

THE MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF STALKING STEREOTYPES

Brian H. Spitzberg & Michelle Cadiz

Introduction

The term "crime victim" tends to evoke a set of archetypal images: Innocence, violence, powerlessness, weaponry, and tragedy. The iconicity of these archetypes is in no small part a product of media typifications rather than the factual data of victimization. Various media are used to penetrate people's everyday lives with images that not only aid in defining what society deems relevant and true, but also in the sculpting of society itself. With techniques ranging from graphic pictures to vivid language, the media are able to reach vast audiences with any particular message or perspective. Television, newspapers, and magazines are just a few examples of media that have been investigated in order to understand their social impacts. One of the most investigated areas of media imagery is crime. From streetwalkers to stalkers, most people have prototypical images of certain types of socially "deviant" persons and criminal forms of activity, and these cognitive prototypes in turn bear varying degrees of correspondence to reality. This analysis excavates some of the correspondences between the media archetypes of stalking and the actual phenomenon of stalking.

Any effects the media have on people's views of the world are likely to be greater to the extent people rely on the media for their information on that topic. Crime is one of the arenas in which the public has traditionally relied on the media for its information. From Jack the Ripper to Al Capone to the stalking of Madonna and the murder trial of O. J. Simpson, people often rely on the media to give them an image of the criminal, the crime, and the risk and nature of victimization. The analysis presented here examines the image of the victim constructed by the media, especially in reference to the phenom-

Source: *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2002, pp. 128-149, © 2002 by the University of Albany School of Criminal Justice. Reprinted with permission.

enon of stalking. The images of stalking in the media appear prismatic. Viewing stalking through the lenses of the media produces many different biased reflections of the phenomenon. These reflections are often reinforcing, but sometimes inconsistent. Understanding how biases and stereotypes are formed and influenced should aid in the understanding of the actual risks of victimization. It will also allow for an understanding of how a crime such as stalking is portrayed by the media and how this portrayal of the crime may affect the public conception of the crime.

The assumption that the news media somehow serve as a value-neutral or objective representation of the world in general, and crime victimization in particular, has long been discredited (Meyers, 1997). News workers inevitably operate with some form of ideology. This ideology in turn "structures the meaning of an event by providing the background assumptions used to understand what is to be treated as an event, what constitutes fact, and interpretation of that fact" (Vounvakis & Ericson, 1984, p. 42). For example, Meyers (1994, p. 48) concluded that "news coverage of battering is socially distorted, rooted in assumptions, myths, and stereotypes that link it to individual and family pathology rather than to social structures and gendered patterns of control" (p. 48). Female victimization, therefore, appears to be a productive arena within which to examine the role of societal and journalistic ideology on the formulation of a stereotype such as stalking.

Gate-Keeping Constructions

Crime depictions in the media result from a multifaceted process involving many people and organizations. The fragmented origin of crime reporting has no single anchor in the "factual" world (Chermak, 1995). Although justice systems and news representatives may have a clear understanding of what crime is, the news production process can distort the image of crime, creating confusion and resulting in messages different than originally intended. News organizations and reporters monitor society for disruptions that occur within people's lives (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). Crimes, especially violent crimes, represent prototypical disruptions. "Crimes without death, blood, or battering are generally not found in the news" (Chermak, 1995, p. 70). Given the entrepreneurial and competitive nature of news organizations, it is little surprise, therefore, that the media philosophy has come to be summarized pithily as: "if it bleeds, it leads." Under the aegis of contributing to public safety, media organizations give extensive coverage of violent crime, even if the actual personal risk of violent crime is relatively minor. Violent crimes possess a high degree of sensationalistic and dramatic content (Meyers, 1997, p. 90).

Public fascination and potential identification of personal risk with such stories provide indirect guidance to media organizations in their story selection process. Newscasts take the role of messenger, providing the general public with the sensational information of the day. Newsrooms and news

programs serve as gate-keepers, monitoring what is seen and heard about any given event. The media also influence public perceptions because of the required selectivity involved in media story selection. Out of the thousands of potential stories that occur every day, the gate-keeping function of media organizations extracts only some as sufficiently newsworthy to present in the appropriate and limited venues of media production (Shoemaker, 1996). The criteria by which some stories are included for broadcast or print, and others excluded, inevitably reflect the priorities of the news organizations, which in turn reflect perceived priorities of the consuming media marketplace.

