The Media, Populism, Public Opinion and Crime

Richard Sparks reflects on populist representations of crime and disorder and asks how more complex representations could be achieved.

To paraphrase a joke once made by the French sociologist Bruno Latour, the only problems in writing a piece with this title are the seven words it contains. We all know quite well from daily experience that communications media are greatly preoccupied with questions of crime and punishment. We also know that their reports, images and evaluations are as bewilderingly various as they are pervasive. When we speak of 'the media' and 'crime' nowadays we cover a gamut that ranges from distressing reports of abduction and murder, via the censoriousness of editorialising about urban problems or the imputed decline of family life to the unabashed titillation of the airport bookstall or the tabloids' delight in the peccadilloes of the momentarily famous. Many of us who work in the criminal justice field, as researchers or as practitioners in often-sensitive areas, experience the media's interest in this area with puzzlement and dismay. Why this endless concentration on the bad news about crime? Is there some malign intent to inflame public passions and play upon our fears? Why are errors, failings and scandals so much more newsworthy than successes and dogged hard work?

more general concern with the question of order - where order is conceived in terms of "morality, procedural form and social hierarchy". This helps to explain why so much attention falls on "what is out of place: the deviant, equivocal and unpredictable". Perhaps we see here why news about disturbing events often jostles on the page with reports about the merely bizarre or mildly scandalous - one may be alarming and the other amusing, but both are departures from the proper order of things. This approach also offers clues to another key feature of news discourse - its preoccupation with blame. Blame attaches to the authors of disorder themselves: criminals, hooligans, yobs, rioters and so on. But often the blame spreads out further. For disorder to occur someone must have fouled up, been incompetent, fallen down on the job. Hence one characteristic feature of crime journalism is a rooting-out of responsibility and an allocation of censure, for example on the heads of 'inadequate' parents, 'over-stretched' police forces, 'inexperienced' social workers, 'permissive' prison governors or on more shadowy groups like William Hague's 'liberal elites'. It is instructive to reflect on how much of political communication nowadays (and the now-

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Must every progressive initiative be undermined by unsympathetic news coverage or every challenging research finding reduced to sound bites?

Where we might hope to find an informed and reflective debate we often merely find a disorientating and dismaying babble. Just what then are the consequences of living amidst such a 'mediascape' for the formation of public opinion on and feelings towards crime and punishment? And how, if at all, is it feasible to intervene positively in this arena? Part of our perplexity on these points arises because we now live in a society where political process and media discourse can hardly meaningfully be separated. One reason why it is so hard to detail the influence of each on the other is that they just do not arise independently.

Happily there is a certain amount of help at hand in recent research. For example, Richard Ericson and his colleagues (1991) argue persuasively that the media's appetite for crime news flows from a

familiar apparatus of 'rebuttal units' and 'spin-doctoring') arises from the need to displace blame from oneself and, wherever possible, to attach it to one's opponents.

Crime news stories

Crime news may be about disruption, violation and disorder but it comes classically in the form of emotive and involving stories. Stories impose moral structure and intelligibility on the swirling chaos of events. They have villains but also victims and sometimes heroes. The American journalist David Anderson (1995) provides a brilliant exposition of the way in which the case of 'Willie Horton' came to dominate the 1988 US Presidential campaign and helped seal the fate of the luckless Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis. The Horton case had everything required for a modern cautionary tale - the black villain; the random, gratuitous and wanton invasion of the middle-class home; the suffering, bravery and
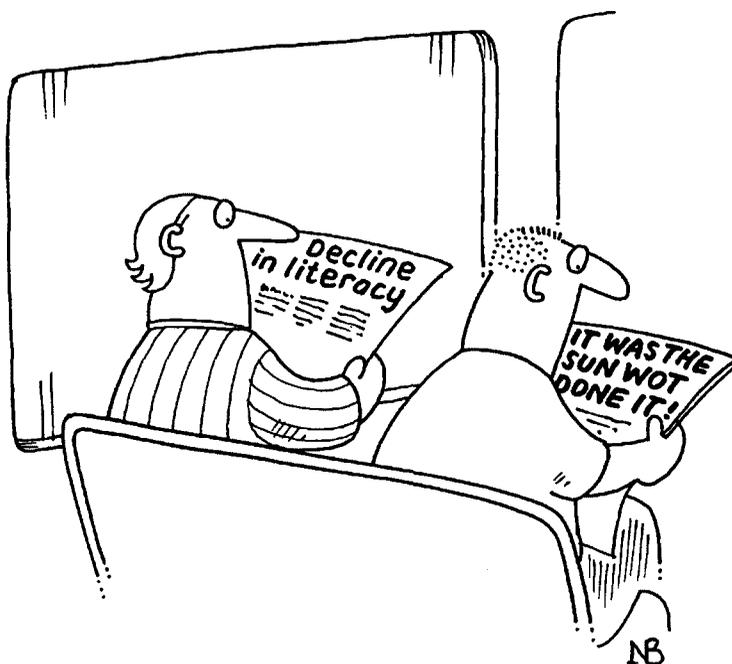
demands for recompense of its victims and the standing invitation offered by the talk-shows for the audience to emote with and for them. Dukakis never produced what the logic of the situation required of him (an avowal, a declaration that he understood and participated in people's pain) and so betrayed a lack of understanding of the kind of symbolic politics in which he had become enmeshed.

Katherine Beckett (1997) goes further towards clarifying the potency of such troubling cases. Beckett shows that decisions by political elites to highlight particular issues (and inherently to do so in particular terms) play a crucial role in mobilising and focusing public concern. We live daily among these 'claims making enterprises' and their associated 'issue packages', vying for the power to inform common sense. Those which chime with our fear and indignation and which play most adroitly on our emotions seem to stand at a distinct advantage over those with more complicated stories to tell about the necessity of social investment or political reform.

This is doubtless a somewhat discouraging picture. Clearly, the emotive and often exploitative character of media portrayals of crime in our public culture is quite entrenched and not easy to displace or overcome. Nevertheless people's responses to crime in the ordinary settings of their lives are more complex and diverse than headlines and sound-bites, as Evi Girling, Ian Loader and I have tried to suggest in our study of the views and feelings of residents of one English town (Girling et al., 2000). Neither are 'the media' just one 'thing'. Some media outlets are more tolerant of complexity than others. And the media interest in blame can on occasion be turned to good effect in calling the powerful to account. More hopeful, constructive and oppositional stories can be told if we can develop the skill and cunning needed to tell them better.

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