

The War on 'Neds': media reports as evidence base

Alison P. Brown describes how tabloid coverage of young people and anti-social behaviour was recently allowed a defining role in Scottish Parliamentary debate.

In this article I want to make a preliminary attempt to connect the role of the media and the question of evidence-based policy making. The example considered here is the Scottish Parliament's debate on recent Anti Social Behaviour legislation, of which the most controversial measures were parenting orders, electronic tagging and ASBOs for 12 to 16-year olds, and a new power for police to disperse groups from public places. The notable feature of this debate was the substitution of journalism and 'fact-finding' for systematic research as the evidence base for policy making. This presents both a threat and an opportunity for critical social researchers.

The Parliament and the 'Neds'

During 2003, the Parliamentary debate on young people became infamous due to a row between the Socialists and the Executive over the use by Ministers of the word 'ned' (meaning 'yob', thought to be an acronym for 'non-educated delinquent'). An unsuccessful motion by the Socialists sought to reject the use of the word 'ned' as inappropriate language in Parliament. During the exchange a Labour MSP declared, referring to BBC coverage:

"This morning, the airwaves were dominated by a motion from some MSPs that we should ban the word "ned" and not be allowed to use it, rather than by today's debate and the celebration of young people in Scotland. In the terms of that motion, it is "hurtful" to describe the delicate little souls—bless them—as neds... Should we rename shoplifters retail stock relocation operatives, or drug dealers independent pharmaceutical consultants?" (D McNeil, Debate 5th June 2003 col 453)

Despite the absence of fundamental challenge to the presentation of young people as the cause of social problems (Muncie 1999), by highlighting the use of language in the Parliament, the media demonstrated how sociological thinking of previous decades has brought the phenomenon of labelling into public consciousness. Of course, not all sections of the media questioned this use of language; and this is particularly significant given the relationship between the tabloid press and the government.

The Neds Dossier

In 2003, during the government's consultation on its proposals (Scottish Executive 2003) the tabloid

newspaper *The Daily Record* held a week-long neds campaign. Its aim was to gather information from readers to pass to the government. Each day, readers' letters were printed and various facets of the problem were tackled: under-age drinking; vandalism; rural villages and urban streets; 'vile' problem families; attacks on firefighters and school janitors. Alongside readers' complaints about poor policing came a letter from 'a very disillusioned police officer' calling for 'trips to Disneyland' for young offenders to be replaced by having them sweep the streets, and 'embarrass them while they are doing so by making them wear bright orange overalls emblazoned across the front and back with I AM A NED'.

Two aspects of this campaign are significant. Firstly, it quoted 'serious' research on the subject: Scottish Household Survey findings on quality of life (24 percent of the population feels unsafe in their own neighbourhood at night; the main neighbourhood problems are vandalism and litter and young people hanging around while drinking) and a Department of Health study showing high levels of exposure to and use of drugs among 10 to 12-year olds.

Secondly, this was not an example of the tabloid press whipping up its readers to put pressure on the government to act. The First Minister had a high profile throughout, quoting constituents' experiences and pledging new laws and tough action. In effect, the campaign was a 'partnership' between the newspaper and the government: "In a unique step, the Executive have asked *The Record* to help ensure your voices are heard" ('How You Can Nail the Neds', *The Daily Record*, September 1st, 2003). "Ministers have promised to read every letter, email or text you send" ('How I'll Win Ned War', September 5th 2003).

In the subsequent Parliamentary debate, opposition members accused the Minister of using a 'populist' tabloid both to consult and to convey the government's message on anti-social behaviour in order to raise support for the Bill. The Minister responded:

"*The Daily Record* presented me with a dossier that brought together its readers' experiences of anti-social behaviour. The readers' response to the issue was immediate and overwhelming. They did not exaggerate their concerns and they were not being unduly populist; they simply highlighted their experiences and concerns, to which we should be prepared to listen." (M. Curran, Debate 2nd Oct 2003, col. 2272)

Aside from the accuracy of the reports in the *Record*, the significant point is that the Executive regarded a tabloid as a reliable, swift, and, presumably, highly cost-effective way to gather 'evidence' about anti-social behaviour.

