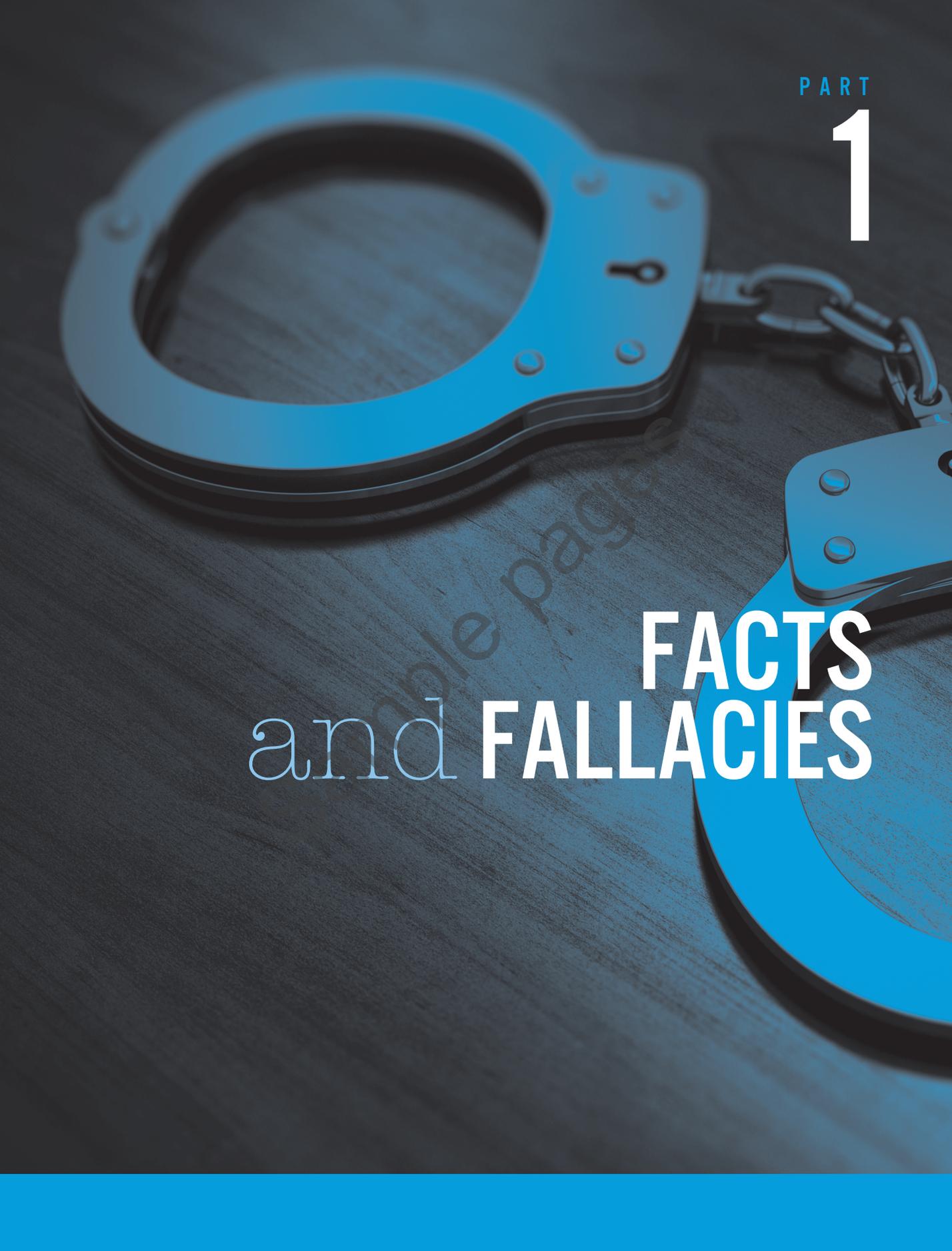


PART

1

A pair of blue handcuffs is shown on a dark, textured wooden surface. The handcuffs are positioned diagonally, with one cuff in the upper left and the other in the lower right. The lighting creates highlights on the metal surfaces of the cuffs. The background is a dark, grainy wood.

and **FACTS**
FALLACIES

MEDIA AND CRIME



Learning Outcomes

- 1 Understand some of the social and economic forces that shape media and news representation of crime
- 2 Understand what is meant by the concept of newsworthiness and how news values affect the reporting of crime news
- 3 Understand and be able to recognise crime frames in the reporting of crime news stories
- 4 Understand why the media frequently over-reports violent and salacious crimes and under-reports property, white-collar and other types of crimes
- 5 Explain some of the ways that media influences social behaviours, beliefs and attitudes towards crime

William Wood

This chapter looks at the relationship between crime and media. For most people in contemporary western societies, media is the primary source of information about crime. Media is also driven by other forces, however, that may serve to distort how it represents crime rates, offenders, victimisation and the criminal justice system. This chapter looks at three areas of media analysis – production, product and consumption – and asks how each area plays a role in how people understand and make sense of crime in today's society. Attention is given throughout to the role that the media plays in the creation of 'myths' about crime.

INTRODUCTION

‘Don’t go letting that sociology degree get you killed.’

