

Media, Crime and Criminologists

Introductory remarks

Crime news educates the public on issues dealing with social order (along with moral order) and by using images they send their own messages. The representations of the crime and the criminal stem from 'underground' fears or mythologies / mysticisms (Wilson 1987: 13).

In the social representations, the members of a group, sharing a common life, react in almost the same way when the information triggers collective emotions (Lefebvre 1980).

The criminal reality is thereof always accompanied by the media representation and the public opinion, which, often misled and believing in the information which is spread (Zarafonitou 2008). These criminal and criminogenic messages form a false consciousness and ultimately a false consensus.

These findings raise many questions.

Is it through representations that we analyse criminality and through stereotypes that we interpret criminological statistics?

How is it possible for the 'great public' to be in consensus when it is comprised of groups and individuals with different perceptions?

The 'pictures in our heads' (Ginneken 1998) that is, the stereotypes of fear, insecurity and diversity are always in search of what is 'real'. The television viewer, moulded not according to the picture, but by the picture itself, is under-informed by being over-informed and is disorientated by the social polls.

As long as reality is a socially constructed (and not objective) system which is subject to 'dislocation' and until a new social reality is constructed, the media play the role of an electronic consciousness.

Theoretically, public opinion at times agrees with the media (consensus), at other times disagrees (dissensus) and at times is not formulated at all, but rather expressed through individual positions (asensus) (Newman 1976).

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In practice, however, through the images projected by the media, general opinions are formed with regards to crime, stereotypes and labels (Cohen 2004) and through social control, deviants are individually disciplined (Mathiesen 1983: 132).

In a representation, the real object is absent and is substituted by the image of another or similar object, which evokes intense emotions. Representations produce 'symbols' through which public discourse on crime and deviance is dramatized.

Nevertheless when a message is constructed by the media and the meaning is constructed by the recipient, they do not necessarily lead to a consensus regarding the causes of the problems, but rather they often concur in the 'solutions' (Demertzis 2002).

The hyper-reality

Crime has always been 'omnibus' news (that is, everybody's business), but it can be easily manipulated by the media, using television 'tricks of the trade' which 'conceal by revealing' (Baudrillard 1983). The selection, construction, dramatization and 'impression of what is real', aim to mobilize or immobilize (empower or overpower) through promoting specific ideas, representations or predispositions (Bourdieu 1998).

The hyper-reality of simulations is an example of the new cultural form of 'crime in the making'.

Cultural recycling, with its simulations, forms the theoretical basis for 'crime waves'. The uncontrolled growth of cities or economic inequality, poverty and immigration shape the context of social problems from which crime waves emerge, although these crime waves do not always correspond to an increase in real crime (Fishman 2006: 48). However, it is certain that public consciousness and social awareness of crime – even if, for many, these are things of the mind – have real consequences. "News themes" construct crime waves and, through their consonance, foster a general atmosphere of insecurity (Sacco 2005).

The social constructionist perspective of crime waves, however solid it may be, must be subjected to the criticism of the television viewer. The camera, as an integral element to a panoptic system of covering, covering-up and revealing, must not be allowed to give the viewer the illusion of being personally involved (that is, of being present, of knowing, of deciding) (Pfeiffer and alias 2005: 266).

Moral panic and deviance amplification are powerful tools used to increase fear and insecurity and reinforce the labelling theory (Sacco 2005). The representations of dangers influence, if not change, behaviours and they work to construct an anti-crime (usually repressive) consensus of public opinion (Garland 2001).

The production and distribution of cultural knowledge by the media, is associated with the public's trust in the reliability of the crime data presented (statistics, processes, sentencing). Television viewers appear to 'ask for' inconsistent and unconventional methods of protection against the crime and the criminal. However it is far from

phenomena such as media-trials, where the tabloid justice of dramatizations and sensationalism prevails, or soap-opera trials or personalized trials (convictions), that citizens must seek the tools to analyse (crime) reality (Fox and v. Sickel 2001).

