**CD15 - Media and Crime**

In this lecture, we will explore the topic of media and crime. Specifically, we will examine how various forms of media, such as fictional and factual crime portrayals in movies, TV shows, books, documentaries, true crime, podcasts, and the press, represent crime and the people involved in the criminal justice system. We will critically analyse whether these representations accurately reflect the reality of crime in society or create a distorted view. Moreover, we will investigate whether the media is a cause of crime or the fear of crime, drawing on theories such as labelling theory, moral panics, gender and crime, and ethnicity and crime. We encourage you to review these theories briefly as we delve into this topic.

**MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIME**

To start with we will explore the representation of distinct groups within fictional crime in various media forms such as television, movies, books, magazines, and graphic novels. The focus of this analysis will be on the portrayal of criminals, police, and victims in these mediums. It should be noted that the discussion centres on stereotypes, which are prevalent in these representations, albeit with exceptions. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the media continuously seeks innovative ways to attract viewers, which may lead to depictions that do not conform to the typical stereotypes. Therefore, this analysis will provide a general overview of the portrayal of these groups within fictional crime.

In the field of criminology, there exists a multifaceted representation of criminals, with various views and perceptions surrounding them. The first representation is that of the master criminal or supervillain, who manipulates others to conduct their crimes. James Moriarty, the villain from Sherlock Holmes, serves as a prime example of this type of criminal. Moriarty's intelligence is on par with Sherlock Holmes, but he uses his skills for evil and criminal purposes. Conversely, there are incompetent criminals, such as the Wet Bandits from the Home Alone films, who are portrayed as heartless thieves, but are outsmarted by a pre-pubescent boy. These criminals are viewed as being foolish and incapable of conducting successful crimes.

Another representation of criminals is that of the psychopath, who is characterized by a lack of empathy and a disregard for human life. Dexter Morgan from the TV show Dexter is a blood spatter analyst for the police, but also engages in vigilante killings of those who have been let off by the justice system. While he sees himself as a vigilante, he is diagnosed as a psychopath and is unable to understand the emotions of others. This representation is common in slasher and serial killer movies.

Finally, there are the planners, who are characterized by their meticulous planning and organization of criminal acts. The heist crew in the movie Oceans Eight serves as a prime example of this type of criminal. These individuals carefully plan and execute complex heists, which require multiple steps and contingencies. While these criminals are often admired for their organizational skills, their actions are still viewed as criminal and are subject to punishment.

These various representations of criminal’s link to theories of crime demons, which posit that criminals are rational planners who weigh the costs and benefits of their actions. The sociological study of criminal representations offers insight into societal perceptions and attitudes towards crime and criminal behaviour.

Traditionally, female characters are depicted as helpless victims in TV shows and movies. However, the Scream franchise deconstructs and breaks down these stereotypes, showcasing characters such as the promiscuous friend who dies early on or the jock who is not a likable person and meets an early demise. Nonetheless, the typical portrayal of the hapless heroine targeted by a criminal remains prevalent. Nevertheless, there has been a recent shift towards strong female characters who take on the role of the vigilante instead of being passive victims of crime.

In contrast, the vigilante male is another common portrayal of victims of crime. These characters often become violent and aggressive after being victimized. For example, drug dealers kill the Punisher’s family, so he goes on a rampage to avenge their deaths. Similarly, the film Wrath and Standing Tall depict male characters who seek revenge against those who harmed them or their loved ones.

Recently, there has been an emergence of films featuring vigilante females, such as Peppermint, in which the protagonist seeks vengeance after her family is killed in a drive-by shooting. These depictions often present a view that victims of crime are driven to violent behaviour due to PTSD.

Moreover, fictional media often portrays victims of crime in police procedurals as ethnic minorities who are entirely innocent. This presentation of crime victims is quite stereotypical, portraying them as sweet, innocent angels. However, victims of crime are not always entirely innocent or without flaws.

The representation of police in fiction tends to be quite binary, comprising two broad categories: the intelligent, astute, and often superhuman, and the incompetent, bumbling type. The former category includes famous fictional characters such as Sherlock Holmes, Temperance Brennan from "Bones," and Dr. Spencer Reid from "Criminal Minds," who possess an extraordinary intellect and the ability to perceive details that elude normal humans. On the other hand, the latter group comprises those characters, such as Inspector Clouseau from the "Pink Panther" films and Frank Drebin from "Naked Gun," who are often portrayed as stumbling and incompetent in their investigations. Regardless of the depiction, the police typically manage to catch the culprit by the end of the episode or movie, and justice is served. This portrayal of law enforcement in fictional media often perpetuates the idea that the police are always successful in catching the bad guys, even though this is not always the case in real life.

