

## Introduction

# Thinking about the News

Crime, deviance, delinquency and other social problems have always been a staple of newspaper accounts, television news shows and crime dramas. As the saying goes, sex and violence sells. Although such knowledge is third-hand, it appears immediate, shocking, entertaining and informative, filtered through the media graphically and textually. The media has replaced first-hand experience and second-hand gossip as our source of information, opinion and news about the world. The pervasiveness and assumed facticity of the news are rarely questioned, and sometimes it's a jolt to realize that knowledge of events can be created.

The media can make it seem as if we are at the scene of a crime down the street or seeing events half a world away. The media presents us with stories about events created by people we will never meet or places we will never see. We accept the objective character of the news, and only when a source is misquoted or an issue receives inadequate coverage is the media questioned or criticized on how it does its job. But what exactly is that job, and is it usually done well enough? When crime news is sometimes criticized as biased, does that mean it usually is not?

The media does not merely report the news. First, it has to construct and assemble it, and in this way the perceptions of crime created by the news media are organized. When reading or watching the news, we are getting reports about events in the world, built from the work of reporters in the field and influenced by the perspective of editors, who are anticipating the reactions of consumers. Consumers are getting more than passively conveyed social facts because the news actively creates impressions and opinions about the world. For example, crime news trades upon and re/creates certain subtexts — law and order, discipline, danger, fear, authority. These underlying themes implicitly define the boundaries of society and have an effect on how people think and live their lives.

The power of the media is evident in how it affects a whole range of attitudes about public and personal safety. For example, television crime can influence public anxiety, leading people to a mean world view, where they think that the world is more dangerous than it really is. The media can also play a reactive role, trivializing violent crimes such as sexual assault, so people

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become desensitized, misconstruing violence and blaming the victim. The media can sensationalize crimes, exacerbated by interest groups that have something to gain by creating moral panic around issues such as child abuse, thereby inflaming public anger. On the other hand, the media can also be proactive in dispelling crime myths. Criminologists who try to use the media to educate the public engage in news-making criminology.

The media can influence our perceptions about everything from break-and-enter to terrorism. Media images of deviance and criminality can fuel the fear of crime and result in a tough law-and-order approach and calls for stiffer penalties against people convicted of crimes. The media has an incredible power to set agendas and reflect political points of view, a fact recognized and often exploited by politicians. It has the power to rock the foundations of a community when it reports on crimes that appear to threaten the very fabric of social life. It has the power to create a fear of crime that is not based in first-hand experience and thus it drives our cognitive and emotional views of the world.

Crime waves as well as individual crimes are subject to social construction as accounts created by journalists, fed by competition and coherence of opinion among newspapers, who rely on a restricted pool of experts and authorities for opinions. As the anecdote goes, early-twentieth-century journalist Lincoln Steffens said he could create a crime wave by writing about all the crime that normally occurs in a large city and that he could end the crime wave just as easily. If crime waves can be manufactured by journalists, what does this say about the social construction of crime?

Consumers, that is, readers and viewers of the news, are not often in a good position to judge the veracity of crime news because they do not know the background of the stories reported, their editorship or the priorities assigned in their production. The production of news is not open to view, even though the news is relied upon increasingly as a source of facts about the world. The world is experienced through the lens of the media, and our understanding of the world is mediated through the abstraction of the news, which stands in for experientially based knowledge. Once we start to realize that knowledge of the world is the sum total of opinions, attitudes, fears and desires produced in the consumption of the news, we begin to have a different attitude toward what we consume. Otherwise we remain alienated in our knowledge of the world.

Comprehending how knowledge is re/produced (and mis/represented) enables us to be more critical in an increasingly complicated, alienating and technologically dominated society, amid all the noise, babble and chaos of the information age. We don't want to be cynical but rather examine how even mis/perceptions are consequential in people's lives. For example, if the media reports that most sexual assaults are committed by strangers jump-

ing out from behind bushes in parks, then that stereotype is more likely to be believed, reported to the police and taken seriously by the public. This stereotype distorts the reality of acquaintance assault.

Or, if the media portrays drug crime as narcotics handled in washrooms, then people will not worry about medicines their doctor prescribes them. If a crime wave is constructed around kids who swarm or muggers in dark alleys with knives, then people will not worry about bid-rigging, insider trading and environmental pollution. A steady diet of sensationalistic crimes hides more mundane and harder-to-detect crimes, just as a focus on street crime hides corporate crime.