This line comes out of the mouth of the hard-edged cop, Dirty Harry, in the film by the same name (1971). Played by Clint Eastwood, Dirty Harry is constantly getting into trouble with his superiors and regularly skirts the law in order to effectively dole out justice to those who deserve it. His sarcastic quip is his way of telling his new partner, who has just graduated with a university degree, how things ‘really are’ for police on the street. It is an old theme in Hollywood films, where effective police officers are frequently depicted as ones who flout the rules, get things done by any means necessary and understand the code of the street in a way that neither liberals nor bureaucrats can ever comprehend.

As media scholar David Perlmutter (2000) has documented, however, how things ‘really are’ for most police on the street barely resembles the depiction of what he calls ‘media cops’. Media cops rarely do paperwork. Real cops do reams of paperwork. Media cops generally shoot and kill with relative impunity. Most real cops never discharge their weapon. Media cops magically solve all their cases using only their intuition, wits and force. Real cops do not solve many of their cases, work closely with many people and face significant pressures to adhere to investigatory and legal guidelines. Media cops are mostly detectives. Real cops are mostly patrol officers. Indeed, Perlmutter documents numerous ways in which media cops engage in dangerous action, fight crime, resort to violence, skirt the rules or the law and solve cases on their own that real cops rarely, if ever, do.

Most of us are media literate enough to realise that the world of police make-believe on TV is not the same as the world of real police work. Yet for every media myth about crime that is easy to unmask, there are others that may be more difficult to spot. For example, many Australian universities with criminology or criminal justice programs offer specific courses in criminal or forensic profiling, or offer profiling as a featured theme in a particular course. These courses are a primary marketing tool used by criminology schools to attract students. Yet as students quickly find out, Australia has a relatively small number of serial killers, rapists, arsonists and other types of offenders that precipitate the need for profilers. Most crimes in Australia, even more serious violent crimes, are not the result of methodical planning by calculating predators.

It does mean, however, that the need for criminal profilers to solve the vast number of crimes reported to the police is very small – far too small to accommodate even a tiny percentage of the people pursuing degrees in criminal or forensic profiling. Moreover, the few profilers that do exist in Australia have come out of backgrounds involving extensive police experience and/or advanced degrees in psychology.

The connecting line between the myth of media cops and the relatively large number of students pursuing degrees for largely non-existent jobs is the extent to which media representations of crime and criminology so markedly distort the public’s view of crime. The sociologist Ray Surette (1994, p. 131) notes: ‘The crimes that

dominate the public consciousness and policy debates are not common crimes, but the rarest ones. Whether in entertainment or news, the crimes that define criminality are the acts of the predator criminals.' Surette (1994) calls predator criminals the 'modern icons of the mass media', and notes that when compared to the empirical research on known predatory offences, the media focus on predators cannot be explained by the relatively minor amount of crimes such offenders are actually responsible for.

In this regard, the media's distortion of crime, criminals and criminal justice policies is not limited to predator criminals. Consistently, research studies have demonstrated how the media distorts or misrepresents the overall amount of crime that exists, the demographics and characteristics of criminal offenders, the frequency and likelihood of crime victimisation, responses of the criminal justice system to crime, the effectiveness of criminal justice sanctions and rehabilitative programs, and so on. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the modern world is that we rely almost exclusively on the media for our knowledge of crime, but the media itself is driven by forces that strongly encourage or even demand that they present a skewed view of the social world.

Given that what we see in the media is often not an accurate representation of what we know empirically about these topics, making sense of the difference between the two requires knowledge of the media – what it is, who makes it and why, who consumes it and its effects, and so on. Social scientists who study the media and its relationship to crime look at an almost limitless number of social phenomena. However, in general they tend to be interested in three categories of questions, namely questions regarding media production (i.e. Who makes the media and under what social conditions?); media products (i.e. What is media, both in terms of content and technology, and how is it used?); and media effects (i.e. In what ways does media effect people, and why?). We will look at each, in turn, in terms of how media production, content and effects both inform and misinform what we know, or think we know, about crime.

THE PRODUCTION OF MEDIA

Questions of media production centre on who produces and disseminates media, and under what conditions. Such questions tell us how the world of media is 'put together' by producers – who owns what, for example, or how media stories are produced by writers, editors and so on. But social scientists also seek to know *why* these things happen the way they do. That is, they seek to articulate and ascertain *theories* of media production. Theories are assumed relationships between two or more variables that provide some causal explanation as to why things happen the way they happen, in the natural world or in our case in the social world.

For example, one question that many media researchers have asked is why the news media seems to focus so heavily on violent and extreme or bizarre crimes, while frequently ignoring property crime, white-collar crime and corporate crime (Howitt 1998; Maguire 2002; Reiner et al. 2000; Roberts & Stalans 2000). Such a question provides an opportunity to delineate two distinct theoretical traditions

within the study of media production, and to illustrate how these traditions relate to our understanding of crime. One explanation for the **over-reporting** on violent crime is that such programs more or less reflect what is important to audiences. Violent crime is a more serious concern for most community residents than property or white-collar crime. Thus, the news media's focus on violent crimes may serve to educate the public by keeping people informed of problem areas or crimes in their communities, keeping citizens up to date with the effectiveness of the police and criminal justice system, or providing people with information as to how they can better protect themselves against victimisation.