**MEDIA DISTORTION**

The phenomenon of media distortion in depictions of criminals is a subject of much scholarly interest. Madel, a renowned sociologist, has expounded upon the notion of over-representation in fictional media, which distorts the reality of crime. This is evident in the skewed portrayal of men as perpetrators of violent crimes, such as murder. It is worth noting that, between 1945 and 1985, over ten billion crime thriller books were sold, while over 25% of TV shows and over 20% of movies were based around criminal activity. The prevalence of such representations, however, does not reflect the reality of crime, and instead creates a false sense of what it is like.

Similarly, Surrette, another sociologist, has developed the law of opposites, which suggests that the depiction of criminal activity in fictional media is the direct opposite of official statistics. For instance, property crime, which is the most prevalent criminal activity in statistics, is not given much attention in fictional media, presumably because it is not considered as exciting as other crimes. In contrast, violence, drugs, and sex crimes receive disproportionate attention in the media, leading to a misconception that murder is driven purely by greed and calculation, when in fact, many murders are spontaneous. The depiction of sex crimes is also misleading as most rapes are committed by acquaintances, rather than strangers, as portrayed in the media. Stranger rapes are rare, and unsolved cases often occur due to the lack of a connection between the victim and the perpetrator.

In the study of crime, it is commonly believed that the police are always successful in capturing the criminals, and that the statistics show a low rate of unsolved crimes. However, this is not an accurate representation of reality. Many crimes that are reported and recorded remain unsolved, often due to a lack of evidence or resources for investigation. The impact of this misperception can result in a fear of crime among the general population, and even lead to confusion between fictional and real-life criminal activity, as portrayed in true crime documentaries and shows, a phenomenon known as hyperreality in postmodernist theory.

Moving on to factual crime, media representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of criminals and victims. In press coverage and true crime documentaries, ethnic minorities, young men, and individuals from the underclass are often portrayed as perpetrators of crime, even though they are more likely to be victims. This creates a fear of these social groups, leading to negative stereotyping and discrimination. The missing white woman syndrome is a phenomenon where middle-class, white females receive more press coverage and sympathy as victims, compared to other groups. Similarly, children who fall victim to crimes are often given more attention by the media. This selective reporting leads to a skewed portrayal of crime and its victims in the media. Examples of this include the Casey Anthony case, where a young white toddler went missing and was later found dead, and the JonBenet Ramsey case, where a young beauty queen contestant was murdered. Despite the controversy surrounding these cases, the media focused on the attractive young victims, further perpetuating the missing white woman syndrome.

When examining the portrayal of police in factual crime, they are often depicted in a negative light. They are viewed as corrupt, with reports of police brutality and institutional racism, particularly after the McPherson report in 1999. Furthermore, they are commonly perceived as incompetent. This trend can be linked to recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where medical professionals and teachers were initially praised but police officers were not given similar recognition despite their efforts in enforcing lockdown measures. In fact, police officers have been subject to abuse and mistreatment during this time, with individuals spitting on them and claiming to have COVID-19. The media maintains a negative perception of the police force, with heroism displayed only in individual cases rather than as a collective entity.

The phenomenon of media reporting on crime has been criticized by various sociologists for causing distortion in the perception of crime. Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne assert that the media's need for spectacle creates a distorted view of crime, where cases are sensationalized and dramatized, as exemplified by the Jon Benet Ramsey and Casey Anthony cases. Such cases become spectacles that engage our repulsion and fascination. Despite feeling disgusted by the crime, we are intrigued and fascinated by the identity of the perpetrator(s). This fascination is evident in the popularity of True Crime documentaries. Postman argues that the media's coverage of crime is increasingly a mixture of entertainment and sensationalism, leading to what he calls "infotainment." The audience not only wants to be informed but also entertained by the news. Felson's theory of dramatic fallacy suggests that the media's emphasis on drama and speculation surrounding a crime can create a false view of the crime, where facts are replaced by the sensationalized narrative. This emphasis on drama can lead to a skewed perception of the crime and its consequences. Therefore, media reporting on crime can be seen as problematic, potentially leading to a distorted view of reality.

The notion of news values is relevant to this discussion. The media possesses a set of values that aid in determining the newsworthiness of an event. These values include.