Rhetorical Constructions

Crimes are, among other things, narratives. As such, crime typifications in the media may follow a variety of rhetorical stylistic conventions. Crimes are also a genre of reporting, and therefore reveal certain institutional and strategic conventions:

Typically, media coverage of new crimes follows a standard pattern: (1) it typifies the crime by offering detailed accounts of particular, usually dramatic, incidents, . . . ; (2) it describes the crime in compelling terms . . . ; (3) it explains some of the crime's causes; (4) it offers interpretations of the crime's meaning and significance; and (5) coverage continues as long as the crime can be approached from fresh angles . . . or until some other story demands attention. (Best, 1999, p. 63)

In general, novelty and titillation potential are important factors affecting whether or not crimes are reported (Meyers, 1997). A more cynical interpretation is that the media "focus on 'hot topics' of entertainment value" until a "media frenzy develops that results in expanded coverage of isolated and unique events. . . . Isolated incidents thus become social issues and, through politicization, eventually crime problems" (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, pp. 6-7). Prototypical representations of crime tend to trade in "(1) the identification and targeting of a distinct deviant population; (2) the presence of an 'innocent' or 'helpless' victim population; (3) the emergence of brave and virtuous heroes; and (4) the existence of a substantial threat to established norms, values, or traditional lifestyles" (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, p. 23). When males are suspects and women are victims, the story takes on greater newsworthiness (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997), perhaps because it resonates with larger cultural narratives. Such news not only conforms to cultural myths, but assists in enforcing them as well (Altheide, 1997). Cultural narratives of crime serve the function of providing warnings and suggestions for personal risk management and sense making (Wachs, 1988).

Other narrative rhetorical conventions can subtly affect impressions of a crime. For example, whether reports are primarily derived from police rather than directly from the victims can affect the personalization of the crime. Word choice can affect attribution of responsibility. Reporting in rape cases

that a victim was "taking a shortcut through a ravine late at night, hitchhiking [sic], accepting a ride home from a stranger, dressing provocatively, leaving her door unlocked, drinking alone in a bar, sunbathing in a secluded area by herself, and taking a man home from a bar" may seem descriptively incidental, but by implication suggest the victims' role in their own victimization (Vounvakis & Ericson, 1984, p. 23). In a story about a murder-suicide, Meyers (1994) points out that the husband was portrayed as "obsessive" and had a difficult time dealing with the separation from his wife. Such language removes partial blame from the husband's shoulders. In contrast, being obsessive and having a difficulty with separation lend themselves to the explanation that he could not control himself and was driven to shoot both himself and his estranged wife. A content analysis of newspaper reports of domestic violence found that 47.8 percent "suggested at least one motivation or excuse for the perpetrator" (Bullock & Cubert, 2002, p. 484).

Vounvakis and Ericson's (1984) study of newspaper accounts of attacks on women indicated predominant attributions were:

- 1) to the victim, especially in terms of how victim precautions can serve as a major device for crime prevention; 2) to the criminal justice system, especially how more and improved laws, policing, and punishment is another major crime prevention device; and 3) to offender pathology, especially how there is a need to identify and control "dangerous" individuals in society. (p. 43)

The tendency to identify the pathological villain and the helpless victim in such crime stories serves several rhetorical functions. "The archetypes are social predators not bound or restrained in any way by normal social rules and values. In contrast, the media portray victims of crime as passive and helpless" (Surette, 1998, p. 40). As such, (1) anyone may be a victim, especially if that person plays an unwitting role in eliciting victimization, (2) increased law enforcement and personal attention to protection are needed, and (3) attention to ongoing media coverage is vital to stay apprised of the risks of such a crime.

Audience Constructions

Another arena in which media typifications are constructed, and indirectly reinforced, is in the public's perceptions of the media reports. Crimes such as rape, murder, and robbery evoke strong images in the media-consuming public that reflect various cultural, ethnic, and gender-based stereotypes. Such public stereotypes serve to filter what is processed when the media report crime stories, and indirectly feed back to the media organizations' values regarding what the public "wants."

