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Criminologists making news? Providing factual information on crime and criminal justice through a weekly newspaper column

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Abstract
This article summarizes the findings from a two-year research project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which explored the impact of a criminologist presenting factual information on crime and criminal justice through a weekly column in a local newspaper. The research included a natural quasi-experiment, the impact of which was assessed through a large-scale survey and in-depth interviews with members of the public. The key finding from the research was that readership of the column was low (although not as low as survey responses initially indicated), and that the column had no measurable impact on readers. The findings suggest that interest in, take-up, and retention of factual information on crime and criminal justice is not as high as previous empirical research has suggested.

Key words
media representation of crime; mixed-method quasi-experimental research; public opinion

INTRODUCTION

The media play an important role in the social construction of crime, as well as the social construction of public opinion on crime and criminal justice. Social scientists and criminologists, it has been argued, have been passive, bemoaning the deleterious
impact of media representations of crime and criminal justice, while eschewing attempts to influence the newsmaking machinery (Barak, 1988). Nearly two decades ago, Barak (1988: 577) called for criminologists to engage in a particular form of ‘public criminology’, by exploiting the ‘contradictions of news production’ and participating in the ‘newsmaking process’. More recently the *British Journal of Sociology* (2005) and *Theoretical Criminology* (2007) have produced special issues on ‘public sociology’ and ‘public criminology’ respectively. While individual criminologists and criminal justice practitioners may have contributed to public debate occasionally (see Uggen and Inderbitzin, 2006, for examples), few, if any, have tried to measure the impact of such contributions on members of the public.

The purpose of the research summarized here was to explore whether presenting factual information about crime and criminal justice – as opposed to narratives about particular crime incidents – through a weekly column would have an effect on readers of a local newspaper. To make clear the nature of this intervention, two examples of this column are presented here (Figures 1 and 2).

It could be claimed that the experimental intervention at the heart of the research study summarized in this article practises a kind of public criminology. By writing a weekly newspaper column, the author contributed to current discussions about crime and criminal justice in the public sphere and influenced public opinion. Or did she?

Both the call for public criminology and the main research question are based on a number of implicit assumptions regarding the nature of public opinion, and the influence of the media on public opinion of crime and criminal justice. The media’s importance in influencing public opinion has been asserted repeatedly in criminological literature through statements such as that ‘the media are at the centre of all influences’ in the relationship between the public and policy makers (Indermaur and Hough, 2002: 202). The media are perceived to ‘shape the accepted realities about crime and justice directly and indirectly’ (Indermaur and Hough, 2002: 202) creating a ‘growing interdependence of media representation and social “reality”’ (Reiner, 2002: 408). This relationship has been a cause for concern for those claiming that the media’s influence leads to exaggerated fear about crime and increased support for repressive criminal justice policies (Schneider, 1978; Williams and Dickinson, 1993; Freiberg, 2001; Roberts, 2001; Reiner, 2002; Ditton et al., 2004).

As far as public opinion on crime and criminal justice is concerned, Roberts and Hough (2005) provide a succinct summary of key findings of research in their recent textbook on public attitudes. I will highlight only a few points relevant for the research study discussed in this article. Despite the steady fall in crime rates over the past 10 years, as measured by police statistics and the British Crime Survey, the majority of ‘the public’ still believe that crime is rising. This misperception of crime trends is associated with low levels of confidence in the system (Mirrlees-Black, 2001; Roberts and Hough, 2005). Moreover, while interest in crime may be high, accurate knowledge of crime and criminal justice is low (Shaw, 1982; Hutton, 2005; Roberts & Hough, 2005). Members of the public perceive the criminal justice system or, more specifically, the courts as being lenient towards offenders, and sentencers to be out of touch with the views of ‘ordinary’ people (Kappeler et al., 2004; Hutton, 2005; Roberts and Hough, 2005).
Is the goal of catching more criminals really that good a philosophy?

A procrase to crime fighting are more diverse than they used to be. They have shifted to include things such as increasing the public and particularly victims' confidence in the effectiveness of the police and the other agencies involved in the criminal justice system.

If confidence improves, more victims may think it worthwhile reporting crimes.

This is important given the current low reporting rates for many crimes. That could provide a significant increase in the number of crimes reported to the police.

In its draft Oxford Crime and Disorder Strategy 2005-2008, the Oxfordshire's Safer Communities Partnership has set a goal of increasing the reporting of racial, homophobic and domestic crimes.

By Yvonne Crowamiller

The plan is to draw such hidden crimes out into the open.

Another likely effect of the new target is a widening of the so-called ‘Justice gap’ — the gap between recorded crimes and those resulting in a sanction.

Past experience suggests that politicians and the media will interpret these trends as indicating a ‘real’ rise in crime levels and a ‘real’ fall in detection rates.

The police and the courts will then be criticised for their perceived failings. Ironically, confidence building measures targeted at victims may have the effect of undermining more general confidence in the criminal justice system.

Many crime policies can have unintended consequences. For example, the chairman of the Youth And Justice Board, gave a talk at All Souls College recently in which he gave another example.

A boy messiah about his garden with some stones broked a pane of glass in a neighbour's greenhouse. The neighbour came home to find the glass broken and reported the matter to the police so that he could claim for the damage under his insurance policy. Subsequently, the boy admitted to his parents what he had done and they made him go next door to apologise and to offer to pay for the damage.