This explanation of why the news media may over-report violent crime is rooted in a *functionalist* theoretical perspective. Functionalism is a sociological view of the world first set forth by Émile Durkheim and later popularised by Talcott Parsons in the 1940s and 1950s. It analyses how social structures such as politics, religion and education serve social 'functions' necessary for the stability, integration and growth of any society. A **functionalist perspective** views the news media as serving to provide information to citizens, challenge official versions of events or social trends and act generally as a reputable arbiter of facts (Wright 1975). In a more general sense, the media may be thought of as a type of 'fourth estate', an unofficial body of power that serves to keep official bodies of power in check through investigation and dissemination of governmental activities. In this view, the media is just one of many competing interest groups within social, political and economic spheres. Each group seeks its own interests, but the overall effect within democratic societies is generally one of a long-term 'balance of powers' to the degree that no single group is able to effectively leverage control over the other groups for extended periods of time (Gurevitch et al. 1982).

Another theoretical perspective takes the position that the news media emphasis on violent and street crime is less driven by audiences than by the interests of the elite. This **critical perspective** argues that the mass media most frequently supports the interests of the wealthiest people, those in political power and dominant social groups, and that much of the media that is produced is meant for consumption by audiences that largely support these positions. Two of the first modern social thinkers to critically analyse the role of the media were Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who in their 1845 work *The German Ideology* observed: 'The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it' (2004, p. 64).

Marx and Engel's work was central to the beginnings of a critical analysis of media production, and it remains crucial today as a means through which to understand how and why smaller groups throughout history have been able to subordinate larger groups to their economic interests. History is replete with examples of smaller groups dominating larger groups – slavery, feudalism and capitalism

being three notable examples. In each case, force and violence were often used as a means of control, but control has also often been maintained without violence, through what Marx and Engels called *ideology*. In many cases, noted Marx and Engels, people seem to accept or willingly participate in the conditions of their own exploitation or suffering. Marx and Engel's explanation in part was that accompanying the material aspects of this exploitation were ideological messages, images and representations that made such conditions appear 'normal' or inevitable.

Using a conflict perspective then, the focus on street crime, salacious crime and other crimes against persons is not a reflection of audience desire. Rather, as Surette (2007, p. 201) argues, 'The cumulative result of the media's construction of crime, crime fighters, courts, corrections, and crime control leads to punitive criminal justice policies as the media mainstay for dealing with crime. When the dominant media portrait is of predatory offenders committing violent crimes in continuous battle with the criminal justice system, nonpunitive policies come across as being simply naïve.' The over-reporting on violent crime is not driven by audiences, but rather by elites and policy-makers who have a vested interest in projecting a menacing view of crime to a fearful public. Such a projection allows media producers to draw larger audiences. It allows policy-makers to run effective political campaigns based on fear of crime and populist demands for punitive sanctions. If Marx and Engels were alive today, they might note that the media focus on violent and salacious crime has allowed the financial elite to escape virtually untouched (in the form of wealth and criminal sanctions) from the largest financial scandal in global history, where hundreds of billions or even trillions of dollars were 'lost' due to fraudulent practices and gross mismanagement of public and private investments in the 2000s – precipitating the largest global economic downturn in 80 years.

Media for profit

Functionalism and social conflict theories present different perspectives on the forces behind the news media's focus on violent and street crime, but both perspectives recognise several trends of media production that have occurred since the 1980s that have influenced either directly or indirectly how we as a society understand crime. The first of the trends has been the increasing corporate global ownership of media. Since the 1980s, ownership of media has become concentrated in a dwindling number of huge global corporations. In the United States, the number of corporations that controlled a majority of media industries dwindled from more than 50 to six between 1983 and 2003 (Bagdikian 2004). This has also been the case in most other western industrialised countries, including Australia. Today, media ownership in Australia is highly concentrated, with two corporations (Fairfax and News Corp) owning 11 of the 12 capital city daily newspapers. Television and radio is similarly controlled by a small number of corporations.

Research on the concentrated ownership suggests that this has increased the drive for profitability, particularly for large corporations often saddled with huge

debt and pressure from shareholders and institutional investors. In turn this has led to an increased dependence on advertising revenue, a push towards programming that attracts larger audiences, a decrease in programming such as critical journalism or news that is not as profitable as other programs, and dependence on outside or wire news services (McChesney 1999). The effects of these changes in relation to crime have been an increase in sensationalised news stories, increasing dependence on infotainment such as crime 'documentaries', increased reliance on police and other official sources for crime news and data (McGovern & Lee 2010), and a shift away from investigative journalism that may investigate more complicated types of crimes such as white-collar crime, corporate crime or public corruption.

Another trend that has occurred in the past three decades is the decreasing readership of newspapers and print media, and the increase in television and the Internet for people's main source of news media. The effects of this shift have been significant. Today, about 75% of Americans get most of their news from watching television. For Australians, this is about 65% (Denemark 2005). Television news tends to present extremely simplified stories, and those stories that do make the nightly news are most often bizarre, extremely violent or out of the ordinary (Surette 2007). Research on television news reporting of crime has shown that actual increases or decreases in crime rates have little effect on the reporting of crime on television (Dorfman & Schiraldi 2001; Indermaur & Roberts 2005; Lowry et al. 2003; Roberts 1992). One study on Australian media audiences found that 'Those who rely on Internet sites for their news and information are most likely to believe that crime rates are stable or falling, while those who rely on talkback radio, family and friends or commercial television are least likely to believe this . . . Television is likely to contribute to any public misperception about crime levels and criminals because of its overall popularity and is particularly so among respondents with fewer qualifications' (Indermaur & Roberts 2005, p. 148).