The depiction of crime in the news affects people's perception of safety and danger in society with subsequent consequences. The news is an endless torrent of chatter and gossip about ephemera, issues that capture one's attention momentarily but are gone tomorrow. The chatter might contain truth, lies, distortions or half-truths and constitute the facts society lives by. But while people are drawn together through consuming the same news, they are also fractured. The media brings us together in a global village yet alienates us from control in the world.

The news media fills our days with information from everywhere about everything, and we do not have time to reflect on its meaning or to know what weight or value to assign to any of it. We are information junkies, demanding more and more but without any notion of what to do with it. It is just information. And the ubiquity of it has created what Marshall McLuhan called a global village, in which everything has become a commodity. This information does not usually directly affect our lives, as would news of a dam collapse upriver or an oncoming forest fire. Our relation to information is quite different. For us, information is a commodity that is bought and sold, but most of it has little to do with our lives.

An estimated that 95 million American viewers watched O.J. Simpson flee from police down the freeway on June 17, 1994. Mass viewership in itself is not surprising. The 2008 Superbowl drew 98 million viewers, and the final episode of *M\*A\*S\*H* in 1983 drew 106 million viewers. However, a grand jury probing possible murder charges against Simpson had to be dissolved on the grounds that it had been tainted by pretrial publicity. Watching that chase it seemed there was little doubt he was guilty, and during the two hours viewers heard about the suicide note, wife abuse, divorce, stalking and jealousy, even though this was for most an event thousands of miles away of which they had no direct knowledge, described by people they would never meet about an event they could not control.

To watch, read and hear about such spectacles is to rely less on direct experience of the world and more on extra-locally produced knowledge. Subsequent gossip about crime is based on information brought by others

via these stories, texts and pictures. And the technological fact of production and delivery gives these stories added weight. The construction of an arena of public discourse creates a form of social consciousness that is extra-local and externalized in relation to ourselves. Paradoxically, we can place ourselves in the experiences of others we will never meet, at the same time as we can distance ourselves from the emotional pain they feel. More subtly, in the process, certain images of crime and criminal justice are normalized.

In watching, listening to or reading the media, we become a news subject ourselves, receiving a constructed knowledge of the world bounded in a discourse that has a beginning, middle and end. This standard, uniform knowledge does not always have a context or history, and it is not always apparent who wrote the news or from what perspective they wrote it. However, these atemporal events without context and author structure our understanding of the world. In some ways, authorless information has the most authority because it cannot easily be dismissed as idiosyncratic. News, as opposed to personal experience, is objective information because it does not have the taint of subjectivity. Even seeing bias in the news presumes knowing what unbiased news supposedly looks like, and ironically this tends to be news that is authorized, broadcast and copyrighted by the news organization that produced it.

The consequence of learning about crime from a media that constructs stories extra-locally is that misunderstanding and fear of crime may be increased. The world portrayed in the media can be disembodied, sensationalistic and stereotypical. When a crime is portrayed as an isolated event, nothing is learned about its underlying causes and the context that surrounds it, the decisions that motivate it, the actions that result in its detection, the search for suspects and the actions of the police. Moreover, crime is not seen as mediated by the news and the justice system. When crimes are not seen realistically, people become increasingly afraid to walk in their own neighbourhoods, they become more desensitized to crime and they think the criminal justice system treats offenders too leniently.

Some criticize the tabloid media and true crime shows of sensationalism, of blurring the line between entertainment and reality. But the sin is not left only to them. Sensationalism can easily feed into the perception of increasing crime and that social order will crumble unless there is a crackdown on gun-toting punks who commit brutal, senseless murders.

Even though there is evidence that crime was not on the increase in the 1990s, major western countries all introduced measures to get tough on crime. And now, we have similar get-tough measures being introduced by the Conservative government, such as sentencing reform, tighter parole restrictions and more severe criminal sanctions. Where do these ideas come from? Is it as simple as examining the media to see how crime becomes con-

structed as a social fact, some of it distorted and sensationalized while other crimes are underplayed? Are symbolic issues the motor of social change? Here we look at some of the ways researchers have turned to the media as an important site of analysis.