* Immediacy: This news value refers to events that are happening right now or have just occurred. The media is interested in covering news that is current, and they often prioritize stories that have just happened over those that have occurred in the past.
* Dramatization: News stories that involve drama, excitement, and action are more likely to capture people's attention. This news value suggests that stories that have a high level of drama or excitement are more likely to be covered by the media.
* Personalization: News stories that have a human-interest angle, or that feature people as the focus, are more likely to be covered by the media. This news value suggests that stories that have an individualized touch, or that feature a person as the main character, are more likely to be covered.
* Status of the victim: This news value suggests that stories that involve high-profile or celebrity victims are more likely to be covered by the media. The media is interested in stories that involve people who are well-known or who have a high social status.
* Simplification: News stories that can be easily explained or understood by the public are more likely to be covered by the media. This news value suggests that stories that are straightforward and easy to understand are more likely to be covered.
* Novelty or unexpectedness: News stories that involve unexpected or unusual events are more likely to be covered by the media. This news value suggests that stories that are surprising or unusual are more likely to be covered.
* Risks: News stories that involve risk or danger are more likely to be covered by the media. This news value suggests that stories that involve threats to people's safety or well-being are more likely to be covered.
* Violence: News stories that involve violence or conflict are more likely to be covered by the media. This news value suggests that stories that involve violent or confrontational situations are more likely to be covered.

If an event satisfies these criteria, it is more likely to garner press coverage. This tendency leads to the underrepresentation of property crimes as they lack the excitement factor. Conversely, there is an overrepresentation of violent, sexual, and drug-related crimes, as they are sensational. Furthermore, the media exaggerates police success and the risk of victimization by showcasing types of victims, implying that they are more prone to being victims. The media also tends to portray crimes as isolated incidents without acknowledging their societal and systemic underpinnings.

**MEDIA AS A CAUSE OF CRIME**

In the realm of media representation, it is essential to examine how crime is depicted, both in fictional and factual contexts. However, the media's influence is not limited to representation but also extends to its potential for causing criminal activity. The Hypodermic Syringe Model is a theoretical framework that suggests media messages have a powerful effect on their audience, brainwashing them into accepting certain viewpoints as factual. Consequently, this model argues that the media can control and persuade individuals to behave in particular ways, leading to criminal activity. The name of the model is derived from the metaphorical concept of injecting media messages into individuals' minds, thereby affecting their view of society and life. According to this model, the media can cause crime by perpetrating various effects. Therefore, it is pertinent to consider how the media can influence criminal behaviour.

One of the ways the media can be blamed for causing crime is through the concept of imitation. The idea is that people may replicate criminal acts, violence, and other behaviours they see in the media, believing them to be acceptable or appropriate. For example, a college student who had played Grand Theft Auto for an extended period decided to emulate the game's violence in real life. He stole a car, kidnapped a woman, and caused chaos until he crashed the car. Similarly, in the James Bulger murder case, Venables and Thompson claimed that they had watched the movie Child's Play, featuring a doll possessed by a serial killer's spirit, and believed that the same would happen to James Bulger. There are several other instances where violent criminal activity has been linked to movies or computer games. For example, the Virginia Tech massacre, one of the worst college shootings in US history, involved a student who had been practicing shooting on the computer game Doom. Thus, some people view crime in the media as a potential imitation or a copycat of what is depicted in movies or games.

Another way the media can be blamed for causing crime is through the concept of arousal. This refers to the idea that what people see in movies, or the media can increase their adrenaline and endorphins, leading them to engage in risky and criminal behaviour. For example, studies suggest that during the opening weekend of the Fast and Furious films, there are higher rates of speeding and traffic violations. The adrenaline rush and endorphin release that viewers experience from watching such films can lead to criminal or risky behaviour that seeps into their actual conduct.

Another factor to consider is desensitisation. This refers to the idea that the more we watch violence or horror films, the more we become desensitised to it. For instance, the Saw franchise, which was initially shocking, is now less so because the more we watch it, the less shocked and appalled we become. This desensitisation can make us more likely to commit acts of violence ourselves because we no longer see the severity of such acts. It is not limited to violence alone, but also applies to criminal acts that we may no longer find shocking or appalling. This can make us less likely to recognise the gravity of such acts and thus, more likely to engage in criminal behaviour.

Television programs are a potential source of criminal knowledge for viewers, which may result in an increased ability to evade law enforcement. Viewers of crime dramas such as "White Collar" and "Criminal Minds" are often exposed to detailed descriptions of the process of committing a crime, including the collection and analysis of physical evidence. This information can enable individuals to anticipate the steps that investigators will take to solve crimes and take precautions to avoid detection. Furthermore, certain groups of individuals may be stereotyped as more likely to commit crimes on these programs, potentially leading to police profiling and further marginalization of these groups.