What is newsworthy?

Perhaps more than any other aspect of the social world, our knowledge of crime is a mediated one. That is to say, we know what we know about crime not from direct experience but from other sources. In the case of crime, moreover, the media is the primary source of indirect information for most people (Roberts & Stalans 2000). This puts the media in a position of enormous influence about what people know, and think they know, about crime. This is especially the case for news media, where research shows that about 65% of Australians rely on commercial television, and 63% on commercial radio, for their daily sources of news (Denemark 2005).

News media is never completely objective. It is subject to the bias of reporters, editors and producers, and also beholden to political and economic forces that serve to structure and shape media images of crime, criminality, victimisation and the criminal justice system. The types of crime stories, offenders and victims that make the news depend in part on what researchers call their '**newsworthiness**'.

Different theories and criteria of what makes a story newsworthy exist, but most of them include the following elements or 'news values':

- 1 *Prominence*: the more prominent an individual or organisation, the more newsworthy it is.
- 2 *Timeliness*: the more recent, the more newsworthy it is.
- 3 *Impact*: the greater the likely impact or the larger the audience, the more newsworthy it is.
- 4 *Proximity*: the closer the events of the story are to an audience – geographically or emotionally – the more newsworthy it is.
- 5 *Novelty*: the more bizarre, unusual or out of bounds the story is, the more newsworthy it is.
- 6 *Conflict*: the more the news story contains evident conflict between two or more characters, the more newsworthy it is.
- 7 *Contemporaneity*: the more the story fits with current events, similar newsworthy stories or immediate public interests, the more newsworthy it is.
- 8 *Human interest*: stories that highlight some positive aspect of human behaviour, even minus the other seven elements above, are more newsworthy.

These news values explain in part why crime stories are often inherently newsworthy. Crime stories contain most, if not all of the elements of newsworthiness in abundance. Problematically, however, the types of crime stories that are most newsworthy, and thus most likely to be featured, are those that are more novel, contain greater conflict, are more prominent and have greater impact. These do not constitute the majority of crimes, however, nor do they reflect the majority of offenders or crime victims. As sociologist Jack Katz (1987, p. 57) notes: 'Comparisons of crime news and crime statistics have produced consistent findings. In study after study, the content of crime news has been found to diverge widely from the patterns available in official statistics. The relationship does not appear to be random or incoherent: in many respects, the picture one obtains about crime from reading the newspapers inverts the picture about crime one gets from reading police statistics.'

In general, the more prevalent a crime, the less likely it is to be reported. Petty crime and simple assaults rarely make the news, unless they involve someone famous. This extends to types of offenders and victims as well. White victims are more likely to make the news than black ones, even where rates of victimisation are higher for blacks. Those less likely to be victimised – the very young or very old, the wealthy or the famous – are more likely to make the news than those such as the poor, minorities or young adults, all of which have much higher rates of victimisation. Children and the elderly are often held up as '**ideal victims**', those who appear blameless, defenceless, innocent and thus most worthy of sympathy and outrage at the offender. Greer (2007, p. 22) notes that within this 'hierarchy of victimization . . . at the other extreme [exist] those crime victims who never acquire legitimate victim status or, still worse, are perceived as "undeserving victims" . . . and pass virtually unnoticed in the wider social world.'

Thus, it is not so much the case that what the news media reports is untrue. Rather, these patterns of reporting create a cumulative distortion of crime by repeated focus on violent crimes, vulnerable and newsworthy victims and predatory criminals. Some of the effects of this are discussed below in the final section of the chapter, but it is important to note that, however unwittingly, the news media serves an **'agenda-setting'** influence, on the public and on policy-makers. Repeated studies have demonstrated that 'the media's coverage of issues [affects] public opinion more than the issues' objective prominence in the "real" world' (Croteau & Hoynes 2003, pp. 242–3). Thus, even where there is debate about the effects of media content on audience behaviour, there is a much more uniform recognition on the part of scholars that the media plays a central role in placing crime in the centre of public consciousness in terms of entertainment, politics and quality of life in our local communities and as a nation.

CRIME AS MEDIA PRODUCT

Aside from theories of media production and questions of what makes certain events newsworthy, many scholars are interested in what media itself is. The word media is the plural of *medium*. It stems from the Latin adjective *medius*, *-a*, *-um*, meaning 'middle'. In this sense, *media* can be understood generally as the processes, forms and content of communication between a sender and a receiver or an audience. Yet media is not merely the technology that delivers the message. The word media refers to the medium of messages such as the radio or the television, but it also refers to what social scientists call media content. Thus, a medium is the container that holds the message, while content is the message itself – the story, the image or the text that contains information that people seek to deliver to others.