The neighbour accepted the apology and gave the police a courtesy call to let them know that the matter had been resolved.

The police, however, arrested the boy, took him to the police station and gave him a formal caution for criminal damage.

In this way, they were able to record the detection of this particular 'crime' and improve their figures.

But was justice really served by their actions?

The story shows the danger of setting simplistic targets for the police such as ‘to catch more criminals’.

We should always be alive to ways of responding to crime other than those on vogue.

Local authorities, Oxfordshire's authorities prominent among them, spend enormous amounts of money on measures such as CCTV systems and more 'bobbies' (or 'community support officers') on the beat.

Because crime has been falling for the last ten years, this is a good time to stand back and evaluate the effectiveness of these measures in reducing crime.

CCTV has proved effective in some settings, particularly car parks, but elsewhere it is striking how little evidence there is to justify the costs involved.

Perhaps the money would be better spent on alternative crime prevention schemes, such as youth and sport clubs, education schemes, drug rehabilitation, and so forth.

Academic and Home Office research has repeatedly shown that crime is more widespread among all segments of society than most people believe it to be. A third of men have a conviction for a non-motor offence by the time they are 40. What conclusions do we draw from this?

There has been some debate about locating police in schools, allowing random drug tests of schoolchildren, and giving head teachers the power to search pupils.

Yet it is adults who commit the majority of crime.

So, should we have the police looking over our shoulder at work, and should our employers be given the power to drug test or search us?

The key question in all of these debates is what level of harm caused by crime are we willing to put up with in exchange for a life free of total social control?

Over the last six months I have provided a lot of information about crime and the criminal justice system to help answer such tricky questions.

As an academic criminologist, I found it hard to restrict myself to the column space and to be clear and concise at the same time.

The main difficulty I faced was that there really are no easy answers to crime.

In this, my final column, I want to ask whether you thought the column provided you with useful information about crime and criminal justice.

Simply e-mail 'CSO yes' or 'CSO no' to crimeconsulting.com or text 'CSO yes' or 'CSO no' to 07897 678333 (standard charges apply).

FIGURE 1 Sample column, published in The Oxford Times, 8 April 2005

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‘Lower classes’ are criminalised by new legislation

By Yvonne Crowmiller

There are over a hundred of these, including murder, burglary, false accounting, and aiding suicide.

Other less well known criminal acts include: exceeding a speed limit, running a red light on your bike (criminal offences under road traffic regulations), fly-tipping, and begging (under the Vagrancy Act of 1824). However, the definition of criminal behaviour is not so simple after all.

The statement above that ‘all (and only) behaviour proscribed by criminal law is by definition criminal’ has been undermined by recent legislation. Certain types of behaviour are now ‘criminalised by stealth’.

Drinking in public, for example, is no longer a criminal offence.

However, since 2005, the police have the power to direct anybody drinking in areas of Oxford where street drinking has been banned or anybody failing to surrender alcohol to a police officer. Anyone failing to comply commits a criminal offence.

Another example is that of teenagers hanging around in groups.

They are not committing a crime. Indeed, there is a right to free assembly in this country.

However, the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 allows the police to direct groups of two or more teenagers to disperse if they are believed to have caused intimidation, harassment and alarm to members of the public and if anti-social behaviour is a significant and persistent problem in that particular area.

Again, contravening these police directions constitutes a criminal offence. And then there is the Anti-Social Behaviour Order.

Asbos were introduced in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and are civil orders which can be applied for by local authorities, the police and registered social landlords.

There are no limitations on the conditions of the order and the type of behaviour banned, and the breach of this civil order is a criminal offence with a maximum penalty of five years’ imprisonment.

A number of people have been imprisoned for non-criminal acts such as setting foot in an area they were banned from, or drinking alcohol in public.

The number of young people imprisoned for breaching Asbos is believed to have risen to 50 per month.

This clearly shows that behaviour can be criminalised without being the subject of the general criminal law of the land.

The criminal justice system tends to bear down hardest on the types of crime most often committed by those in a ‘weaker’ social position, mainly young, working-class males.

A lot of the crime typically committed by the middle-classes, such as breaches of health and safety legislation, workplace theft, and fraud, is not, and perhaps cannot be, subject to stringent policing.

A side effect of circumventing criminal law through the use of Asbos has been to intensify the policing of the ‘new’ folk devils: the young, the homeless, the mentally ill — the yobs and thugs of our time.

However, the most worrying aspect of the increasing blurring of the lines between criminal, anti-social, and even immoral behaviour is the way it undermines the principle of treating citizens as equal under the law.

Criminal law applies equally to everyone and the consequences of breaking criminal law are, in theory, the same for all.

Asbos, on the other hand, are imposed on unpopular individuals such as prostitutes, the homeless, street-drinkers, rowdy neighbours and troublesome youth.

Of course, the ‘haves’ often indulge in their own forms of anti-social behaviour.

But as Professor John Gardner of Oxford University has wryly noted, Asbos are not being advocated for middle-class parents who repeatedly park illegally as part of the ‘school run’.

So, whether certain behaviour is illegal increasingly depends on who you are.