It is important to note that the effect of television on criminal behaviour is a complex issue and cannot be attributed solely to exposure to crime dramas. Additionally, while some viewers may gain knowledge of how to commit or avoid being caught for crimes, the majority of individuals do not engage in criminal behaviour because of watching these programs. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of media on the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, particularly regarding criminal activity.

The concept of deprivation, particularly relative deprivation, is relevant in the context of certain television programs, such as reality shows like "Made in Chelsea" and "Keeping Up with the Kardashians". Viewers may develop a sense of desire for the lifestyle and possessions of the individuals portrayed on these shows, leading to feelings of frustration and resentment if they are unable to attain such a lifestyle themselves. In extreme cases, individuals may resort to criminal activities as a means of acquiring the material possessions that they covet.

The glamorization of criminal activity in certain television programs is a relevant factor to consider in the relationship between media and criminal behaviour. Programs like "The Sopranos", "Narcos", and "White Collar" depict criminal lifestyles in a highly idealized and often glamorous manner, showcasing characters who lead lives of luxury and excess through their illegal activities. This portrayal can lead viewers to develop a desire to emulate this lifestyle, fuelling a fascination with the world of crime and the perceived rewards that it can offer.

When considering the assessment of media effects, it becomes apparent that the hypodermic syringe model is not entirely accurate. This model posits that the media functions like a hypodermic syringe, injecting individuals with beliefs about criminal behaviour, which are subsequently internalized and imitated, resulting in desensitization. However, this model cannot account for the fact that not everyone who is exposed to such content will commit crimes. In fact, exposure to violent media may lead to sensitization rather than desensitization, making individuals more cognizant of these behaviours and less likely to engage in them. Furthermore, the uses and gratifications model suggest that individuals selectively choose which media to consume based on personal preferences and interests. Therefore, the media's impact cannot be simplified as a "monkey see, monkey do" phenomenon. Examples of media effects, such as the uses and gratifications model, reveal that individuals are not passive recipients of media content, but rather active agents who exercise control over their consumption choices based on personal preferences and interests.

**MEDIA AS A CAUSE OF THE FEAR OF CRIME.**

The focus of our discussion is not cantered around the reasons behind criminal behaviour, but rather the factors that contribute to the fear of crime among individuals. As we have previously explored, individuals who fall under the middle-class category are more likely to be apprehensive of being victimized by crime than any other social group. This apprehension can be attributed to the "fear of crime cycle," which postulates that the media is responsible for instilling fear in individuals by portraying a distorted image of crime victims, types of crimes committed, and those at risk of becoming victims. Violent crimes, sexual offenses, and homicides are examples of crimes that are often excessively publicized, causing individuals to fear for their safety and well-being. This fear, in turn, prompts individuals to remain within the confines of their homes, perceiving it as a haven, with the belief that by not venturing out, they would be less susceptible to crime. As individuals spend more time within their homes, their media consumption increases, and they become more exposed to fear-inducing content, causing them to be even more fearful of crime. This fear-driven behaviour causes individuals to refrain from socializing, spending time outdoors, or engaging in activities outside their homes, exacerbating the cycle. This cycle is more prevalent in contemporary times, especially during the lockdown period, where individuals resort to consuming more media content due to a lack of other recreational options, thereby increasing their fear of being a victim of crime.

In examining the causes of the fear of crime, various scholars have put forth several hypotheses. Schlesinger and Tumbler suggest that this fear stems from the overrepresentation of specific types of crime, such as violent crime, murder, and sex crimes in the media. The amplification of these crimes creates a sense of anxiety and apprehension among the public, as individuals do not wish to become victims of such severe victimization. Stan Cohen's work on moral panics and folk devils is also relevant to this discussion. According to Cohen, moral panics can be induced by the media, which exaggerates the prevalence of certain issues and causes public anxiety. This, in turn, leads to heightened police attention to those issues, leading to more arrests and further legitimizing the panic. Such panics often create stigmatized social groups, based on ethnicity or subcultural affiliations, which are perceived as problematic or threatening to society. Miller and Riley, who argue that moral panics are a form of ideological control, suggest that creating moral panics instils a sense of fear and reinforces negative stereotypes of certain groups. This, in turn, can prevent revolutionary actions by influencing societal behaviour and attitudes towards groups.