Thus, two primary areas of media product studied by researchers are content and technology. We might think of these respectively as 'message' and 'package', insofar as the former contains the meaning and materials necessary for audiences to understand and make sense of messages, and the latter is the physical and technological materials used to deliver the messages. However, while media researchers often divide the study of media products into content and technology, the most famous media theorist of the 20th century, Marshall McLuhan, was famous for saying 'the medium is the message'. What he meant was that mediums and technologies frequently have larger effects than simply changing how we communicate. According to McLuhan, they also can fundamentally displace older ways of *being* in the social world.

Media technologies

McLuhan and Quentin Fiore provide the example of the birth of the modern printing press. They note that in this invention, '[t]he phonetic alphabet forced the magic world of the ear to yield to the neutral world of the eye. Man was given an eye for an ear' (1967, p. 44). The movement from oral cultures to written cultures fundamentally transformed virtually every aspect of social life. No longer

dependent on religious or political authorities for understanding the written word, the printing press was a central – perhaps *the* central – technology at the heart of the Renaissance and later the Enlightenment. Yet it was not simply the content of these writings that precipitated such changes, but their form as well. McLuhan (1962, p. 158) called print ‘the technology of individualism’. What he meant was that knowledge in written form could be stored, broken down and analysed, and reconfigured by individuals on a level unlike anything to that point in history. This was a technology particularly germane to the rise and proliferation of the scientific method, as well as to modern forms of political and social criticism.

Many have argued that we are undergoing a similarly radical social transformation at the beginning of the 21st century. Images and multimedia are taking precedence over the written word. Relative to television and the Internet, relatively fewer people read newsprint or other print sources of media than ever before. The effects of such a transformation remain to be seen in their totality, but two effects of the so-called digital revolution are quite clear. First, people move and acquire information at speeds that far surpass anything even in the recent past. Second, in such an image-saturated society, people’s ‘experience’ of crime is markedly different than even a generation ago. As Surette (2007, p. 25) notes, ‘mass media is an electronic, visually dominated media. Print and audio are secondary in social impact . . . The evolution of the media has been towards the goal of making mediated experience indistinguishable from actual experience.’

Media has largely replaced ‘actual’ experience for most people in terms of their knowledge about crime. An irony of this is that while people are more exposed to information about crime, and indeed often feel knowledgeable about crime, this knowledge is increasingly divorced from actual crime rates or actual knowledge of the criminal justice system. As we have seen, news media and entertainment representations of crime distort actual crime rates, types of crime victimisation, and so on. They may also distort things such as the public’s perception of the efficacy of criminal justice agencies. In this regard, it is not at all clear that the information revolution has facilitated more knowledgeable citizens as much as it has created increased consumption of and fascination with crime.

Media content

One of the most researched aspects of mass media is the content of media messages. One of the primary ways researchers answer this question is through a methodology called content analysis. Content refers to specific information present in media messages, as well as the way in which specific mediums may shape the delivery and audience reception of such information. Content is usually studied with an eye towards ascertaining the *frequency* of particular messages within a given media or source, or analysing the *meaning* of media content contained with text, images, film and so on. For example, a content analysis of the television crime drama *Law & Order* (Eschholz, Mallard & Flynn 2004) compared African-American victims of

crime in the show against data on actual crime victimisation from the New York City Police Department (NYPD). The authors found that historically the show had under-represented African-Americans as victims when compared to the actual data. It had also over-represented the number of crimes cleared by the police department when compared to clearance data from the NYPD. In using content analysis, the researchers were thus able to bring attention to at least two important aspects of this influential and widely watched crime drama; namely, that it does not present an accurate depiction of the racial aspect of victimisation in New York City, and also that the police department is arguably depicted as more effective in clearing crimes than the data from the real New York City Police Department indicate.

Semiotics and representation

Aside from content analysis, other forms of media analysis look at how media messages are structured, how they take on meaning for audiences or how they may be embedded within larger cultural practices. These types of analyses are less interested in testing hypotheses and more interested in attempting to deduce meaning through textual and symbolic relationships. The most well-known of these in the study of media is *semiotics* (the study of signs). This approach originated with the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's work centred in part on developing a method through which people could analyse the linguistic and cultural meanings of sign-systems. He noted that all signs contain a *signifier* (a sound, a word) and the thing being *signified* (the concept), but that there was no logical connection between the two. For this reason, Saussure argued that all signs must be learned within the context in which they are signified. Signs, he argued, acquire meaning only in relation to one another. Saussure gave the example of the game of chess to illustrate this point, where the relative meaning or value of any individual piece can only be ascertained in relation to where the other pieces may be on the board at any point in time.

Yet if concepts, like chess pieces, can only be understood in relation to other pieces, Saussure also viewed language as having underlying rules or structures, in much the same way as the chessboard limits and allows for what is possible in the game. He called language a sign-system and noted that in the case of signs, 'the system as a united whole is the starting point, from which it becomes possible, by a process of analysis, to identify its constituent elements' (Saussure 1983 [1916], p. 112). He further argued that a primary way that the meaning of signs are structured is through difference, and through opposition. 'What characterizes each [sign] most exactly is being whatever the others are not' (Saussure 1983 [1916], p. 115). Sinner/saint, good/evil, black/white and up/down all constitute 'binary' oppositions through which the relative meaning of a sign can be ascertained and further developed within a sign-system.