FIGURE 2 Sample column, published in The Oxford Times, 11 March 2005
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Finally, there appears to be a relatively widespread consensus that the last 20–30 years have brought about the advent of penal populism and populist punitiveness (e.g. Garland and Sparks, 2000; Hutton, 2005; Roberts and Hough, 2005). Policy makers are among those who have assumed that the media have a powerful, and sometimes pernicious, influence on public opinion on crime and criminal justice. They have accordingly sought to identify alternative ways of communicating information to the public. As part of the review of the sentencing framework, the Home Office conducted a major study in 2000–1 which aimed to test options for changing public attitudes to the sentencing framework in place at the time. This research provided information to members of the public through three different media – a leaflet, a video tape, and a seminar – and measured the impact of the information on levels of knowledge of, and attitudes towards, crime and criminal justice. The research found that levels of knowledge could be improved through the provision of information and that, in turn, attitudes could be influenced (Chapman et al., 2002). The Home Office study suffered, however, from a number of methodological problems. For example, research participants were paid to read/view the information provided, and they were aware that they were taking part in an experiment.

The main question pursued in the ‘Crime Scene’ study discussed here was whether the Home Office findings would be replicated when factual information was presented in a naturalistic way through a local newspaper. Thus, the research explored the role of the media in communicating factual information about crime and criminal justice to members of the public as well as the potential role of criminologists in contributing to the public debate about crime and criminal justice.

THE ‘CRIME SCENE’ STUDY

The ‘Crime Scene’ study consisted of three parts: a natural quasi-experiment, in-depth interviews with survey respondents, and the collection of contextual data through exploratory interviews with media insiders and opinion leaders, observational work, and a fieldwork diary. The main element was the natural quasi-experiment, the impact of which was measured by a large-scale public opinion survey which was repeated after the experimental intervention – namely, the publication over a six-month period of a weekly factual column on crime and criminal justice.

The medium chosen for the experimental intervention was a local weekly broadsheet, The Oxford Times (Figure 3). This county-wide newspaper, based in Oxford and founded in 1862, has a circulation of 30,000 and a readership of 80,000, with most of its readership in the city of Oxford.

Local newspapers have been identified as one of the main trusted sources of information on crime and criminal justice (Ericson, 1991; Page et al., 2004). Also, the flexibility of the format of a newspaper column seemed appropriate for the purposes of this research. Newspaper editors make allowances for columns as regards word length, topicality, and objectivity, as they aim ‘to stimulate public debate and action, and to provide readers with useful information’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004: 61). The Editor
of *The Oxford Times* agreed that he would publish a column for 26 consecutive weeks and provided the column with a logo (shown at the head of this article) and the title ‘Crime Scene’.

A number of steps were taken to preserve the naturalistic quality of the experiment. The experiment was kept secret, even from colleagues and friends. Any references to the project on the University of Oxford website and elsewhere were extremely vague. The ‘before’ and ‘after’ survey measurements of people’s knowledge and attitudes were conducted under the auspices of the University of Oxford whereas the column itself claimed no connection with the university and was authored by ‘Yvonne Crownmiller’ (a fictitious name) described in the first column as a ‘local criminologist living in Abingdon’, a town a few miles to the south of Oxford. In addition, the survey questions made only passing reference to *The Oxford Times*.

While the manner in which the survey was conducted reduced the possibility that ‘before’ measurements would predispose people to read the column, some risk of sensitization remained. There was also the danger that the ‘before’ measurements might influence the way that people answered questions at the ‘after’ stage of the experiment (an ‘instrumentation effect’). To counter these possibilities a quasi-experimental Solomon four-group design was used (see Table 1).

In order to collect pre-experiment measurements a large-scale public opinion survey was carried out with a sample of 3145 Oxford residents randomly selected from the electoral roll. This is referred to below as the Oxford Public Opinion Survey (OPOS).
The impact of the weekly column on crime and criminal justice was measured through a repeat post-experiment survey with those survey respondents willing to be recontacted after a period of nine months. In accordance with the Solomon four-group design, a part of the sample of Oxford residents initially selected was surveyed only once after the experimental intervention.

Table 1 shows a breakdown of all surveys returned according to the Solomon four-group design. Overall, the response rate for the Oxford Public Opinion Survey was reasonable, at around 30 per cent for both the pre-experiment (31%) and the post-experiment-only sample (29%). There was no evidence of either a sensitization effect or any clear evidence of an instrumentation effect of those surveyed at the pre- and post-experiment stage. Therefore the findings concerning the degree of change, or lack of it, in knowledge and attitudes have been treated as reliable.

A qualitative element

Public opinion research based exclusively on survey data has been criticized for its flawed premise. First, all those asked are presumed to have an opinion on the matter queried and to be capable of expressing it. Second, with the use of closed questions, respondents are not asked about their opinions but rather their choice from a small selection of pre-formed answers. This in turn assumes that the questions asked and the answers provided are meaningful to all members of the public. As Robert (1978: 91) notes, ‘questioning the public on subjects which are insufficiently meaningful to them is likely to result, at best, in random and, usually, in induced answers’. Third, survey research assigns each individual opinion equal weight strictly following the egalitarian principle (Robert, 1978; Bourdieu, 1993; Tourangeau et al., 2000; Luskin et al., 2002; Champagne, 2004). All of the above assumptions have been comprehensively criticized and some critics have concluded that public opinion as an entity measurable by opinion polls does not exist and is simply a social scientific artefact (Blumer, 1948; Bourdieu, 1993; Osborne and Rose, 1999).