Moral panics are a phenomenon in which a particular issue or group is portrayed in an exaggerated and distorted way, leading to widespread public concern and anxiety. In recent times, there have been several instances of moral panics, which have elicited strong reactions from the public. For example, the black man gangs in the 1970s, as described by Philip Hall, resulted in a crisis in policing. The AIDS and HIV epidemic of the 1980s gave rise to misinformation and scapegoating of gay men, who were portrayed as a "folk devil" that everyone should avoid. However, current statistics show that there are more heterosexual women with HIV than gay men. In the same decade, the satanic child abuse panic saw individuals being treated with regressive hypnotherapy to recover repressed memories of abuse by satanic cults. These claims were later proven to be false and were attributed to planted memories. In the 1990s, the video nasties, particularly horror and slasher films, were harmful to children and their exposure led to the banning of some films, such as Child's Play. The James Bulger case was linked to this panic. In the 2000s, gun crime and Islamic terrorism caused panic, particularly after the 9/11 attacks. More recently, knife crime has been the subject of a moral panic, which has led to the targeting of certain groups and the creation of a fear of crime. The media plays a significant role in these panics, as they have the ability to amplify the issue and create a sense of urgency and concern among the public. These panics can have profound consequences, as they can lead to the marginalization and discrimination of certain groups and can distort the perception of the issue at hand.

**EVALUATION OF MORAL PANICS**

McRobbie and Thornton argue that the notion of moral panics as a means of instilling fear of criminal activity is becoming increasingly obsolete. In fact, they posit five distinct reasons for why the concept of moral panics as a causal theory of crime is not as prevalent today as it once was. This notion is not connected to the idea of sensitive desensitization, which was covered in our course, as it pertains to the root cause of fear of crime or criminal activity. Rather, this concept is exclusively concerned with how moral panics are no longer as potent as they once were in the 1960s and 1970s. The initial rationale they present is frequency. McRobbie and Thornton contend that there has been a surge in the frequency of moral panics, to the point where they no longer affect individuals. They are nonchalant and unresponsive when confronted with these types of stories, thinking "Okay, now we need to worry about knife crime. Next week it might be drugs, and the week after that, it might be terrorists." The media is constantly striving to produce the next folk devil or moral panic to sell newspapers, and as a result, people no longer take as much notice of them.

McRobbie and Thornton also examine the notion of context. In the past, moral panics would identify a group and make them into the folk devils. However, from a postmodernist perspective, there are so many different viewpoints and values within contemporary society that it has become increasingly challenging to obtain a majority consensus against any group. People now have more information available to them, and they are more tolerant than they were in the past, as they are more aware of the complexities of the globalized world. With numerous perspectives and accepted viewpoints in today's world, it has become difficult to create a moral panic because it is not possible to create a homogenous group that everyone can label as "evil" or "horrible." There is no particular group that everyone can point to and say, "they are doing nasty things."

Reflexivity is another critical factor to consider. The widespread knowledge and awareness of the concept of moral panic have led some groups to attempt to create one for their own benefit. Specifically, politicians have been known to manufacture moral panics, such as those related to knife crime, in which they can manipulate the data to show how successful they have been in addressing these issues. This type of political posturing is intended to demonstrate their competency to the public and garner support in the future. As a result, people have become increasingly aware that certain groups, including the media, society at large, and moral entrepreneurs, are attempting to create a moral panic for their own gain.

Furthermore, it has become increasingly challenging to generate a moral panic due to the ambiguity of the values that underpin these panics. This uncertainty is linked to the postmodernist notion of multiple viewpoints. Nowadays, people tend to adopt an "each to their own" mentality, if it does not cause harm, rather than viewing difference as inherently negative. This perspective makes it difficult to create a homogenous viewpoint of what is considered "bad," and it becomes challenging to mobilize public opinion against a particular group. Finally, there is the issue of rebound, where people have become wary of initiating moral panics.

The media have become more circumspect about instigating moral panics due to the risk of it backfiring. An instance of this was observed in John Major's Back to Basics campaign in 1993, which was a right-wing initiative aimed at restoring family values and traditional heterosexual nuclear family structures in response to the increasing number of divorces and same-sex relationships. However, it was later revealed that John Major himself had engaged in extramarital affairs with Edwina Currie, while several MPs were caught in compromising situations, including one who was discovered having a homosexual liaison in Clapham Common. This demonstrated that groups that are identified as deviant or problematic by the media may retaliate by revealing scandals and pointing out the hypocrisy of those who are attacking them. As a result, there is a greater level of caution among the media when it comes to singling out groups for condemnation, as they may face accusations of being morally compromised themselves.