For those interested in studying media content and messages, Saussure's work provides a way to inquire into how representations acquire subjective and collective meaning. Researchers may inquire, for example, into how certain oppositions are structured within sign-systems, for example the privileging of white over black, rich over poor, normal over deviant. In studying crime and media, such an approach

has been of immense value for feminist criminologists in particular. Chesney-Lind and Eliason (2006) write, for example, about the tendency of both news and entertainment media to masculinise particular groups of 'deviant' women and girls, in particular adolescent girls and adult lesbians. The authors examined media coverage of adolescent female offenders and adult lesbians in the United States in the 1990s and early 2000s and found:

[T]here is scant evidence that girls and women are actually committing more violence; indeed most of the evidence that exists is to the contrary. There is, though, very strong evidence that certain women, particularly girls of color and lesbian girls and women, are being constructed by the press and popular culture as both masculine and violent . . . It appears that both the media and the criminal justice system play crucial and complementary roles in the control of women. Popular media masculinize and demonize a few women, effectively casting them out of the 'protected' sphere of femininity, while celebrating the presumed passivity of the rest of womanhood. The criminal justice system steps in, both ratifying and enforcing the gender order, along with the racial, sexual and class order, through its processing and punishment regimes. (Chesney-Lind & Eliason 2006, p. 43)

In this respect, the authors effectively explain how the binary of 'male' and 'female' functions within a privileged matrix of social relations for most men. Women who deliberately or otherwise threaten these social relations risk being seen as too masculine, a label that ironically serves not to align them with dominant forms of gendered power, but to one that is used as a means of social control and a justification for informal and even formal sanctions.

Media crime frames

Sociologists recognise that while media representations of crime may present inaccurate images or depictions of offenders, victims and the criminal justice system, in a more general sense the media is never able to present a wholly objective view of any aspect of the social world, including crime. This is not simply because, or even in spite of, media bias or misrepresentation, but also because the media is dependent upon the use of what social scientists call 'frames' in order to communicate a large majority of the information in a short amount of space or time. Kuypers (2006, p. 8) notes that, 'Framing is a process whereby communicators, consciously or unconsciously, act to construct a point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted by others in a particular manner. Frames operate in four key ways: they define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. Frames are often found within a narrative account of an issue or event, and are generally the central organizing idea.'

The concept of framing is useful to the study of crime and media because it provides researchers with a way to understand how media stories are made 'meaningful' for viewers, particularly within a three-paragraph or 30-second news story. Frames do not tell people what to think per se, rather they organise information in such a way as to guide people towards certain pre-existing explanations for

and judgements of events. Sasson (1995) provides examples of five criminal justice frames used frequently in news media stories in the United States, although these are arguably also applicable to Australia. These frames are:

Faulty Criminal Justice Frame: people commit crimes because the justice system is not effective enough, does not punish enough and is too liberal and focused on the rights of offenders. News stories regarding repeat offenders or particularly violent crimes often utilise this frame.

Blocked Opportunities Frame: people commit crimes due to lack of opportunity, dire circumstances, discrimination or social injustice and other factors that limit their ability to legitimately participate in society.

Social Breakdown Frame: people commit crimes due to increased divorce rates, breakdown in social values, lax morality and other factors that contribute to the breakdown of social order and cohesion.

Racist System Frame: people commit crimes, but differential enforcement and racism ensure that ethnic and racial minorities are disproportionately caught and punished. Alternatively, this frame also suggests that minorities might be more frequently wrongly arrested and convicted when innocent.

Violent Media Frame: people commit crimes in response to increased exposure to violent media. This frame is often present in news stories on youth violent crime or apparently senseless violent crime. This frame is often also presented with one or more other frames, so that media are not seen as the sole cause of a crime but rather as a contributing factor.

In researching and understanding media frames, the goal for researchers is not to try and suggest that any type of pure objectivity is possible. Rather, researchers seek to uncover and possibly correct the ways in which dominant frames may lead to distortions and misperceptions of crime and criminal justice responses to offending and victimisation.

MEDIA EFFECTS

So far we have considered the relationship between crime and media as it relates to the way that media is produced, as well as to some aspects of media products themselves. However, by far and away the most attention given to the relationship between media and crime has been on the question of media effects and in particular the media's influence on criminal and antisocial behaviour. Since the advent of mass media, every generation has been convinced at some point as to the corrupting influence of media technology, if not also the degenerate messages of media content. Video games and online pornography are the dominant worries today. In the 1980s and 1990s it was rap and heavy metal music, and in the 1950s it was comic books.

Today, no-one disputes that the media influences how we act, what we think about and even who we are. Rather, the debate is around the degree of influence,

particularly in the case of children and young people, and particularly in the case of crime and/or antisocial behaviours. The two primary areas of the study of media effects have been around questions of how the media may promote or encourage violent or antisocial behaviour, and how the media may influence people's attitudes or beliefs about crime and justice.