Thus, it was decided that the research should include a qualitative element which would enable the construction of a richer and more complex picture of the processes of take-up, reception, and recall of information, and of public opinion more generally. In-depth data on the experimental intervention were collected through face-to-face interviews with a sub-sample of survey respondents who had taken part in both the initial and the repeat OPOS.

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<th>TABLE 1 Solomon four-group design</th>
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O = Observation
X = Experimental intervention
In addition, contextual data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with ‘media insiders’, that is, the editor, a columnist, and the subeditor of *The Oxford Times*. Additionally, two ‘opinion leaders’ were interviewed to explore the potential impact of the ‘Crime Scene’ column on those influencing the political debate on crime and criminal justice. The author shadowed *The Oxford Times*’ crime reporter, had numerous informal meetings with the crime reporter and the editor of *The Oxford Times*, and kept a fieldwork diary of observations and events. While it was hoped that ‘triangulation’ of the different data sources would facilitate a more accurate assessment of the validity of all the data gathered, this technique was used primarily in the spirit of its ability to ‘deepen understanding’ rather than to ‘guarantee validity’ or to serve as an aid in the search for the simple and ultimate truth (Silverman, quoted in Seale, 1999: 58).

The ‘Crime Scene’ columns

The 26 columns (the experimental intervention) were published in the news section of *The Oxford Times* between September 2004 and April 2005. The first column outlined the columnist’s intention to answer questions about local crime and criminal justice and to put crime reporting in a wider context. Columns were about 800 words in length and, whenever possible, drew on stories and comments of local relevance in order to increase their salience for *The Oxford Times* readers. The columns aimed to provide factual information on all but one of the 14 knowledge questions asked in the OPOS questionnaire and the information for each of the questions was provided at least twice in the 26 columns.

One lesson that may be drawn from this research is that it is feasible for criminologists to secure the agreement of a local newspaper to include a regular column on crime and justice issues. However, the task of writing a fresh column containing factual and locally relevant information on a weekly basis is challenging. Moreover, despite an initial agreement reached with the Editor to place the column close to the main editorial, column positioning varied from week to week and often ended up in newspaper ‘dead space’, that is, at the bottom of the latter parts of the news section. And, as part of the sub-editing process carried out by the newspaper, columns were occasionally shortened, and headlines regularly replaced. This sub-editing sometimes undermined the clarity of the messages the columnist sought to convey. For example, in one case the final paragraph was omitted altogether, resulting in the column terminating on a rather odd, inconclusive note.

THE OXFORD PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY

In the quantitative part of the research, surveys were received from 954 Oxford residents, 648 before September 2004 and 306 between May and August 2005. The data presented here refer to the whole sample of 954 respondents.
Oxford is a-typical compared to the rest of the country as far as its residents’ demographics are concerned, in particular their educational status. Additionally, analysis showed that the sample resulting from the Oxford Public Opinion Survey was in many respects not representative of the population it was drawn from. It was skewed towards females, those of white ethnic background, the older generation (those aged 60 or older), and those with a university degree. It became clear that this sample ‘skew’ had an impact on the findings of Oxford residents’ views on crime and criminal justice as both levels of knowledge and attitudes towards these issues were correlated with demographic variables.

Knowledge of the criminal justice system

The OPOS questionnaire contained one section with 14 knowledge questions which were specifically designed to test respondents’ knowledge of crime rates, reporting rates of specific crimes, sentencing statistics, and so on. The expected average score which could be attained by answering these questions purely through guessing was 2.75. The mean score achieved by Oxford survey respondents was 4.14 out of 14. As many as 172 (18%) of the 943 respondents answered two or fewer questions correctly, and 11 respondents did not answer any of the knowledge questions correctly. Only 87 (9%) answered seven or more questions correctly. The best score was 9/14 which was achieved by six respondents. The mean knowledge score differed by demographic variables, such as gender, age, and educational achievement. However, the only statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) predictor for a higher knowledge score was the level of educational achievement.

One of the factual questions tapped respondents’ familiarity with one of the two main measures of crime trends currently employed by the British Government, the British Crime Survey (BCS). Given the prominence of the BCS in the frequent discussion of crime rates in the media, it is striking that only 12 per cent of the sample stated that they knew what it was. Nearly two-thirds (65%) reported that they had not even heard of it.

Respondents of the Oxford Public Opinion Survey were acutely aware of their lack of knowledge of crime patterns and the processes of the criminal justice system. A box was included next to each knowledge question which enabled respondents to indicate that their answer was a ‘pure guess’. More than three-quarters of respondents regarded their answer to 13 of the 14 knowledge questions as a ‘pure guess’.

Yet, respondents’ answers to the knowledge questions appeared to be prone to popular misconceptions. For example, 84 per cent of respondents indicated that they were purely guessing the answer to a question about the rate of imprisonment for adult men convicted of robbery. However, if people had indeed guessed randomly at least 20 per cent of the sample should have guessed correctly. In the event less than 2 per cent of those identifying themselves as ‘guessers’ chose the right answer (81–100% of adult male robbers are sentenced to imprisonment). Nearly three-quarters of them (73%) ‘guessed’ that the rate of imprisonment for convicted robbers was
between 1 and 40 per cent, with 44 per cent assuming that the rate of imprisonment was less than 20 per cent.