The (television) definition of crime or deviance is a socio-media construction. However, the reaction of public opinion to that construction, even if dependant upon established ideology, the normative framework and the social/political power of certain groups in shaping that same 'public opinion', does not cease to hover within the contexts of social *constructionism*, as well as within the contexts of 'free wielding' and subjective feelings. Symbolic reality cannot come into line with the reality we actually live. That is the starting-point and underlying assumption of our approach (Surette and Otto 2006: 301-304).

Media influence

If, on the one hand, the media construct social reality and, on the other, they 'impose' the interpretive contexts in which this reality is to be comprehended, then we must accept that we are all slaves to and held hostages by a media (technological) determinism (Serafetinidou 1987).

However integration is not achieved (since even the media are inter-mediated by other social processes), nor does a media behaviourism prevail (Benet 1989: 53-80). Real life will always prevail over virtual reality and social processes will always override communicative models.

Any effects of the media must not be perceived as 'influences exerted from above and from outside', but rather as an interaction of factors and combinations dealing with individuals, groups, attitudes, traditions, conjunctions and structures etc (Hall 1989: 90-94).

The mass media construct social realities *à la carte* (depending on the social group). Television, for instance, in order to provide a 'service', reproduces pre-existing spectacles with a view to create the greatest possible impact (psychological, social, political) (Eco 1987). On the flip side, however, television, acting as a 'universally apocalyptic medium', instructs us how to learn (correctly?) our social roles.

Constructed points and codes of communication (Fiske 1992) are also employed in the production and transmission of messages, as structures of control and power. Points and symbols, meanings and messages and the iconology of (re)productions attempt to steer coding / decoding to the foundations of a 'virtual' ideology. Messages which are hidden or obvious, intended or unintended, may act as agents for spreading values, behaviour models, social integration, (personal) identity, as well as categorisations, discriminations and stereotypes (Lippman 1988). The dominant opinion held by the media, accompanied by spirals of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1993, 1998: 89-93) and fear of isolation, is nothing more than a selective projection / interpretation of political information (Barker 1997: 86-87).

Crime construction and constructors

Journalists, themselves, are not the producers of (their own) news and television viewers are not simply consumers of 'news'. Therefore, it is imperative that criteria for discerning what is real from what is constructed are found, so that false ideas do not lead to real events (Panousis 2008) or to create a negative climate (Roberts and Stalans 1998: 54-55).

At times, based on the consensus model and moral agreement and at other times, based on the conflict model and social compulsions (Luhmann 1985) the media 'stimulate' public opinion by providing the illusion of free choice. Information, narrations, sensitisations / desensitisations may result in moral panics, but they do not cancel out free choice and reasoning (Young 2004: 18-19).

When news regarding the level and type of crime and the need for more crime prevention measures is provided almost solely by the media, this does not mean that opinion-makers can manipulate the public; nor, however, does it mean that public opinion should guide policy-makers. In the field of criminal justice, the views of the public and the experts differ qualitatively in terms of the causes, as well as the management of crime (Roberts and Hough 2002: 2-4).

The views of the public depend on the level of the legal knowledge it has, on the descriptions given by the victims of crime to the media (which are often 'constructed' after the event). They also depend, however, on how acquainted the public is with crime and how it has been trained to 'read' crime news. For instance, the public in a violent community will construe crime differently to the public in a peaceful community (Roberts and Stalans 2000).

Political, social and criminal violence become intertwined on a communications level and alter the 'tools' of analysis. The pop-entertainment value of television crime (Brown 2003) breeds consensus (even through silence of spiral) (Noelle-Newman 1993) not through a rational view, but through imaginary symbolic processes.

The uniform image that the media tend to produce, is not uniform across all media, nor does it remain uniform or break down socially / class different views in the medium-term. The double dose of reality does not work *for*, but rather *against* homogenisation.

The television viewer possesses and spreads prejudices and fears with regards to his/her constructed enemy and often unknown to the viewer lives in a make-believe world regarding the course of events (Gerbner 1998: 425).

The media, as subversive means, are seen as a threat to the law and morality, while the media as sovereign means, are seen as bolstering authoritarianism. Finally, the media in the role of jester, are seen as having no essential impact on the behaviours of the viewers, irrespective of the amount of violence they show or demonise (Jones and Wardle 2008: 58, Lambropoulou 1997).