The earliest modern theories regarding media effects were focused on how the media could influence or control large groups of people. These theories are often called 'mass society theories' because they emerged out of the rise of mass media consumer culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this time, print media, photography, radio and film grew to such an extent as to be thought to wield tremendous influence over an increasingly homogenous and consumer society. In some ways this was seen as positive, for example in the ability of media to more instantaneously inform people of events or to mobilise national sentiment. But this was accompanied by a growing fear from policy-makers that the media's influence could be used for all sorts of nefarious ends. Media coverage of civil panic caused by the American radio broadcast of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* in 1938 convinced the public and many policy-makers that the media was indeed influential and dangerous. This belief was supported by the effectiveness of Adolf Hitler's propaganda campaign in the build-up to World War II. The idea that new media technologies such as radio and film could easily influence the beliefs and behaviours of mass populations to the point of getting people to do things they would not normally do is often referred to as the **hypodermic needle theory**. The idea is that media is 'injected' into the person's mind in a way that renders them passive and susceptible to the intended message of the sender.

This view of the power of media effects was and remains popular with both the public and policy-makers. For example, in the United States during the 1980s, significant media coverage and political influence in the form of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), headed and staffed by several wives of well-known politicians, created a veritable moral panic over the influence of sexual and/or supposedly 'Satanic music'. The US Senate held hearings on so-called 'porn rock' in 1985, which received wide media coverage. Around this time as well, there were several well-known civil trials involving lawsuits of rock bands, most notably Judas Priest, whose music was blamed for influencing people to commit acts of extreme violence. Parent and Christian groups held record-burning parties, where music from AC/DC, Prince, Judas Priest and other bands was burned.

Then, as now, there was very little in the way of research evidence to suggest that music could make people do anything they normally would not do. Nevertheless, the furore over Satanic and pornographic music was not about evidence; rather it represented what the sociologist Stanley Cohen called a '**moral panic**'. Cohen (1972, p. 9) defined a moral panic as:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops,

politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

Cohen's larger point was not that such panics were simply mass hysteria. Rather, they represent deliberate yet discursive patterns of enforcement of the moral and normative order of society. Right-thinking people, or what he called *moral entrepreneurs*, engage in such panics against what he called *folk devils*, or those who represent a threat to the prevailing moral order. Moral panics are not a creation of the media, and in some respects they probably date back throughout history, but in the case of the PMRC and other moral panics, the media may function to facilitate and amplify such panics. It may also act in its own right in the capacity of *moral entrepreneur*.

The idea that the media can have such a direct effect, particularly on young people, extends to the present day. However, as early as the 1940s, research into the veracity of the hypodermic needle theory was casting significant doubt on the idea of such direct media effects. The sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues were the first to conduct research on this theory, when looking at media effects on voters on the 1940s. Lazarsfeld concluded that when compared to the influences of social class, religion and peers, the media had at most a 'minimal' influence on voting preferences (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). Later research by Stuart Hall (1973) in the 1970s found that while senders of messages may have intended meanings, the messages received by audiences may frequently not be interpreted as intended, messages are never wholly transparent, and audiences are not as passive as assumed in much of the earlier mass society theories of media effects.

While the research of Lazarsfeld, Hall and others has undercut the idea that people are merely passive receivers of messages, research regarding the influence of media is still contentious, particularly where it involves media effects and crime or antisocial behaviour. This is apparent in the ongoing debate regarding the purported influence of violent television, film and especially video games, all of which continue to be blamed for a host of social ills, including increases in violent behaviour. Several well-publicised laboratory studies have found that young men in particular evidence heightened states of aggression immediately following exposure to violent media content. Critics of these studies have pointed out, however, that such experiments tend to be conducted in artificial settings, measure only short-term reactions to content and fail to account for potential researcher bias (Gauntlett 2005). Indeed, some studies exist that suggest that on average, delinquent and antisocial youth may consume *less* violent media content than their non-delinquent peers (Hagell & Newburn 1994). Also problematic is that while the consumption of violent media content has been increasing (especially in video games) in the last 20 years, rates of violent crime for juveniles and young adults in Australia, Britain and the United States have generally declined from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s.

Does this mean then that the media has no effect on people's social behaviour? No. As Surette (2007, p. 71) argues, there remains a 'general agreement that

there is a persistent positive association between violence in the media and viewer aggression'. What is unclear is the strength of this association, how long this association may remain after exposure to violent media and what other factors may serve to mitigate or enhance the strength of this association.

While there remains less direct evidence to suggest that consuming violent media causes people to become violent, there is more evidence to suggest that exposure to violent content and crime news media may distort people's perception of the rates of violence and crime in society. In particular, heavy viewers of crime dramas are more likely to have distorted views of the actual prevalence of crime and chance of victimisation compared to those who watch less or no television (Dowler 2003). Gerbner et al. (1986) have referred to the relationship between media violence and fear of crime as a '**cultivation effect**', proposing that while the media may be less influential on specific behaviours, it may have more of an effect on people's attitudes and beliefs. According to Gerbner and colleagues, increased consumption of violent media in turn increases people's perception of society as a mean and hostile place – what they call 'mean world syndrome'.

More recent research on Gerbner et al.'s cultivation effect has led to mixed results. Some studies have found a small but significant association between media violence and fear of crime, while other studies have found none or even found that increased consumption of violent media reduces fear of crime (Ditton et al. 2004; Eschholz 1997). Moreover, research that has found an association has also found that the fear of crime tends to be about places *other* than people's own neighbourhoods (Surette 2007). Increased consumption of violent media also appears to be related to increased fear of crime *more* in areas where crime is actually higher (Chiricos et al. 2000). So it may be that consumption of violent media contributes to a view of the world as mean and hostile, but this tends to be a view of the world of other people, of urban areas (for suburbanites) and demographically diverse communities.