## Studying the News

Canadian and international newspaper articles are used to illustrate certain points in this book. In many cases, these articles are taken from clippings files developed for teaching and research purposes and supplemented with news articles from various sources. For the first edition, the *Canadian News Index (CNI)*, was useful; while in the second, the *Canadian Business and Current Affairs (CBCA)*, *FP Infomart*, and public archives and newspapers were used more. Many major newspapers such as the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, and the *New York Times* have online searchable archives, and articles from international news agencies can also be accessed via the Internet.

The *Canadian News Index* listed stories since 1977 by subject from seven major Canadian dailies: *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Toronto Star*, *Winnipeg Free Press*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Calgary Herald* and *Vancouver Sun*. The *CNI* provided enough information to get the article from microfilm or interlibrary loan. Since 1993 the *CNI* has been called the *Canadian Index*, and newspaper citations have been amalgamated with those for magazines and other periodicals. The *Index* did not list all stories on crime that had been published because only items of major interest were selected and compiled. The advantage of using the *Canadian Newspapers Fulltext FP Infomart* is that this database offers full-text access to more than fifty Canadian newspapers; coverage dates vary by title but for New Brunswick, papers goes back to at least 1998.

Historical research can also be done with primary documents found in libraries and archives. A provincial depository usually has local community and provincial newspapers from the 1800s onwards on microfilm and can be used to research events such as the Oka standoff in Quebec of 1990, the 1991 Halifax riot in Nova Scotia, the debate on the *Juvenile Delinquents Act* of 1908, the Winnipeg General Strike or Riel Rebellion, or the imposition of the federal *War Measures Act* during the FLQ crisis. In my course on the historical development of criminal justice in Canada, the news has become an important source of information and insight into then current events and a resource for studying the construction of public opinion, for example, the editorial influence on attitudes toward the abolition of capital punishment in the *Globe* in the 1970s.

Daily newspapers are a good source of information on events that were not always important enough to be included in history books or academic journals. Local newspapers are usually easily available, and university and public libraries receive national and international newspapers. Reading in-

ternational newspapers can take less time if one is looking for specific topics, and it is also a good way to search for topics seldom covered, such as police deviance and political corruption.

Researching the news is something anyone can do, but it requires some time and organization. Once samples are collected, one can begin to see patterns in the length, placement and discourse of the articles that wouldn't have been immediately apparent. For example, why are there so few stories about wife abuse in the news, yet so many stories about youth crime? Why do community papers have a court report section, but national papers do not? Why are corporate crimes reported in the *Globe and Mail* often found only in the business section? What crime stories make the front page?

A basic assumption in this book is that news constitutes a textual re/presentation of crime, and analyzing the media involves examining discursive themes and patterns. For example, in articles on youth violence, what is of interest is whether the problem is characterized as widespread, how new it is said to be and the degree of violence reported. This characterization of youth violence can then be compared with official statistics on youth crime to see if there is any consistency between them.

Comparing the patterns found in the news with the official incidence of crime is one way of obtaining a standpoint on the news. This is called context analysis. The following sources of official information are used throughout to create context: crime statistics collected by police departments across the country and published by Statistics Canada, special statistical reports published by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics and analyses of victimization data obtained through the General Social Survey. These and other secondary sources of information are used in part to compare what is officially known about crime with how crime is presented in the news, but there is no assumption that these official sources of information are perfect or that news accounts should necessarily match them.

The textual characterizations in the news can also be examined internally to reconstruct the claims made about youth crime, to see which point of view is represented and thus analyze why the public has become more concerned with youth crime as an issue even though it does not appear that it has actually increased. This is called content analysis, and it is especially useful in teasing out political themes and ideological messages.

Specific devices are useful in doing a content analysis, such as analysis of metaphors, tropes, elisions and misrepresentations. An example of a metaphor is the use of a descriptive term in a way that is not intended literally, as in "crazed serial killer," where it is not really known whether the killer has a mental illness or not. Such metaphors easily lead to sensationalism and contribute to social panics. A trope is a figure of speech, as in speaking of prostitutes as "ladies of the night," that is also both metaphorical and ironic.

Tropes can contribute to misperceptions and distortions of crime, such as viewing prostitution as women's deviance. An elision is an absence, a failing to include something essential in the account, as in omitting that most sexual assault is violent exploitation between acquaintances rather than a crime between strangers. Elisions contribute to ideological misunderstandings about crime that can actually increase their likelihood.