The social construction of crime and the cultural function of ideological mechanisms come together in 'crime news'.

The *cornerstone* of this phenomenon comprises of *eight* (at least) new values:

- Immediacy – speed / currency / power – prestige
- Dramatization (drama and action)
- Structured access (experts, power base, authority)
- Novelty (new angle, speculation, twist)
- Titillation (revealing the forbidden, voyeurism)
- Conventionalism (hegemonic ideology)
- Personalization (culture of the personality / celebrity)
- Simplification (elimination of shades of grey) (Greer 2003)

This version of reality is based on a further twelve imperatives:

- Threshold
- Predictability
- Simplification
- Individualism
- Sex
- Risk
- Celebrity or high-status persons
- Proximity
- Violence
- Spectacle
- Youth
- Conservative ideology and political diversion (Jewkes 2006:159-163).

Crime news has added another five sets of informal rules to the above:

- Visible and spectacular acts
- Graphic representation
- Deterrence and repression
- Sexual and political connotations
- Individual pathology (Greer 2003).

The meaning of selectivity in the news production process centres around the term *gate keepers*.

Frequency, intensity, completeness, significance, compatibility, surprise, continuity, correlation, powerful nations and celebrities comprise the framework within which the media produce *their own* (good or bad) crime news and achieve two goals at once. On the one hand, they satisfy popular culture which demands more and more shock horror stories for mass consumption. On the other hand, the media themselves, again, provide the appropriate sedatives and easy solutions (at a profit, of course).

The construction of crime serves a particular purpose; it sets the *dividing line* of the nation's conscience between good and evil, guilt and innocence (Panousis 2008).

Exaggeration, distortion, prediction and symbolization act as stock-takers (inventory stage), but the 'moral entrepreneurs' do not foster a climate of reaction which is outside the law, even when they are ideologically or commercially exploiting the deviance and the punishment of the scapegoats (Thompson 1999).

The 'expert' information regarding crime which is provided by the media has the legitimisation / moralization of social control mechanisms as effect on the public opinion (Chiricos and alías 2006: 275).

The criteria for selecting / screening news with a 'bloody content' and the dramatization of the police / court reporting, have to do with provoking personal fear of victimization and collective insecurity, and usually result in a new abundance of laws being drafted by the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Public Order, so as to protect the public from crime (and not, of course, from the virtual crime constructed by the media) (Alexiadis 2000: 41-45).

Social control presupposes the diffusion of dangers, the increase of dangers and the innovation of dangers, which stem from deviant behaviours and this leads to disproportionate reactions, hostility and volatility, etc. The media intervene in the social negotiation of who is a criminal (Faget 2003) filtering the issues in approximately the same way as criminological statistics do, resulting not in a 'born' criminal, but a 'socially constructed' criminal.

Generally, the crime shown by the media always involves violence (murder, robbery, rape), which is continually on the rise. This is why, in most cases, crime is associated with the inability / incompetence of the police and the radical, revisional or critical approach of Criminology regarding social control (Cohen 1994: 63-73).

The media is in favour of the penal pressure groups (v. Swaaningen, 1997), while the less properly informed public opinion is regarding crime, the greater penal measures it seeks.

The conformist and moralistic view of the criminal is influenced by crime waves, insecurity and the images of crime (Cohen 1971, Zarafonitou 2002).

The reinvention of reality by the media, however, does not have the same meaning for all citizens. The partial, selective or stereotypical representation of reality is often so simplified, that it can only really have a coincidental effect. Television viewers appear to hold on to their initial opinion of crime (Fenton and alías 1998), despite the opposite or different messages of the media. Moral panic is the media's essential 'domain' of construction (Cohen and Young 1981, Garland 2008: 24). Hostility towards certain social groups provoked by the representation of negative images by the media demonises those who belong to those groups and converts the moral condemnation of deviant behaviour into social control and penal repression (Watney 1997: 126-128, Davies 2007: 117).