**Attitudes towards crime, criminals, and criminal justice**

Survey respondents were asked to choose which one of eight social issues they were most concerned about in order to assess the relative importance of crime. It was evident that people found it difficult to decide on just one social issue, and 15 per cent chose more than one. Where respondents did select a single issue, 21 per cent were concerned most about the standard of the National Health Service, 19 per cent about the level of inflation/house prices/cost of living, and 17 per cent about the quality of education. The level of crime did concern 14 per cent of respondents, putting it in joint fourth position with the state of the environment.

Eleven questions included in the questionnaire tapped respondents’ attitudes towards crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system. A majority of respondents of the Oxford Public Opinion Survey believed that crime nationally had risen over the past five years; that the criminal justice system is not effective in reducing crime; that the judiciary is out of touch; and that the sentences they impose are too lenient. These findings are very much in line with results from other survey research and can be read as reflecting a lack of confidence in the criminal justice system and the judiciary, and a desire for more punitive sentences. However, this apparent ‘punitiveness’ was contradicted in other parts of the survey. Less than a quarter of respondents, for example, believed that a prison sentence is effective in reducing an offender’s likelihood of reconviction, two-thirds believed that offenders can be helped to change and more than half felt that prison should only be used as a last resort. These seemingly contradictory findings call into question the frequently made assumption that the public’s disquiet about the leniency of court sentences can be neutralized through the imposition of more and longer prison sentences.

**The experiment**

The primary objective of the OPOS was to assess the impact of a weekly column on crime and criminal justice on readers of a weekly local newspaper. In total 443 *Oxford Times* readers and 220 non-readers were asked whether or not they read the ‘Crime Scene’ column at the post-experiment stage. Fifty-four respondents reported to have read the column which is equivalent to 12 per cent of all those who reported ever to read *The Oxford Times*, 27 of them in the pre-and-post experiment sample (12%) and 27 in the post-experiment-only sample (13%). The majority of column readers (*n* = 42) only read the column occasionally, less than twice a month.

Those reading the columns were fairly similar to the general *Oxford Times* readership as regards gender, ethnicity, and educational qualifications. There were considerable differences in age (46% of column readers were aged 60 or older vs 32% of *The Oxford Times* readers) and related differences in homeownership (50% of column
readers owned their home outright vs 37% of *The Oxford Times* readers) and working status (41% of column readers were retired vs 25% of *The Oxford Times* readers). This suggests that readership of the column was mainly determined by the amount of ‘spare’ time available to readers of *The Oxford Times*, and as one interviewee stated, ‘I would imagine retired people would read more of this, they have got more time’.

**Impact of column**

Readers of the column had a slightly lower mean knowledge score than the total sample prior to the experiment (4.07 vs 4.20). After the experimental intervention, the mean knowledge score increased slightly for the column reader sample (from 4.07 to 4.19) but it was still lower than the mean score achieved by *The Oxford Times* readers who had not read the column (4.45, up from 4.40). As far as changes on an individual level were concerned, 13 readers showed an improvement in knowledge score, four column readers showed no change, and in ten cases the knowledge score deteriorated. There was no obvious link between the frequency of reading the column and the changes in knowledge on an individual level.

Column readers’ attitudes changed slightly on five attitudinal questions: in four of them in an arguably more ‘liberal’ direction, in one case in the opposite direction. However, the analysis is based on very small numbers and none of these changes was statistically significant.

Spontaneous reaction to the columns, mainly in the shape of letters to the editor, was monitored. However, according to the Editor of *The Oxford Times*, only one letter in response to any of the columns was received. Unfortunately, the Editor was unable to locate this letter so its contents remain unknown. In the final column, feedback was sought on whether or not readers thought the columns had provided them with any useful information on crime and criminal justice. An email address and a text-messaging service were provided but in total only 6 messages were received, 5 of them providing positive and 1 negative feedback.

This apparent lack of interest in the general issues discussed by the column came as no surprise to the Editor. In his view, reader interest centred on acts of crime rather than in understanding broader issues such as the definition, measurement, and complexities of offending behaviour. Consistent with this editorial judgment, stories about particular crime incidents were a staple feature of each issue of *The Oxford Times* while letters to the Editor on the subject were rare. In an interview with us the Editor noted that ‘over the period of a year you could count the number of letters we get on crime almost on one hand. There really is that few’.

There are other ways in which the column might have had an impact. There is some anecdotal evidence that the column was noted by professionals in the criminal justice system. The Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police in post at the time of the experiment reportedly stated that ‘he had seen the column and quite liked it’; a local Youth Offending team officer contacted the author (in her role as columnist) to ask her to write a column on restorative justice; and a volunteer working with prisoners
noticed that a local project involving the work placement of prisoners in the community had been mentioned in one of the columns. Moreover, the current Acting Chief Constable acknowledged in an interview that Thames Valley Police routinely scrutinize national and local media for coverage of police and crime stories and some other local criminal justice agencies may have had similar arrangements in place. The police, however, do not only monitor media representations in a passive way. Chief Constables have taken on a more active role as social commentators since the 1970s, and police communication strategies in general have become more proactive and professional with an emphasis on controlling media images of policing as much as possible (Mawby, 2003; Wilcox and Young, 2007). The significance of this is examined further in the conclusion.