This suggests that the role of the media in the creation of 'moral panic' (Cohen 1980) is changing. By the technique of the 'dossier', the role of the media became one of 'co-creators' of news with 'ordinary' people and communities and the government itself that attempted to appeal to the 'respectable' working class. In the consultation process, therefore, these voices were privileged over those of professionals who opposed greater punitiveness and called, for example, for tackling underlying causes and strengthening of the child-welfare-based Hearings system.

Fact-finding

In contrast to the government's 'dossier' approach, the Parliament's Communities Committee undertook its own painstaking 'evidence-gathering' process. Predictably, however, the result did not appear to be particularly useful. Having consulted an array of organisations and the public at large, and carried out a series of fact-finding visits across the country, it produced a disjointed string of causes (boredom, alcohol, lack of police, drugs, housing policies, lack of educational opportunities, poor parenting, the media, young tenants, breakdown of communities, working mothers, gypsy travellers, day trips for offenders, political correctness) and solutions — more facilities and youth workers, parenting classes, more police, tougher sentences, faster evictions, residential places, better schools, ASBOs, curfews, discipline, national service, tagging, chip implants (Scottish Parliament 2004). This demonstrates what might be described as the difference between consultation, that merely presents views, and (what is absent from the debate) systematic and analytical research.

Both the government's use of the popular press as a means of gathering evidence for policy making, and the tabloid press's citation of academic research, contrast with the apparent disregard of formal research during the consultation processes by both the Parliament and the Executive. Although in their submissions to the Parliament, criminal justice organisations introduced the question of fear versus reality of crime, the Parliament simply concluded that reluctance to report renders statistics of little use. There was no mention of the use of victimisation surveys to gain a more accurate picture; nor any call for systematic research on any aspect of anti-social behaviour; nor use of existing research evidence on the use of ASBOs for adults, or the effectiveness of alternatives (Brown *et al* 2003, Janes 2003).

The virtual absence of social science research from the debate contrasted with the use of the Scottish Executive's use of tabloid newspapers to consult the public and provide an 'evidence base'.

There may, however, be grounds for optimism among critical social researchers in that policymakers are discarding statistics in favour of qualitative evidence: the information presented by organisations representing the interests of young people (Scottish Parliament 2004); and the direct engagement between politicians and the public's individual experiences ('fact-finding'). Moreover, politicians have shown that they are willing to listen to marginalized groups; for example, part of the Parliament's fact-finding included a discussion with a group of young offenders serving custodial sentences (Scottish Parliament 2004).

In conclusion, this anti-social behaviour debate was characterised by a move to subjectivity and lived experience, of a particular selective type of 'community' knowledge, and away from objectivity, science and professional knowledge. The media's role was complex, both as carrier of 'community' knowledge and as challenger of the government's approach. The challenge for academics and researchers is to engage with the media and policy makers and to demonstrate the benefits of qualitative research that is relevant, systematic and embraces the complexity of concepts such as 'anti-social behaviour'.

Alison Brown is a researcher in criminology at the University of Stirling and is working on a study of the use of qualitative methods, on psycho-social theory, and on several evaluations of youth crime-related initiatives. She previously worked in government and the voluntary sector.

References

- Brown A.P. *et al.* (2003) *The Role of Mediation in Tackling Neighbour Disputes and Anti-Social Behaviour*. Scottish Executive.
- Cohen, Stan (1980) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
- Crichton, Torcuil (2004) Why Labour has the young in its sights, *The Sunday Herald* 15 February.
- Janes, D. (2003). *Tackling anti-social behaviour: an audit of Scottish Local Authority Practice 2001-02*. Scottish Executive.
- Muncie, John (1999) *Youth and Crime*. London: Sage.
- Scottish Executive (2003) *Putting Our Communities First: a strategy for tackling anti-social behaviour*. Scottish Executive.
- Scottish Parliament (2004) *Communities Committee Stage 1 Report on Anti-social Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Bill*. Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament.