

Crimewatching crime: some concluding thoughts

It is increasingly recognized that the medium of television is situated within, and fully interwoven with, many other social practices, to the extent where crime, criminals and criminal justice cannot be separated from their representations on television (Sparks, 1992; Ferrell, 2001). While we cannot make sweeping claims about media 'effects' or the media being responsible for 'causing' fear of crime, we can look at the ways in which media in general, and television in particular, are integral to the processes of meaning making by which we make sense of our everyday lives. For example, although this chapter has deliberately avoided discussion of the many TV series concerning forensic-science-based detection, the phrase '*CSI Effect*' has become commonly used to describe phenomena including jury members' expectations of criminal cases and the rising popularity of degrees in criminology! Media may also contribute to fears about crime: if, as Sparks (1992) contends, fear of crime is more likely to be governed by uncertainties than known probabilities, the issue of fear must be inextricably linked to issues of representation, interpretation and meaning. Misrepresentations concerning the extent of certain types of crime, the likelihood of victimization, and the locations in which crime commonly occurs, are bound to create a skewed picture of the 'problem of crime' in this country.

One of the central aims of the makers of *Crimewatch UK* is to vary the cases featured on the show, but the programme as a whole fails to diverge far from its tried-and-tested formula of representing a limited range of very serious crimes perpetrated against a restricted category of victims. A *Crimewatch* producer's comment that the programme strives for a mixture and balance of items – which he illustrates with the evidence that in one show they included a sexual assault and murder of a woman in Tonbridge Wells and then did a reconstruction/report into the Notting Hill rapist – is unlikely to convince many that *Crimewatch* represents a cross-section of crimes in Britain (cited in Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 261). To put it bluntly, incidents most likely to feature on *Crimewatch* are crimes against the person in which a high level of violence is involved, and crimes of a sexual nature, especially in cases involving young women and girls. Much less likely to be included are white-collar crimes, corporate or state crimes, and crimes in which the police have bungled the investigation. Also unlikely to be featured is any useful advice concerning crime prevention. In all these respects, *Crimewatch* reproduces the values and genre conventions of most other media, including news. Not only is the programme emblematic of wider trends in media output, adhering closely to the twelve cardinal news values outlined in Chapter 2, but it also upholds the patriarchal structures and stratifications highlighted elsewhere in this volume. These observations raise important questions about where the public service/entertainment balance lies – not only of *Crimewatch*, but also of factual news-based programming more broadly.

Summary

- The media are not solely to blame for inciting fear of crime. Actual risk of victimization, previous experience of victimization, environmental conditions, ethnicity and previous contact with the police and criminal justice system are among many factors interacting through complex mediated processes to influence public anxiety about crime. As Richard Sparks comments: 'the reception by people of media stories about crime and punishment is best grasped ... in situ, in which case many public responses that are commonly deprecated by criminologists and others as "irrational" or "hysterical" tend to become substantially more intelligible' (2001: 197).
- However, the media might be said to play an important role in creating a cultural climate in which certain types of criminal behaviour are portrayed more frequently, and with greater intensity, than others. This distortion may cultivate fears among certain sections of the audience, and exaggerate their risk of victimization. Given that the British Crime Survey (now the Crime Survey for England and Wales) shows that fear of crime has an inverse relationship with statistical occurrence, the media may be partially responsible, in so far as crimes against the most 'fearful' but least likely to be victimized members of society – especially young women and elderly people – are over-reported and over-sensationalized.
- Some critics argue that, as a consequence of the media's tendency to concentrate on the most atypical crimes and present them in a sensationalistic and voyeuristic manner, women and the elderly are socialized into fear and become over-sensitized to their own roles in avoiding becoming victims of crime. Research shows that programmes like *Crimewatch* encourage women to think of themselves as potential victims and that most female viewers uncritically accept their 'at risk' status and modify their behaviour accordingly.
- The genre conventions employed by *Crimewatch UK* are very similar to those found in other media, including news and cinema. They not only result in an overwhelming emphasis on violent and sexual crimes perpetrated mostly on women (invariably constructed as 'tragic victims'), but they also serve to construct offenders and crime scenes in particular ways. Crimes featured on the show are usually committed by non-white, male strangers ('others'); in either the victim's home (a particular violation, and indicative of their vulnerability) or in public places (usually 'the streets'); which results in not just the victimization of the individual, but of their entire family who have been 'robbed' of their loved one. Like other examples discussed in this book, this structuring of events means that traditional conservative family and gender relations are endorsed and celebrated, even when the reality of sexual and violent crime suggests that the home is frequently a site of (largely masculine) violence, sexual abuse and murder. Corporate crimes are almost entirely invisible in *Crimewatch UK*, just as they are in other media genres.
- *Crimewatch UK* is also a prime example of the collaborative relationship between the police and the media. The issue of policing has increasingly come to be understood not simply in its political or social context, but as a set of semiotic practices enmeshed with mediated culture (Ferrell, 2001). 'Image work' is central to a police service that is increasingly coming to recognize that policing is as much about symbolism as it is about substance (Mawby, 2002).