The in-depth interviews

There is a considerable body of social psychological literature that ‘considers the limiting properties of surveys in reflecting attitudinal dimensions of public opinion and whether the survey situation creates attitudes where none really exist’ (Dran and Hildreth, 1995: 130; see also Maruna et al., 2004; King and Maruna, 2006). Moreover, while members of the public generally welcome the chance to ‘make their voices heard’, they also express ‘some degree of scepticism about polling as a mechanism of public input’ (Dran and Hildreth, 1995: 141). In order to counter some of the limitations of the knowledge derived from large-scale surveys, this research sought to triangulate the data elicited from the public opinion survey with more detailed qualitative data from in-depth interviews.

All survey participants who had agreed to be recontacted at the pre-experiment survey stage were asked – at the end of the Oxford Public Opinion Survey Part 2 – whether they would be happy to be recontacted for an in-depth interview. Forty-one per cent (n = 145) of respondents indicated that they would be happy to be contacted again. Forty-four survey respondents were asked to take part in an in-depth interview and in total 38 interviews were carried out (an 86% response rate). Eight of the interviewees had self-reported to have read the ‘Crime Scene’ column, eight had noticed but not read the column, and 22 interviewees were regular readers of The Oxford Times, that is, read it at least three out of four times a month, who nevertheless reported to have not noticed the column.

The interviews were semi-structured through the use of open-ended questions which explored three main issues:

▪ respondents’ interest in crime and criminal justice;
▪ the way in which they received the columns in respect to recall, impact, content, and style;
▪ and the experience of filling in the Oxford Public Opinion Survey.

Considering the length of the in-depth interview (45–60mins), and given that interviewees had participated twice in a lengthy survey on crime and criminal justice, a
surprisingly large group of people \((n = 17, 45\%)\) described themselves as only ‘interested in a general sense’ \((n = 5)\), ‘moderately interested’ \((n = 5)\) and ‘not particularly interested’ \((n = 7)\) in such issues. One respondent said, ‘[I am] not particularly [interested]. Just as part of a social fabric, if you like, of society. I haven’t got a particular interest in criminals or criminology or whatever, but just as an indicator of our society if you like’.

Similarly, when asked whether interviewees were interested in receiving more factual information (such as more reliable statistics) about crime and the criminal justice system, nearly a quarter \((n = 9)\) stated that they were ‘just not interested’ in more information and another four respondents made it clear that they did not trust any statistics due to the perceived ease of manipulation. On the other hand, the vast majority of interviewees \((87\%)\) reported they read stories about crime incidents in *The Oxford Times*. This evidence is consistent with the Editor’s sense (mentioned earlier) that the majority of *The Oxford Times* readers are attracted by the human drama of crime while not being particularly interested in broader treatments of statistical trends and underlying issues. Since incident-related stories tend to concern particularly harmful or otherwise atypical crimes, the possibility exists that readers construct faulty generalizations from the stories they are reading. However, less than half \((42\%)\) of those who read incident-driven stories believed that these incidents were representative of actual crime in the Oxford area, although some respondents thought that local newspapers provide a better picture than national papers of the frequency and nature of crimes committed and sentences passed. Respondents were quite clear that ‘newspapers necessarily give a dramatic view of crime . . . but then you can hardly blame the newspaper for looking for things that are newsworthy’.

Close to 60 per cent of interviewees \((n = 22)\) felt that increased knowledge of patterns of crime and the processes of the criminal justice system had the potential to change attitudes towards crime and criminal justice. Without prompting, nearly a third \((n = 12)\) of interviewees mentioned that providing factual information through a local newspaper would be a good method of making it available to members of the public. Moreover, when asked about the value of a regular newspaper column on crime 15 interviewees \((40\%)\) thought this was a good idea with only three \((8\%)\) stating that they thought it was a bad idea.

Interviewees were presented with a selection of three ‘Crime Scene’ columns and then asked whether they recalled reading any of the 26 columns published. Nineteen of the interview participants believed they had read the column at least once or twice, which is more than double the rate of those who thought they had read the column when filling in the survey. This is in line with the perception of the Editor of *The Oxford Times*, who felt that the number of survey respondents who had identified themselves as ‘Crime Scene’ readers was too low and that readership ‘would be much, much higher than that’. What this finding suggests is that presenting the column in visual form (with its distinctive logo as shown at the top of this article) was a more effective way of triggering memories of reading it than the OPOS survey method of merely referring to the title and author of the column in one among many other questions.