Virtual justice

The effects of terror are real, even when the fear of victimization is constructed. Personal fears, insecurities, assumptions, estimations and value judgements with regards to the efficiency of the police, combined with stereotypes and prejudices, result in conformist, manichean and optimistic or pessimistic views of crime management (Robert 1979: 50-99).

Public opinion, through the media, persists in seeking retribution and television persists in playing the role of the modern 'pillory' (Crépeau 1998: 64) where media lynching and cruel infringement of human rights, in the name of satisfying the media masses, create a penal rationale which "co-judges" (Pires 2001: 186-198).

'Television justice' of emotions uses information and communication to construct the guilty and/or the victims, and to turn the State, Law and Trial into a spectacle.

Tele-trials confirm the public's right to know, but they contribute to the creation of a (not-so-innocent) media spectacle and this makes its own (social - cultural) spectacle (Schuetz 1999: 7).

Although television viewers are not 'cultural idiots' (culturally naïve), the hyper-reality of a televised criminal trial (e.g. O. J. Simpson trial in the USA) (Furno-Lamade 1999: 19-20) is created by the high pressure media scrutiny (Boyarsky 1997: 32) and/or by neo-racist convictions (e.g. Tyson's trial) (Lule 1997: 377).

It is unacceptable that, in the name of 'media justice', we hide the truth (Uviller 1996) nor is it acceptable that, in the name of freedom of expression, we transform justice into a marketplace of ideas, at the expense of rights and freedom.

The construction of the 'presumption' of guilt or innocence through a televised criminal trial has been widely discussed, due to a number of extremely interesting cases [e.g. November 17 trial in Greece (Panousis 2004) O. J. Simpson trial in the USA]. 'Made-up' publicity runs the risk of not only diminishing the organizational / functional aspect of the hearing, but also of lessening the people's trust in the ideological impartiality / clarity in the administration of justice. In order to avoid this trap, the citizens' right to be informed must be coupled with valid and multi-sourced information, as well as with the reinforcement of the judges' independence.

The media influence popular consciousness through public images and through selection and presentation, but the imaginary line between 'good' and 'bad' does not alter criminological theory.

The correlation of (crime) newsworthiness and deviancy amplification, moral panic and social control may be viewed as a manufacture of news and maker of the false enemy. However, if we put aside the magnification / increase of fear, all these factors in no way effect Criminology.

The silence of the victims in this paradox form of tele-justice with no real trial (where public opinion often plays the role of the mob); photo-journalism (with the hyper-manufacture of photographs); the graphic courtroom images; the dangerous TV

shows (e.g. *To Catch a Predator*) all convert real crime into a crime spectacle, but they do not convert Criminology into journalism (Panousis 2008).

Crime journalism and criminologists

Criminology has only recently begun to concern itself with the issue of the media. The image of real crime and the television representations of that image have caused confusion which the 'science of crime' has now been called upon to clarify (Osborne 2006: 267-275). Hyper-reality has created a new field of criminological research and 'news-making criminology' (crime journalism) has broadened the responsibility of criminologists to include the reconstruction (restoration) of crime reality distorted by the media (Chibnall 1977).

Criminology (and criminologists) need to respond to the media (communication) myths with demystifications.

Crime news, public order, the cultural environment, symbolic deviance and the political system provide the framework for newsmaking Criminology. Criminologists must re-construct the myths on which the construction of crime news is based (information on crime, deterrence, real-life drama etc.) (Barak 1994/95: 3-6) and provide the public with other 'tools' for interpreting the phenomenon of crime (Chermak 1994/95: 104).

Criminologists use the media to interpret crime, to inform public opinion and in this sense often find themselves presented with many roles to play (Barak 2007: 107). They are not only experts, but educators, as through replacement discourse, they educate the public on how to interpret journalistic exaggerations (Greek 1994/95: 104).

Code of Ethics

In 1999, the General Secretariat for Youth assigned the task of drafting a Code of Ethics to the Department of Communication and Mass Media of Athens University, in order to protect young people from television violence (Tsevas 2004: 183).