There are clearly some overlaps in these textual devices, but they provide a connecting thread that links the topics of the chapters with a deeper underlying theme of social construction. Ordinary misrepresentations, stereotypes and distortions are identified as well. To see how these textual devices work requires an especially close reading in some cases.

The analysis developed here is not based on how people are affected by what they read in the news. Although that is important, this book is primarily concerned with an analysis of how reading is ideological, how the news takes possible interpretations of events in the world and constructs a dominant point of view. Crime news is ideological because through the media we acquire systematic misperceptions about the world, for example, that youth gangs are rampant. But news is not simply exaggerated or unreal, it has real consequences. Thus, the pertinent question is not simply how well the news represents a crime but how the crime is represented. News is part of the ideological apparatus of our society. It supports the status quo and represents the point of view of the powerful. The distortion in the news might convince readers that the world is a violent place but this is not an analysis of how people read, it is an analysis of how the news could possibly be read to (re)create social order.

The analysis in this book draws from various ideas in criminology but is based generally on a social constructionist approach: the idea that our news about the world does not necessarily reflect reality and that crime topics are as much constructed as reported. This approach comprises a variety of research and is best known for its ability to deflate moral panics. For example, crime news is often sensationalized and largely reflects the perspectives of the police and the criminal justice system. Crime waves can occur like fads, reflecting the fear of the day.

The moral panics model, developed first in the 1970s, drew heavily on symbolic interaction and labelling theory. It was used to great advantage in unpacking exaggerated fears around narcotics, pornography, prostitution and child abuse. The original model assumed that there were folk devils, so-called, who symbolized a moral threat to society. Society itself was assumed to be homogeneous and monolithic and subject to moral panics contained in speeches, sermons, law-and-order agendas, crime legislation and so on.

As an example of how we can begin to do an analysis of crime in the news, consider a recent attempt to introduce anti-crime legislation in Canada.

In February 2009, the Conservative government introduced stiffer penalties for certain offences. If we were to construct an exemplary discourse on the topic it might look like: “Prime Minister Stephen Harper visited Vancouver, what his public safety minister calls Canada’s gang capital... and met with police chiefs and the families of gang-violence victims who’ve become lobbyists for a crackdown... ‘We’ve had a terrible wave of violence in British Columbia, and quite frankly the public is sick and tired of what’s going on,’ said the police chief, while an opposition politician said, ‘more jail time will not cure the violence.’”

The attempt to create unanimity of opinion around the need to do something about violent crime represents an orthodox ideology, while the difference of opinion illustrates the difficulty in doing same, an uneasy heterodoxy. The way in which these opinions are expressed, and debated, is through words, and we can use many techniques to analyze them.

## Overview of the Book

The research this book represents is organized by topics: sexual assault, prostitution, domestic violence, the Mount Cashel orphanage scandal, AIDS, crime fear, Crime Stoppers, serial homicide and the Westray tragedy. Each chapter also has an underlying theme, such as sensationalism, invisibility, orthodoxy and community.

The first part of the book is called Gender and Crime. In Chapter 1, Sharon Fraser, a freelance journalist and broadcaster, speaks about working as a columnist writing about feminist issues and how issues that affect women are either not discussed in the media or not presented from a woman’s point of view. Branching off from there, the chapter looks at how sexual assault is reported in the news media, how the police dominate as the authority on crime and how the media provides readers with an orthodox version of events that can actually misinform women, and men, about sexual assault. A sample study is created using all articles on sexual assault in the *National Post* during 2007.

In Chapter 2, Anne Derrick, then a noted criminal attorney and now a youth court judge, focuses on women who work as prostitutes and how they are narrowly stereotyped as hookers in the media. This label becomes their main identity and much less attention is paid to the organization of the sex trade, their poverty and the ways in which they are abused. Examples of how the media labels such women are reproduced, and it is argued that the characterization of prostitutes is part of the crime itself. By focusing too little on the roles of men as johns and pimps, the media and the criminal justice system end up revictimizing these women. A special case study on how women went missing in Vancouver’s downtown eastside and also went missing from the media is discussed. The result was tragic.



In Chapter 3, Debi Forsyth-Smith, politician and civil servant, introduces the topic of violence against women in relationships. In analyzing news accounts of violence against women, certain features are important, such as article size, whether the violence is portrayed as unusual or normal and whether the article points to the larger context within which individual incidents of violence take place. As domestic violence is invisible in the media compared to its incidence, the analysis takes up the problem of how to account for invisibility and how some topics get taken up in the media while others do not.