Subsequently, interviewees were asked to choose one of the three ‘Crime Scene’ columns to read and comment on. Although most interviewees \((71\%)\) said that they
found the column they chose interesting rather than dull, nearly all had suggestions on how to improve the readability of the column. The comments mostly concerned the accessibility of the arguments made and recommended the inclusion of visual aids (graphs, pictures, charts), the breaking-up of solid chunks of text (through bullet points, different typeface), and the inclusion of human interest stories and more local examples. Some interviewees \( (n = 6) \) felt that the column was trying to provide too much information, was too complicated, and not sufficiently self-critical. Some respondents said,

*I also think that, I don’t mean to criticize it, but it’s a sort of essay, so a lot of people just don’t read essay-type things so, it might be more interesting if there were more quotations.*

*I think it needs to give a balanced picture and doesn’t need to feel responsible about how society feels about crime. I think it needs to attempt, it needs to regard itself as the servant of its readers and give an objective a picture as it can . . . and I don’t feel that article is adequately self critical.*

Further, in order better to understand whether members of the public are confident in extrapolations from survey research, interviewees were asked whether they thought that public opinion polls can adequately capture people’s views and attitudes. While 40 per cent of interviewees \( (n = 15) \) thought they could, a somewhat larger proportion \( (47\%, \ n = 18) \) stated that this would depend on the chosen methodology – sample selection, questionnaire design, and response rate – and quality of analysis. It was also noted repeatedly that surveys can only ‘capture part of the attitudes’. This point is supported by the finding that about 27 per cent of survey respondents felt the need to comment on or question the validity of the questions, or explain or qualify their answers. A small selection of comments is included here to give a flavour of the variety of points made:

*I hope my considered comments will be of use and not simply binned, ignored, in favour of the current vogue for statistics (63.5% of respondents considered; 15.3% thought).*

*You do not question whether prison is a suitable moral punishment, which is an important function of the CJS alongside prevention and rehabilitation.*

*There were some important issues within the questions but the questions were too limited and therefore the answers are not a true reflection of my views, e.g. Q49, offenders should be treated harshly according to the severity of the crime. Q20, police-recorded crime levels does not take into account the large percentage of unrecorded crimes because the public have lost faith in the ability of the police to do anything or the courts to obtain a conviction.*

Interview participants decided to take part in the OPOS mainly for two reasons: interest in the topic \( (n = 14, 37\%) \) or civic duty \( (n = 13, 34\%) \). Another six interviewees filled in the survey because they felt that their ‘views [were] representative of people who aren’t often quoted in surveys’ and that they should ‘balance the books a bit’.
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: DOES PUBLIC CRIMINOLOGY WORK?

The findings from the research discussed in this article suggest that criminologists’ understanding of public opinion on crime and criminal justice and media influence needs to be more sophisticated. The unusual research design resulted in ‘new’ findings about the relationship between the media and public opinion on crime and criminal justice, the significance of which is discussed later.

The research design was ambitious: designing and implementing a public opinion survey and writing weekly columns for a local newspaper were labour and time intensive activities. The research process offered new insights into the pleasures and pains of practising a ‘public criminology’ using traditional media, and the implications of using a mixed-method research design. There is insufficient space here to fully discuss the methodological and practical issues arising from this unusual research design, though some of these have been discussed elsewhere (Feilzer, 2007).

Respondents of the Oxford Public Opinion Survey on crime and criminal justice were not representative of Oxford residents in general. This is relevant because levels of knowledge of, as well as attitudes towards, crime and criminal justice were correlated to demographic variables, and therefore the level of knowledge shown and the attitudes expressed are unlikely to be representative of Oxford residents’ views. Despite this, the findings are similar to those found in other public opinion surveys regarding the public’s attitudes towards crime, criminals, and sentencing and are an example of well-reported public ambivalence (Stalans, 2002; Wood and Viki, 2004). To reiterate this ambivalence, a majority of respondents believed that crime nationally had risen over the past five years; that the criminal justice system is not effective in reducing crime; that the judiciary is out of touch; and that sentences imposed by the judiciary are too lenient. Yet at the same time a majority held that a prison sentence is not effective in reducing an offender’s likelihood of reconviction; that offenders can be helped to change; and that prison should only be used as a last resort.

More significantly perhaps, we have seen that respondents were acutely aware of their lack of knowledge of crime patterns and the processes of the criminal justice system. More than three-quarters of respondents regarded their answer to 13 of the 14 knowledge questions as a ‘pure guess’. In the in-depth interviews many interviewees (\( n = 12, 32\% \)) mentioned the ‘pure guess’ option without prompting, with nine participants stating that they found it useful to be given the opportunity to qualify their response to the knowledge questions. It appears that the OPOS was the first survey to use such an option in combination with factual questions about crime and criminal justice. The frequent use made of the ‘pure guess’ option indicates that people are reflective about their ‘ignorance’. However, this should not be interpreted as a sign that people do not subscribe to specific perceptions and beliefs of the ‘right’ answer, only that they are aware that such perceptions are not based on knowledge of the facts. Thus we saw that ‘pure guesswork’ did not lead to anything remotely resembling an even distribution of answers in relation to a question about the sentencing of adult robbers.
There is a belief among sections of the media, among politicians, and among criminologists that issues to do with crime have salience for members of the public, that ‘crime sells’. However, survey respondents only ranked it fourth of the social issues they were most concerned about. Equally, nearly half of the interviewees did not express a strong interest in issues to do with crime and criminal justice. It could be argued that this lack of interest in crime and criminal justice is a result of the composition of the Oxford sample, a fairly wealthy, educated, middle-class, white sample. However, penal theorists have suggested that the middle classes are no longer immune from crime and thus concerns about crime (Garland, 2001). Finally, the Editor of The Oxford Times repeatedly asserted that crime in general was not an important topic for his paper and his readership. The findings from this research seem to imply that crime in general is not a salient issue for the public and that interest focuses primarily on narratives of particular crime incidents.

