

Is the Press the Real Power Behind Punitivism?

Reformers in criminal justice blame the news media for alarmist coverage that encourages popular punitivism. **Enver Solomon** analyses the factors behind the reporting and recommends a change of approach in getting the message across.

Along with estate agents, journalists tend to come out at the top of surveys of professions which the public dislike and distrust. I was well aware of this when I worked as a reporter so when meeting people for the first time I would always try and be economical with the truth about what I did. However, nothing had quite prepared me for the disdain, and sometimes pure venom, reserved for the media that I came across when I left journalism and joined the Prison Reform Trust.

On numerous occasions people throughout the criminal justice sector lambast the media for creating a punitive climate which is blamed for the relentless rise in prison numbers (I am mainly focusing on the news media — newspapers, television and radio news, rather than media in the broader sense). The media is seen as the irresponsible bogeyman that fails to report the facts and is hell bent on whipping up fear with sensationalist reporting. It is blamed for playing

conducts itself in this manner. Journalists operate on the basis of unwritten newsroom rules and values. They have specific ways of working unique to their profession. These need to be understood and placed in a broader social and political context in order to move towards a more sophisticated and constructive analysis that is not simply about blaming the media.

News values are all about people and the unexpected and unpredictable events that befall them. Inevitably when people are robbed, attacked, beaten, abused or murdered, journalists regard it as a good story, or as I have heard many times in newsrooms, 'it's a great tale'. Not surprisingly, therefore, crime stories will always be picked up by the media and the more sensational the better. But news values are not politically neutral. Newspapers reflect the public mood, society's hopes and fears, aspirations and anxieties. These are often determined by the government and politician's agendas.

The balance of power ultimately rests with politicians, who have the levers of state control in

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on people's emotions and then demanding tough action from government and long sentences from the courts. This is a common view held with great passion by many academics and professionals including prison governors, probation officers and voluntary sector leaders. Professor Richard Sparks articulates a sense of deep rooted frustration and anger towards the media:

'Why the endless concentration on the bad news about crime? Is there some malign intent to inflame public passions and play upon our fears?... Must every progressive initiative be undermined — or every challenging research finding reduced to sound bites? (Sparks, 2001)

The list of complaints levelled at the media is comprehensive. It is blamed for not only being sensationalist, but also for misrepresenting the facts on crime, for misinforming the public, for oversimplifying complex issues and ignoring important developments or ground-breaking projects. But there are reasons why the media

their hands, and not with the media. If politicians start talking up a particular issue journalists in the national media who work in the Westminster village will soon become infected by this and it will not be long before it is headline news across the country. This then has an impact on people's perceptions about law and order. The recent furore over anti-social behaviour which has had an impact on the numbers being remanded into custody, particularly amongst children, demonstrates this very clearly.

An equally important factor which determines why the media is sensationalist is the simple fact that the press needs to sell newspapers to survive. It is easy to forget that the media is big business. From the smallest local newspaper to the Sun, they all rise or fall on the state of their profit margins. Executives keenly keep up with circulation figures. In a world where newspaper sales are in long term decline, both locally and nationally, the press is constantly fighting for survival. Commercial pressures will mean editors are minded to be more sensationalist in order to sell

their papers. And the pressures also determine the kind of stories that get into the paper.

Overall the general trend in the media has been towards consumer orientated issues. A home affairs correspondent on a leading national newspaper that has recently changed its format has been told by his editors that policy developments are to be given a lower priority. He knows that stories about debates over the creation of a new National Offender Management Service will not generate any interest with his news desk. Ironically, despite the huge expansion in the number of media outlets with the creation of the internet and 24 hour news channels, there is probably less space in newspapers and on news bulletins for serious debate and political critique. Over the past 20 years it has therefore become much harder for issues relating to penal or social policy to get media coverage. And when they do it is not as common as it once was for the issues to be presented in a straight, intelligent format.

It is also important to understand that journalists will always look for the most critical or controversial line in a report. Even if it is only a minor aspect of the report or a line which is not developed in any detail, in the journalist's mind it is controversy which makes news. A good example is the publication in November 2004 of the Coulsfield Inquiry into Alternatives to Custody (Coulsfield, 2004). Buried in the report is a brief paragraph which expresses concerns about how the early release of prisoners under the Home Detention Curfew (HDC) Scheme could undermine public confidence. This line was leapt on by the media. HDC has been controversial with the Conservatives consistently criticising Labour and pledging to scrap the scheme

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if they are elected. When an independent judge also voiced concern, for journalists, it was clearly a good story.

Whilst journalists will always pick up on controversy, newspaper reporters are inevitably influenced by the partisan position of their owners. Newspapers are organs of political power and always have been. Distorting the facts or putting a particular spin on information is a consequence of advancing their own political agendas. And the newspapers often define themselves on the basis of their political beliefs. *The Independent* prides itself on promoting progressive liberal values and attempting to imbue the wider public with these values.

We are, of course, living in an age of political spin. The sections of the media which are impartial and non-partisan have to work even harder so they do not misrepresent the facts. This is particularly the case for BBC journalists. Public relation companies will push journalists to take a particular line on a story and the New Labour government has a notorious reputation for using its spin doctors to influence them. It is not uncommon for BBC correspondents to be called by a minister's senior media advisors and questioned about why they have interpreted the latest government initiative in a particular way.

Misrepresentation and oversimplification is also a function of the changing nature of news production. Today news programmes are on air around the clock with dedicated news channels on radio and television. They have to churn out stories without having the time or space to sit back and make considered editorial judgements. Time pressures mean that subtle arguments will be overlooked and for broadcasters the aim will

be to get a clear pithy sound bite.

So how should the criminal justice sector deal with the media? Firstly the sector would be much better off if it engaged with greater enthusiasm and opened up more information channels so that journalists are better informed. For a reporter who is up against a tight deadline and is not a specialist in criminal justice somebody on the other end of the phone who is prepared to help them navigate round a complex story and provide them a solid background briefing is invaluable.

Secondly, in a world of political spin it is important to be clear what your message is and then to be realistic about whether it is the kind of story that will make it into the news. Given the way the media works and the changing nature of journalism it will always be a struggle to get stories into the media. This requires thinking carefully about what the message should be, how it should be spun. It should also not be forgotten that the messenger is just as important as the message. Too often the head or policy director of a criminal justice organisation will speak to the press or appear on television. Yet research has found that messages resonate more strongly with the media if they come from ex-offenders themselves and also victims of crime (Rethinking Crime and Punishment, 2004).

Finally, given that the media is not immune from the wider political, economic and social context shaping society it is vital that if any campaigning organisation is going to have an impact on crime debates it has to engage with broader issues. Having something meaningful to say about the rise in the prison population and about crime and the fear of crime therefore requires developing arguments and ideas that feed into wider

debates on social policy. This, in effect, means devising strategies that enable campaigning organisations to influence the big policy ideas.

If those who work in the criminal justice sector want to use the media to convey their messages more effectively they must begin to understand why it is prone to distort the facts and exaggerate. It is also vital to recognise the social and political environment that the media operates in. Only then will organisations be able to realise the limitations of using the media, that it is naive to expect newspapers and broadcasters to be responsible conduits of information, and to develop more effective communication strategies.

Before joining the Prison Reform Trust in 2003, Enver Solomon worked for nearly ten years as a reporter in local newspapers and BBC national news. This article is an abridged version of a chapter in 'Captured By the Media: Prison Discourse in Media Culture' published by Wilan in the Autumn.

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