Furthermore, in an increasingly complex communication environment, the public cannot process all available information and news. To manage the deluge of information in the environment, people develop cognitively efficient schemata for processing sensory stimuli. "Perceptions and judgments

are subject to distortion because of shortcuts . . . [that is,] fast and expedient paradigms used to cognitively cope with massive amounts or fast-paced information" (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). When crime narratives are distributed to the mass public, the value orientations of these narratives are filtered through millions of personal schemata, and subsequently through millions of informal interpersonal conversations in which new versions are negotiated, reinforced, and passed on to others.

In such information rich environments, media consumers may increasingly rely on the media to structure and simplify reality into more manageable forms. For example, heavy consumption of sexual images appears to decrease sensitivity toward sexual aggression victims (MacKay & Covell, 1997), and repeated exposure to filmed violence against women similarly produces desensitization effects (Dexter, Penrod, Linz, & Saunders, 1997). Gender role stereotypes portrayed in the media coexist with gender stereotypes in society (Signorielli, 1989), and these stereotypes in turn interact with stereotypes of crime and victimization. Rape tends to be portrayed as perpetrated by sadistic, psychopathic, or disturbed persons preying on the relatively helpless (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000).

The similarity media consumers perceive with reported crime victims plays a role in how people attribute blame to a victim. "A person who sees herself as personally similar to the victim and thus a potential victim will attribute catastrophe to chance or some other factor, and not the victim" (Dexter et al., 1997, p. 2151). The more similar a victim is to a person, the less likely the person is to attribute responsibility of the crime to the victim. Contrariwise, the less the victim is similar to the person, the more likely the person will attribute blame to the victim. Importantly, desensitization, which can be strongly influenced by media typifications and exposure, appears to mediate women's empathy with victims of violence (Dexter et al., 1997). Similarly, males exposed to sexually objectifying films appear less sympathetic to rape victims than males not exposed to such films (Millburn, Mather, & Conrad, 2000).

The finding that similarity between a victim and a perceiver affects the perceiver's attribution of blame has at least three implications. First, although most crime stories mention neither the race nor the socio-economic status of the victim, among those stories that do, most victims are reported as white and middle to upper class (Kappeler & Potter, 2005; Meyers, 1994). Therefore, media consumers who do not identify with these victims are less likely to be sensitized to the victim, and thereby, to the crime itself. Second, the media can bring unfavorable aspects about a victim to light. This can have the effect of diffusing attributed responsibility for the crime, allowing people to be less empathetic to victims of crimes, and implicitly creating a climate of tolerance toward the violence itself. For example, to the extent that stalking victims are portrayed as celebrities, the media consumers may not internalize either empathy or sense of personal risk. Third, and related, relevant parties can distance themselves both from the crime and the societal agenda that would seek to regulate the crime. For example, "the very common view that

men who rape, murder, or otherwise commit acts of violence against women are 'sick' or in some way pathological ignores the social roots of this violence. . . . The representation of the assailant as a monster or psychopath also allows men to distance themselves from the perpetrators of these crimes" (Meyers, 1997, p. 10). Thus, for example, to the extent stalkers are portrayed as obsessed, delusional, or mentally ill, the public may distance their own courtship activities from such crazed and deviant actions, thereby licensing their own intrusive behaviors, and not seeking protection or redress against such actions from others.

In regard to crime, the more unusual the crime, the more media exposure it tends to receive (Meyers, 1997). This leads to a media paradox. The media tend to report highly unusual, unlikely, but vivid events that nevertheless provide a "disproportionate influence on . . . subsequent judgments through their increased memorial availability" (Ruscio, 2000, p. 22). Media consumers not only find such reports interesting, but their enhanced memorial availability and sensational nature make such stories more likely to be reproduced in everyday conversation with others. Such interpersonal effects thereby serve to reinforce the selective biases of the media. Thus, the media are selective in what they portray of reality, what they portray reflects both organizational ideologies and cultural stereotypes, and these biases are in many ways reinforced through public interpersonal processes of conversational topical reproduction.