In keeping with the idea of a public criminology, dissemination of the research findings to research participants as well as a wider audience was an important element of the research design. All interviewees received a one-page summary of the research at the end of the interview and a copy of the 10-page report submitted to the Nuffield Foundation was sent to those survey respondents and interviewees who had expressed an interest in the research findings. Additionally, I discussed the possibility of running a feature in The Oxford Times. However, enthusiasm on the part of the newspaper was fairly low and, despite my efforts, the journalist tasked with writing the feature failed to contact me and the feature never materialized. Nonetheless, the Nuffield report was disseminated to other interested parties, such as local interest groups, including the Acting Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police, Oxford City Council, and Oxford Youth Offending Team.

Turning to the main aspect of the empirical research, namely whether the provision of factual information through a weekly newspaper column can have an impact on readers of the local newspaper, a number of findings emerged. The Oxford Public Opinion Survey showed that only a very small proportion of The Oxford Times readers identified themselves as column readers and only very few of those had read the column regularly. The in-depth interviews suggested that the survey findings probably underestimate the number of people who had read the columns. The fact that some interviewees needed visual prompting before they recalled reading the column suggests how little retention of factual information presented in a simple textual format can be expected.

Among column readers no significant improvements of levels of knowledge were found, which is hardly surprising considering the irregularity of column readership and the relative lack of any general interest in crime and criminal justice. None of the slight attitudinal changes discernible was statistically significant. Additionally, the social psychology literature regarding the instability of attitudes suggests that such changes may well bear little or no relation to column readership. As one interviewee suggested, answers to attitudinal questions can very much depend on circumstances and the mood at the time:
I think the other problem with these sorts of things very much depends on the mood or the experience you are in at the time. If you have just come back from a lovely holiday which has been very peaceful and very calm and you haven’t encountered any sort of minor problems recently you are going to be far more optimistic whereas if you have just come back from some minor fracas on the Magdalen Road or something like that you are going to be in a negative frame of mind and if you’re not sure then you will be opting for the worst scenario when you are answering the questions.

There was anecdotal evidence that the columns had been read by people with a professional or particular private interest in criminal justice, and it has been argued elsewhere that columns are used to ‘inform an ongoing debate between national elites’ and that there is really ‘very little substantive public participation’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004: 66). Thus, while the column might have contributed to and influenced the debate of the ‘elites’, the extent to which any of the information presented reached and influenced the public sphere is unclear but at best is likely to have been slight. Arguably, the ‘Crime Scene’ column might have gained more lay readers with more time to establish itself, better and more consistent positioning in the paper, more authoritative authorship (e.g. by a professor of criminology at the University of Oxford), and more ‘advertising’. In that respect, the experimental intervention can be described as fairly light. However, the negotiations with the editor of The Oxford Times suggested that a more intensive intervention, that is, a more prominent, longer piece published with greater frequency, is unlikely to find the support of a media outlet.

Thus, this natural experiment provided some evidence that interest in, take-up, and retention of factual information on crime and criminal justice is not as high as previous empirical research has suggested. Chapman et al.’s (2002) assertion that the provision of factual information and improved levels of public knowledge of crime and criminal justice is the cure for low levels of confidence in the criminal justice system should be regarded with scepticism. Moreover, the findings presented here indicate the need for a more sophisticated discussion of the basis and stability of public opinions on crime and criminal justice as well as suggesting a number of promising avenues for future research. How would a similar column fare in a tabloid newspaper – would the presentation of factual information provoke anger and debate and eventually reach the public sphere? How do direct experiences of crime and the criminal justice system as offenders, victims, or witnesses affect knowledge and opinion of crime and criminal justice? How can the interest in crime incidents and narratives, but the relative disinterest in crime patterns and processes of the criminal justice system be explained?

Such questions are of particular importance as assumptions about the nature of public opinion and its relationship with the media have gained increasing significance with the advent of the theory of ‘new punitiveness’. Proponents of this theory seek to explain the development of penal policy over the past three decades with reference to changes in public attitudes towards crime and punishment (Pratt et al., 2005). The main contention of this theoretical framework is that punitive public opinion, and a significant loss of middle-class support for liberal penal policies, is responsible for...
a shift in UK policy towards a more repressive and punitive criminal justice system (Garland and Sparks, 2000; Garland, 2001). It is held that the media are at least partly responsible for this rise in public punitiveness (van Dijk, 1978; Reiner, 2002). However, there are serious doubts whether these contentions hold when empirical research and literature is scrutinised more closely.

Notes

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1 The survey questionnaire consisted of 61 questions at the pre-experiment stage and 66 questions at the post-experiment stage, with sections gathering purely statistical information on survey respondents’ main demographic characteristics; measuring attitudes towards crime, criminals, and criminal justice; checking respondents’ levels of knowledge of crime and criminal justice; and asking more general questions about respondents’ habits of media consumption, areas of social concern, experience of victimization, experience of crime, and criminal justice, levels of confidence in the criminal justice system, and perception of changes in crime rates.

2 For a breakdown of Oxford residents’ demographic status by word, see http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/

References


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