

Postmodernism, media and crime

Ian Marsh and Gaynor Melville summarise the theoretical basis for a postmodern analysis of the connections between media and crime, and regard the internet, the most postmodern of crime sites.

Changes in the social, political, cultural and economic arenas of life in the late twentieth century led theorists to suggest that western societies in particular had reached a condition of 'post-modernity'. Some of the basic features of what has become known as postmodernism include a rejection of grand all-encompassing theories (or meta-narratives), a consequent acknowledgement that there is no such thing as an absolute truth and an emphasis on individualism in personal life and on variety and differences within cultural forms including the media, architecture, art and literature. The influence of postmodernism's rejection of grand theory and the emphasis on diversity of explanations and on the role of the media in contemporary society have influenced how we theorise about crime and criminal justice.

Cultural criminology

A particular influence of postmodernism that can be related to theorizing about crime concerns the spread of the media, including the scope this offers for new forms of criminal behaviour and the role it has played in the development of 'cultural criminology'. Particularly associated with the theorizing of American criminologist Jeff Ferrell, cultural criminology emphasizes the importance of image, style and representations and the way these have encouraged a mediated construction of crime and criminal justice. It takes on the postmodern position that 'style is substance', that the meaning of something is based on its representation, to suggest that crime can be best understood as part of an 'image driven media loop' (Ferrell 2001). Ferrell points to a number of areas in which this new theoretical approach has developed. Firstly, crime is seen as a subcultural phenomenon organized around symbolic communication. It also examines the mediated construction of crime and the control of crime; considering the interconnections between the criminal justice system and the mass media, it looks at how certain activities come to be constructed as crimes and others do not and at the everyday consumption of crime as drama and entertainment. To quote Ferrell (1999):

"The notion of cultural criminology references the increasing analytic attention that many criminologists now give to popular culture constructions, and especially mass media constructions, of crime and crime control."

A good deal of research in cultural criminology

has looked at 'subcultural style', seeing this style as defining the way criminals characterize their activity and also the way such activities are viewed and constructed from outside. It has also introduced the idea of 'culture as crime', whereby aspects of popular culture become criminalized: "performers, producers, distributors, and retailers of rap and 'gansta rap' music have likewise faced arrest and conviction on obscenity charges, legal confiscation of albums, highly publicized protests, boycotts, hearings organized by political figures and police officials, ongoing media campaigns and legal proceedings against them of promoting – indeed, directly causing – crime and delinquency." (Ferrell, 1999).

Media crime revolution

In addition to framing how crime and criminal activities are viewed, the media also frames and determines our perceptions of crime control. With regards to the police, 'reality' policing programmes determine public perceptions of the police and will play a part in officer recruitment. To quote Ferrell (1999) again, "From the view of cultural criminology, policing must in turn be understood as a set of practices situated, like criminal practices, within subcultural conventions of meaning, symbolism and style."

As well as the media being a key contributor to the perception of crime, another important aspect of the postmodernist view of the link between the media and crime is the way that the media can cause crime. Indeed it could be argued that there has been a 'media revolution' in crime in recent years. This argument sees the media as a cause of an array of new crime in the sense that it is used to commit criminal activity, the obvious and most prevalent example of this being cyber and internet crime.

Although cybercrime is a term that has become widely used of late, it is not always clear what it actually is. Wall (2004, in the last issue of CJM) points to the tendency to call any offence involving a computer a 'cybercrime'; and offers a definition that embraces three different forms of such crime, which he suggests are at different positions on a 'cybercrime spectrum'. At one end are acts which are called cybercrime but which are basically 'traditional' crimes where the internet has been used to help organize and carry out the crime (eg. paedophiles). Without the internet the criminal behaviour will still exist using other forms of communication. In the middle, are 'traditional' crimes which have 'benefited'

from new global opportunities – which Wall terms ‘hybrid’ cybercrimes (eg. frauds, global trade in pornography). Such crime would still exist without the internet but on a reduced scale. At the other end of the spectrum are ‘true’ cybercrimes which only occur as a result of the opportunities created by the internet (eg. in cases of intellectual property theft or ‘phishing, in which money is stolen from banks and credit card accounts with fraudulently obtained customer codes and passwords). Without the internet these last types of cybercrime would not exist.

Race hate groups

Another example of the way in which the internet can be used to encourage and increase crime is its use by race hate groups – an example of what Wall would call ‘hybrid cybercrime’. Sutton (2002) argues that the internet has encouraged a growth in the race hate movement in recent years:

“The communications revolution has brought a new dimension to the hate movement. Racist web sites provide an enabling environment in which hate can flourish both on-line and off-line in our towns and cities.”

He summarises the different ways in which the internet can assist racist activities. Photographs can be used to show and celebrate real instances of racial violence. This can promote an indifference towards victims. The internet provides a vehicle for selling racist paraphernalia and enables the downloading and saving of collections of racist materials. And it enables people to experience and indulge in racism without being directly and physically involved.

Sutton also points to the internet creating a new dimension in hate crime through bringing together a range of distinct racist groups from various countries, which helps create a ‘powerful communications medium facilitating the development of neo-Nazi networks’. As well as racist groups using the internet, individuals are able to air and debate their own race hate on newsroom type web sites. The group identity created using this type of media, often through blatant and extraordinary rewriting of historical or biological fact – one has only to glance casually at the glorification of a mythic Anglo/Celtic past on ‘Aryan Brotherhood’ type websites created in the Southern United States to see how such a group identity fosters acts of hate crime – is surely a dramatic example of the postmodernist view of crime as situated within a subculture of symbols and identities, and of media and crime as a dynamic and interrelated system of meanings and actions.

The postmodern analysis of the relationship of media and crime can be applied to all areas where the two phenomena intersect – and indeed, the influence of the postmodern approach can be seen in the other articles in this issue of CJM, which look at the connections between representation of ‘crime’, public attitudes and policy – be it in the form of drug use, the actions of teenagers, or in the perceived threat of ‘asylum seekers’ and actions toward them.

One additional aspect of the interconnection

between symbolism and representation and ‘real life’ that can be seen through the lens of postmodernism is how the media can affect the victims of crime, to the extent of victimising victims even further. This is not to say that victims of crime are always treated badly by the media; some victims might in fact gain some comfort from seeing their situation getting media attention. As Mulley (2001) points out, the media can give victims the chance to tell their side of the story and ‘set the record straight’. Also, people who have been victims of crime or family members or friends of victims often feel that bringing attention to the crime through the media will help to give strength both to themselves and to others who have suffered from similar experiences. The media attention given to the plight of hostage Ken Bigley, who was beheaded in Iraq in October 2004, arguably helped his family and friends deal with the terrible ordeal he and they faced. Indeed it was through the media that the Bigley family gained access to the kidnappers. However, Mulley also highlights how media attention can become a form of secondary victimization. She reviewed research by Victim Support into the concerns and problems experienced by crime victims and witnesses, which found that unwanted and intrusive media attention was complained of by 50 out of 80 families interviewed. Victims of the most serious crimes can find media attention extremely difficult, especially if media journalists are particularly persistent and assertive. Anonymity in court is only legally guaranteed for child witnesses and victims of rape or sexual assault. Victim Support have also detailed cases where victims have been harassed and intimidated by friends of an offender following media reporting which has provided personal details – one might regard this as a ‘perfect’ example of a cause/effect relationship between media representation and a criminal act. ■

Ian Marsh is Programme Leader for Criminology and Gaynor Melville is Lecturer in Criminology at Liverpool Hope University College.

References

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