by over half of our informants, deeper knowledge of the background of the offender and the crime often resulted in viewers identifying and sympathising with offending or imprisoned characters. This process of empathetic identification, and the awareness and knowledge that it generates, is crucial to any shift taking place along the scale of punitiveness towards leniency.

Soap viewers may feel less threatened by the contradictions between their punitive and lenient tendencies and judgements because soap operas empower viewers.

The research findings suggest that viewers may find it easier to handle the cognitive dissonance generated by the identification with the offender that may occur in soaps because of certain conventions of form associated with classical melodrama. In other words soap viewers may feel less threatened by the contradictions between their punitive and lenient tendencies and judgements because soap operas empower viewers. The popularity of soap operas can indeed be explained, to a large extent, by the way this genre subjectively empowers viewers by compelling them to process complex information and knowledge in order to pass judgement on particular characters or situations - and, often, to revise this judgement in the light of new information. The soap viewer is empowered by always being in a privileged position of knowledge and in possession of relevant information denied to characters. Equally important, the soap opera typically presents problems from multiple perspectives and viewpoints, which encourage the viewer to weigh up the evidence and come to a judgement.

Where respondents could empathise with the offender, a less punitive attitude was adopted. This is clearly more likely to occur when there is depth of insight into the offender's character, motivation and social circumstances. Soap genres also proved to be significant in respondents' opinions of the judiciary and the police. But none could remember the actual sentence passed on any soap character, so their viewing seems to have contributed little or nothing to their perceived knowledge of sentencing. The

complex relationship between knowledge (albeit of a rather *ad hoc* nature) and opinions and values was most evident in the case of soap discussions.

It is important to stress that knowledge and values are not easily disentangled and are often at odds. Entrenched punitive attitudes are resistant to change and are closely related to political outlook and world view. It was recognised by a majority of our

respondents that television is a major way for the public to inform themselves. Moreover, television can be a useful medium for informing the public about the criminal justice system, especially at a time when crime reporting has become increasingly like titillating entertainment, as well as being increasingly politicised. For the most part it seems that even though people are highly critical of the criminal justice system, they are content to leave it to the professionals and resigned to the fact that the administration of justice goes on with or without them. Even so, a consensus view emerged that television was in theory capable of shifting public attitudes in favour of alternative community based sentences. However, whether it was desirable for television to do so was considered to be quite another matter. The idea that television drama, or the creativity of writers, should be somehow interfered with in order to change minds and hearts, albeit in progressive directions, was regarded as tantamount to producing government propaganda, or social engineering of a benign kind. ■

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M. Gillespie et al 'Media, crime stories and the shaping of public attitudes, knowledge and opinion towards crime and sentencing' (a summary report) will be released this autumn.