Despite this Code never being implemented, it provides an all-embracing solution which helps to manage this problem, and that is why we have included the main points of the Code here (G.S.N.Y. 1999).¹

1. See for instance art. 3 & 4

In order to place programs in each of the abovementioned categories and to determine their exact time of transmission, careful scheduling is required if it is possible that the program may, due to its dramatization or content, directly or indirectly:

- a. Cause these minors anxiety, insecurity, fear of agitation, for instance,
 - (1) by showing scenes of violence or destruction,
 - (2) by brutally portraying life situations, which could be experienced in real life by children, causing intense fear (such as, family conflicts),

Conclusions

The public's social representations of crime rates, crime and the criminal have not been subjected to standard social processing, nor are they the result of extensive scientific enlightenment from experts in the field.

Cultivation (Potter 1999) involves the 'long-term shaping of perceptions and convictions about the world' derived from the interventions of the media. Although media 'constructions' often interpose between 'crime and justice', this does not mean that the social constructions which have created the meaning and content of the terms *crime* and *justice* are withdrawn.

"An audience made up of citizens" has no need for mediation between society and morality (Chomsky 1997), institutions and public interest (Postman 1985).

The construction of public interpretation with regards to the threat posed by crime and the accompanying moral panic, is derived from *exaggeration, accommodation, symbolization, prediction, generalization* and *degradation* (Braithwaite 1987: 55-56).

A simple incident is presented as an instance, in order to kindle the imagination of the public and to expose the 'crime waves' behind social problems (Sacco 2006: 33).

- (3) by showing actual scenes of violent events, without sufficient explanation,
- (4) by presenting the imaginary as real or the real as imaginary, in such a way as to make their distinction difficult or impossible,
- (5) by showing sex scenes in detail, or
- b. Create confusion in minors from a social or moral aspect, for instance,
 - (1) by presenting role models with violent or other anti-social behavior,
 - (2) by presenting or justifying the use of violence as a means for settling disputes,
 - (3) by presenting violence as an effective or appropriate substitute for communication,
 - (4) by suppressing the consequences of violence or insinuating that violence is less dangerous than what it is in reality, in order to dull one's sensitivity towards violence,
 - (5) by showing violence at length and in intensity which do not correspond to reality, in order to create a sense of present and constant threat in the under-age television viewer,
 - (6) by the uncritical portrayal of prejudices or acts of violence against non-conformers,
 - (7) by prompting one to adopt extremely one-sided or long out-dated behavioral stereotypes,
 - (8) by showing sexual relationships and behaviors which degrade human dignity in such a way as to make them appear legitimate or acceptable,
 - (9) by showing sexual relationships involving minors, acts which are punishable by law, in such a way as to make them appear legitimate or acceptable,
 - (10) by frequently or unnecessarily using abusive terminology, blasphemy or profanity.
- c. Disorientate young people in issues of health or safety, for instance,
 - (1) presenting behavioral role models, the imitation of whom could place young people in danger, especially those behaviors which involve undertaking any dangerous or risky activity without protection, or using tools, weapons, other hazardous objects or substances without observing the rules for their use,
 - (2) by showing smoking or the consumption of alcohol or other harmful substances or habits,
 - (3) by giving young people the impression that violence against animals or damage to property of cultural or historical significance are acts which are acceptable or harmless..

The freedom of the media as the most important value of communication and the independence of justice as the most important value for rectifying structures and relationships must not be parallel to each other, nor must they conflict.

We should not forget that technology is merely a machine, while the medium is a social construction. Therefore, the use of the medium by the (legitimate) culture is that which should concern us.

Criminological research in Greece must get rid of the ghost of the *inner enemy*, which offends age-long values and rallies around the power of the state (Dimopoulos 2003) since the *risk society* often becomes a *scapegoat society* (Beck 1992).

The Criminology of news reports and the responsibility of criminologists in the correct and full information of the public are crucial parameters to this end (Gerbner and Gross 1976).

The representation of 'distant violence' through images of a political and ideological nature has undermined the role of the experts and given the media the authority to actively intervene into reality in the name of 'higher ideals'.

May these *higher ideals* be the first field in which media ideology is doubted and reversed by the science of Greek Criminology and the daring of Greek Criminologists.

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