The second part of the book, *Distortion in the Media*, deals with specific ways crime is misrepresented in the news. In Chapter 4, Gary Kinsman, an activist and sociology professor, looks at the Hughes Commission of Inquiry into child abuse at Mount Cashel in St. John's, Newfoundland. Kinsman describes how the media inscribes deviant categories by creating a link between homosexuality and child sexual abuse. The media does not invent this convergence but reproduces a pre-existing social idea. In the process of inscription, certain voices are presented while others are silenced. An orthodox view replaces a heterodox one. A sample study using articles from the *Ottawa Citizen* on the Cornwall pedophile ring is used to illustrate how blame is assigned.

In Chapter 5, Eric Smith, a former teacher and AIDS activist, talks about how AIDS is (mis)represented in the news media. While having AIDS is not a crime, in a process called convergence, it is distorted in the media and associated with drug users, prostitutes and other deviant groups. The signification of AIDS in the media as a problem of marginal groups makes it easier for authorities to call for quarantining infected people. Articles that exhibit this alarmist characterization of AIDS have an obvious tendency to scapegoat the problem, blame it on marginalized social groups and associate it only with them. The consequence of this misrepresentation is that many people still do not feel themselves to be at risk. This topic is taken up in the recent concern over swine flu.

In Chapter 6, Joy Mannette, activist and teacher, takes up the issue of ethnocentrism in the news, showing how race relations issues are portrayed in ways that reinforce ethnic bias. She recounts three cases of lack of ethnic sensitivity in the news. The theme of extra-locality, or distance from events, is discussed, using the example of the 1991 Halifax race riot, where Blacks rampaged through the streets committing random violence, finally leading to a confrontation with the police. This analysis illustrates how crime news comes to stand in for direct experience and shows the power of a mediated world. A more recent example of coverage in the *Montreal Gazette* of a race riot following a police shooting in 2008 is used for analysis.

The third part of the book, *Law and Media*, looks at the relationship

between the news media and the criminal justice system. In Chapter 7, a retired Halifax constable and former police media relations officer, Paul MacDonald, discusses how the media often fails to do a good job in reporting on crime and the workings of the criminal justice system and how this can lead to problems in policing. This speaks to the organizational structure of newsmaking and how reliant the media is on knowledge owned by the police. The issue of exaggeration is developed by looking at fear of crime and how crime reporting creates an emotional ontology, wedding audience to police in the fight against crime. Coverage of the 2005 Toronto Boxing Day shooting is examined.

Similarly, in Chapter 8, Tony Thomson, a sociology professor, looks at the historical relationship between the media and the police, discussing and criticizing how public relations has come to be an important part of policing. Using the example of Crime Stoppers, the analysis looks at how soliciting the help of the public through the media extends the influence of the police further into the community than would have been possible otherwise and is itself an exercise in public relations. Unfortunately, however, soliciting the public's help through invoking the idea of community can alienate the very audience ads try to enlist. An analysis of how this works through video Crime Stoppers ads is presented in the sample study.

In Chapter 9, Darrel Pink, lawyer, discusses sensationalism in the news and how difficult it is to work with reporters when they often do not have an adequate understanding of the criminal justice system and how it works. The concept of sensationalism is developed through the example of the Homolka–Bernardo case in Ontario, where the law was used to prohibit the media from reporting certain information, while tabloid speculation in the United States and Britain was rampant. The theme of sites of social anxiety is taken up and discussed in light of recent sensational cases in Canada, and the analysis tracks the development of the term “serial killer” in the 1980s, mapping its ambivalent use in news and entertainment.

In Chapter 10, Deborah Woolway, radio producer, discusses the theme of pack journalism in the context of the inquiry into why Donald Marshall, a Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq, spent eleven years in prison for a murder he didn't commit. This theme is taken up in a look at the media coverage of the Westray mine disaster and the subsequent criminal and legal issues that surrounded its inquiry. The consequent uniformity in news reporting caters to an emotional sense of personal tragedy instead of illuminating the underlying causes of such a disaster.

A recommended reading list is provided but no references or endnotes. This pedagogical style is chosen to invite readers to consider the persuasiveness of the analysis.