

Local Effects?

Media, Crime and Sense of Place

Mark Banks illustrates how interpretation of crime risk is influenced by sense of place.

In *Space and Place* (1977) the humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan proclaimed that, “*place is security, space is freedom*” and so indicated that the key to understanding human well-being is partly through an appreciation of how place, as a humanized and bounded milieu, informs our identities and patterns of social reproduction. Thus, given the evident link between place and security it is perhaps perplexing that ongoing debate over the ‘fear of crime’ continues to take place in something of a spatial vacuum. How concepts of place inform discourses and practices of fear, security and well-being have been marginal to the wider criminological project to pin down what causes fear of crime. Only recently have observers such as Girling *et al* (2000) begun to address how place mediates fear through its status as a repository of meanings and a focus for the routine reproduction of everyday life.

If place is generally marginal in fear of crime literature, it has barely registered within the sub-field of studies that examine media-crime effects. Researchers have tended to see the audience impacts of crime-based television, press, films and so on as unaffected by such ‘extraneous’ variables as geographical location or community attachments (see for example Tulloch 1999). Yet where we live and how we feel about our environment may have significant import to the way in which we interpret images of crime and the steps we take to assuage or moderate any anxieties that such images may generate. Thus, given its centrality to the construction of human well-being, *sense of place* is yet another ‘environmental’ variable that we must account for in establishing the linkages between media-crime and human action.

Two Households as Example

To provide illustration of how sense of place can shape the interpretation of crime in the media, I report here on interviews with the ‘Kents’ and the ‘Henshaws’, two white, middle-class households of similar social and educational background, life-stage and gender composition residing in the prosperous suburb of Didsbury, Manchester. The observations are summaries from a paper (Banks, forthcoming) on the relations between consumption of media-crime and sense of place.

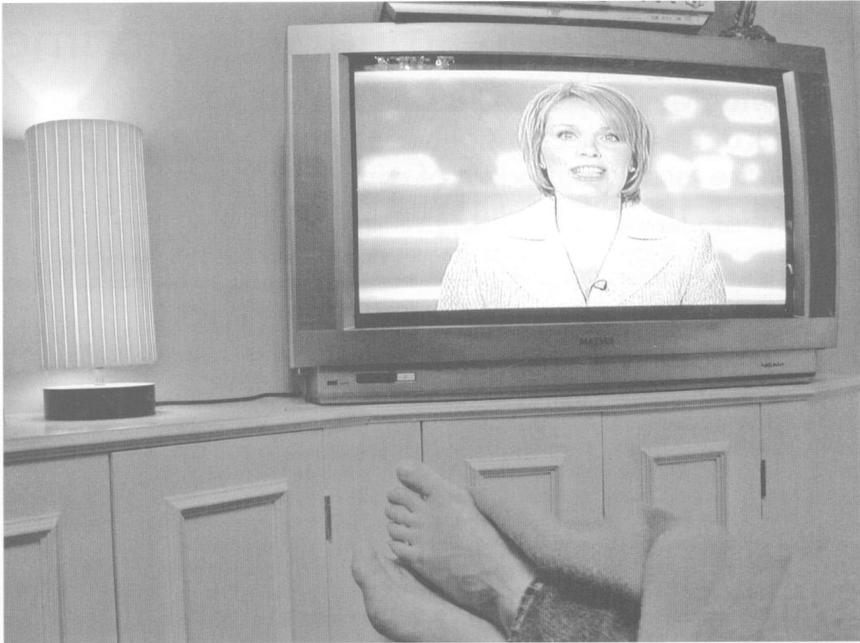
Mollification of Media-Crime?

The ‘Kents’ avidly consumed crime news, documentaries and dramas, read crime-obsessed local newspapers, had suffered break-ins and had recently had their car vandalized – yet felt little apprehension or sense of fear. This feeling of security appeared to stem from the fact that the Kents had all been ‘born and raised’ in Manchester. Having lived locally and with extended family and friendship networks across the city, the Kents felt connected and confident in their environment. Family ties and longevity of residence is by no means a universal indicator of ‘well-being’ or ‘community’, but here it was significant. Into this context, media-crime was ‘absorbed’ and fear of crime discourse rationalized into a set of “calculable and knowable” (Holloway and Jefferson 1997) risks, that avoided any need for fear or stigmatization of deviant groups or ‘rough’ districts. Despite their different material circumstances the Kents’ experience echoed that of ‘Joe’, a participant in Holloway and Jefferson’s study. Like the Kents, Joe was community active, had a local extended family and a strong sense of connection to local place. As someone who inhabited “a local world, a known world and in principle therefore a controllable world” (*ibid*, 264), fear of crime tended to have limited impact. For the Kents, media-crime was consumed as part a wider set of symbolic resources upon which to reflexively construct a positive and progressive sense of place.

Media-Crime as Threat?

In contrast, the ‘Henshaws’ were not ‘born and raised’ Mancunians and had few family or social ties in the city; they were a more privatized and insular household unit. They had not been victims of any crime. While a certain degree of fear was generated by television crime, this was not evidenced through viewing habits, but rather non-viewing habits, as they deliberately avoided what they called ‘grizzly’ news and crime dramas and prioritized ‘family’ viewing. Local newspapers were used to evaluate household risk from crime (“a source of burglary information” as Mr. Henshaw put it) – and the overall impression was a household somewhat fearful and ‘under siege’ from crime, both ‘real’ and represented.

While the Kents’ positive sense of place appeared to mollify any crime ‘threat’, the Henshaws had found alternative ways to cope with their fears ‘in the



community'. This involved cultivating a more defensive sense of place, where neighbouring districts were identified as potential sources of crime and incivility, where 'village' networks (church, local civic society) were looked upon to provide moral guidance and, at a personal level, privatized strategies to avoid crime (*Neighbourhood Watch*, staying in, avoiding crime on television) were enthusiastically employed. The Henshaws did not feel secure in their environment – and media-crime exacerbated this insecurity.

Thus, where the Kents' sense of place was fluid, open and multiply focused (incorporating a number of districts and social relationships across the city), the Henshaws' was introverted and spatially fixed around the physical, symbolic and imagined quasi-rural social relations of 'the village'. In each case, consumption of media-crime was seen to be shaped by a distinctive sense of place, which in turn, helped further reproduce that sense of place.

Connecting media, crime and place

Of course, these vignettes do not foreclose the range of possible impacts that sense of place may have on media-crime consumption, nor do they suggest any causal relationships between types of media-crime consumed and audience response. Neither do they suggest that sense of place is necessarily the *dominant* variable in 'causing' fear of crime. And while the evidence indicates competing fear of crime discourses within the middle class, it makes no general claims about the generalizability of these typologies.

The recommendation is to further evaluate media-

crime meanings within the lived context of place. Here, despite evident similarities in the history and profile of the households, marked differences in use and attitudes to media-crime were noted – contrasts explicable only within the 'politics of the sitting room' (Morley 1992) and more widely through evaluation of household discourses of community, locality and sense of place. Given the increasing intersections of media with the politics of place and space,

so media are becoming more central to the ways in which people's 'worlds of crime' are lived, defined and imagined. ■

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