David Altheide (2002, p. 59) has noted that, contrary to the notion that people are easily influenced by violent media, the current research suggests that 'It is not easy to make people afraid.' In this regard, the public is frequently cast as too susceptible and too passive to resist or challenge media messages of violence; however, the reality of this seems to be far more complex. As Chiricos and his colleagues (2000, p. 756) note: 'The presumption of undifferentiated TV effects – such as those producing fear or other controlling outcomes – has yielded to the recognition that consumers of TV programs are subjects as much as objects. That is, communication research now regards the reception of media messages as an interactive construction in which audience members – whose social circumstances vary – play an essential and variable role in the constitution of TV's meaning.'

On the other hand, while people may not internalise fear of and anxiety about crime as easily or passively as once thought, there is research that suggests the media more directly impacts people's perception of how much crime exists in society, as well as the degree to which crime exists as an immediate social problem

(Indermaur & Roberts 2005; Lowry et al. 2003; Roberts 1992). Media news coverage of crime presents little, if any, context as to the actual crime rates in local communities or larger states. Research studies over the last two decades throughout much of the western world have found that while crime rates have generally decreased, public perception of crime has not followed suit, with many studies finding the public perceiving a general increase in crime (Dorfman & Schiraldi 2001). While much of this research has been conducted in the United Kingdom and United States, research from Australia suggests that the public here has an equally distorted picture of crime, victimisation and the criminal justice system (Indermaur 1987; Weatherburn et al. 1996; Weatherburn & Indermaur 2004). The reasons for this are complex, but this problem has been linked to dependence on television news in particular for information about crime and criminal justice policies (Callanan 2005; Farkas & Duffett 1998; Roberts & Doob 1990).

Overall, it is probably safe to say that people are *less* influenced than once previously thought in terms of violent media content, but that as research grows, our knowledge of media influence shows that it is greatly dependent upon a host of factors. For example, the more experience people have with crime or the criminal justice system, the less likely they appear to be influenced by the media. People living in higher crime areas appear to be more influenced. People who depend more on the television for their primary source of news about crime tend to be more influenced. What is more certain is that, given the growth and consumption of mass media in the 21st century, and the increasing sophistication of media technologies, this influence will become more profound and problematic for those seeking to differentiate between reality and make-believe.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at how media production, media content and technology, and media effects all play a role in what we know, or think we know, about crime. Most of us live in a world where we give little thought to how the media is produced, why media content is what it is, or how it affects us individually or collectively. For most of us, most of the time, the media is so ubiquitous and self-referential that it appears natural, as much a part of our world as breathing, eating and sleeping. As this chapter demonstrates, however, the media is very much a social and political entity. It is regularly driven by forces other than public interest or objectivity in terms of how it (mis)represents crime, criminals, victims and the criminal justice system. The social reality of crime is both far more complex and far less dramatic than is generally represented in crime media.

In this respect, media literacy is becoming a necessity for most citizens in democratic societies. The ability to critically analyse how the media represents the 'reality' of crime and to understand the social and policy effects of these representations

is crucial for criminology students in the 21st century. More than most people, criminology students and criminal justice professionals are expected to be able to ascertain fact from fiction in terms of all facets of crime and the criminal justice system. Understanding the ways in which the media may obfuscate or even wilfully distort our knowledge of who is involved or impacted by crime, the prevalence of crime in our communities, and the efficacy of the criminal justice system should be paramount for those who will take up roles and leadership positions in our collective understanding of and responses to crime and justice.

KEY TERMS

agenda-setting
critical perspective
cultivation effect
functionalist perspective

hypodermic needle theory
ideal victims
media crime frames
moral panic

newsworthiness
over-reporting

QUESTIONS

- 1 What recent global and national factors have influenced the way in which the media reports on crime stories?
- 2 What are news values? How do they affect which crime stories make the news?
- 3 In Australia, the problem of alcohol-related violence and 'king hits' has been in the news frequently in the last few years. In your opinion, what crime media frame or frames are most frequently employed in media accounts of these stories? Why?
- 4 What are moral panics? Can you find an example of a moral panic recently in Australia?
- 5 What do you think are some of the cumulative effects of people's exposure to media over-reporting of violent crime, over-representation of ideal victims or predator criminals, and other media 'myths' discussed in this chapter?

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Two excellent general books on crime and media are Yvonne Jewkes' (2010) *Media and Crime* and Ray Surette's (2007) *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice*. For a good overview of crime and news, see David Altheide's (2002) *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crises*. For a discussion of crime and media in Australia specifically, see Indermaur and Roberts' (2005) excellent book chapter 'Perceptions in Crime and Justice'.

WEBSITES

The American Psychological Association has a webpage discussion on the current research on media and violence: <www.apa.org/research/action/protect.aspx>.

Common Sense Media has a webpage incorporating current research into media and violence into a guide for age-appropriate media: <www.commonsensemedia.org/research/media-and-violence-an-analysis-of-current-research>.