- Both traditional media and 'new' social media have changed the way that the police do their work and communicate with the public. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have a myriad of benefits to the police, from allowing recruitment personnel to covertly check on a candidate's suitability to join the police force, through to gathering intelligence and responsabilizing the public. But as we have seen, new media have a democratizing role to play on occasions where the police (or individual officers) act inappropriately. During protest events where the police strations or riots, the battle to control the 'virtual' version of events such as demonstrations be every bit as important as what occurs on the ground.
- Thanks to programmes like *Crimewatch*, appeals from families, crime reconstructions and interviews with senior detectives requesting help from the public are now familiar communicative formats across a range of media genres. The images and language of such communications are carefully crafted and chosen by the police in an attempt to persuade potential witnesses, offenders or people who suspect someone of the offence to come forward with their information. In this respect, we have seen a return to the kindly benevolent, consensual policing epitomized by the fictional *Dixon of Dock Green*. Unfortunately, since PC Dixon walked the beat, the relationship between the police and the media has often been characterized as difficult and mutually hostile. In recent years the police have sought to embrace and exploit the media in pursuit of a positive image and an impression of legitimacy and accountability. However, the bond of trust formed between the two institutions is still fragile, as witnessed by periodic media exposés of racism and sexism within the police service.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. It has been said that PC George Dixon has been 'exhumed and laid to rest more times than some care to remember' (Greer, 2004). What accounts for the enduring popularity of Dixon and why is his image still evoked so long after *Dixon of Dock Green* was taken off air?
2. Lee and McGovern (2014: 213) claim that Facebook and Twitter are simply the new Neighbourhood Watch and Crimestoppers: 'traditional policing reframed... through new technologies'. Do you agree with this assessment? What can social media enable the police to do which they could not by traditional means?
3. Conduct your own analysis of an edition of *Crimewatch UK*. To what extent does it follow the conventions of news reporting (that is, 'news values') in the popular press and broadcast media? In your own experience as a viewer, does *Crimewatch* amplify fears about certain types of crime and victimization? If so, are its effects long-term and diffuse or short-term and based on geographical and cultural proximity?
4. In addition to the example of *The Secret Policeman*, there have been a number of other cases where individuals (especially celebrities) have been covertly filmed engaging in criminal and deviant behaviour, such as accepting money

to rig sporting events and dealing in, or buying, drugs. Frequently, as in the case of the BBC documentary, the individuals are set up by journalists in what amounts to entrapment. Are undercover investigation methods by journalists justified in cases where issues such as sexism, racism, corruption and crime might otherwise not be revealed?

FURTHER READING

Robert Reiner has written extensively on police and the media, including in Reiner, R. (2010) *The Politics of the Police*, 4th edition (Oxford University Press). An excellent analysis of the subject is provided by Leishman, F. and Mason, P. (2003) *Policing and the Media: Facts, Fictions and Factions* (Willan/Routledge). The classic text on policing, crime, public disorder and moral panics remains Hall, S. et al.'s (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. In 2013, a 35th anniversary edition was published, containing two new chapters that explore the book's continued significance, with a new Preface and Afterword, in which each of the authors takes up a specific theme from the original book and interrogate it in the light of current events and contexts. Mawby, R. (2002) *Policing Images: Policing, Communication and Legitimacy* (Willan/Routledge) was an early contribution on the 'image work' that the police now have to engage in and Lee, M. and McGovern, A. (2014) *Policing and Media: Public Relations, Simulations and Communications* (Routledge) provides an up-to-date analysis. Murray Lee has also written about *Inventing Fear of Crime: Criminology and the Politics of Anxiety* (Willan/Routledge, 2007). Given the relationship between fear of crime and issues of policing, this chapter has deliberately concentrated on a single element of the criminal justice system – the police. However, that is not to say that fears about crime are not implicitly related to other aspects of criminal justice, for example courts (especially when sentences are passed that are perceived as erratic or too light) and prisons (which might be perceived as overcrowded because of the dangerous and volatile nature of contemporary society). These other aspects of criminal justice, and their representations in the media, are explored in Jewkes, Y. (2004) 'Media Representations of Criminal Justice' in Muncie, J. and Wilson, D. (eds.) *Student Handbook of Criminology and Criminal Justice* (Cavendish). The best introductory analysis of *Crimewatch* remains that in Schlesinger, P. and Tumber, H. (1994) *Reporting Crime* (Clarendon).