In one of the clearest evidences of the mediated construction of reality, research has repeatedly shown that media consumption is significantly correlated with biased perceptions of personal risk of crime victimization. That is, because crime is more likely than other events to end up being portrayed in the media, heavy media consumers tend to perceive personal risks of crime victimization that are many times greater than their actual statistical risk (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). This enculturation effect suggests that the proportion of media exposure to crime enabled by content selection processes shapes the domain of relevance in people's minds, thereby restricting alternative interpretations of reality.

Media Effects on Reality

News media use statistics in order to get across the importance of a crime or newsworthy event. Yet researchers have found that the media often misrepresent the numbers, or otherwise bias how the numbers are presented and, therefore, interpreted by the consumer. For example, perhaps due to an understanding of recency effects, percentages and rates of crime are usually cited toward the end of a story (Berger, 1998). Furthermore, especially in reference to crime, the most dramatic estimates tend to be selected rather than the most conservative numbers. One study, for example, concluded that the media foster the perception that crime rates are constantly increasing, and even downplaying the amount of nonviolent crime (Kappeler & Potter, 2005). The media in particular appear to be eager and complicit partners with police

and political bodies in the construction of "crime waves" (e.g., Brownstein, 1996). Such exaggerations help make a story more newsworthy and interesting. Exaggeration raises viewers' concern and allows the media to spend more time or space on the events (Glassner, 1999).

The media both systematically and unsystematically distort the images they relay to society, for example, in portraying an epidemic of violent crime (Kappeler & Potter, 2005). Yet, the media use such fear evoking images because they invoke a preexisting framework of expectations in which people identify with potential victims and are able to attribute such problems to manageable causes (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). Apparently, "the success of a scare depends not only on how well it is expressed, but also . . . on how well it expresses deeper cultural anxieties" (Glassner, 1999, p. 208). In parallel to the maxim, "if it bleeds, it leads," it seems to follow that "if it terrorizes, it mesmerizes."

The Media Portrayals of Stalking

By any historical measure, stalking is a paradigm example of social and media construction of a crime. Despite the occurrence of stalking since antiquity (Kamir, 2001), it was not recognized as a crime until California passed an anti-stalking law in 1990. Indeed, the media appear responsible for the labeling of the crime itself (Keenahan & Barlow, 1997; Lawson-Cruttenden, 1996). Despite a lack of any scientific evidence of widespread prevalence or risk in society at the time, and in the murky legal context of prohibiting behaviors that may be constitutionally protected (Hueter, 1997), in less than a decade all 50 states in the U.S. passed some form of anti-stalking legislation. The media played no small part in this avalanche of political activity in a context best known for a more glacial pace of social reform. "The new language of stalking was born in the sensationalism of the media who first appropriated the term stalker to name the persistent pursuers of celebrities. . . . Now stalking forms part of legal and scientific discourses as well as having acquired a privileged status among the descriptors of our society's categories of fear" (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2000, p. 1). Stalking has generated at least three interrelated domains of discourse: Popular (media), legal, and scientific (Lowney & Best, 1995; Mullen et al., 2000). These discourses will be analyzed as they inform, or fail to inform, each other. First, a couple of specific instances of claims about stalking located at the nexus of these domains are examined for their lack of substance. Second, the research literature on stalking is briefly summarized so as to provide a point of contrast to the media portrayals of stalking. Third, some general critiques regarding media typifications of stalking are presented.

Case Studies in Constructing the Stalking Problem¹

One of the most oft-cited claims about stalking is that 90 percent of women who are killed by former intimates were stalked prior to the murder

(see table 1). This statistic has been reconstituted in hearings before Congress, in the popular press, and extensively in law review articles on stalking legislation. If the credibility of a statistic is in any way based upon its repetition, this "finding" must be true. In an attempt to trace the origins of this statistic, several steps were pursued. First, available databases and search engines were employed to locate any additional information that could provide leads to this statistic's original source. The additional articles found through these search engines proved to be of no use for this purpose. Second, an attempt was made to locate the original person quoted for this statistic. Its derivations always seemed to lead back to William S. Cohen, Ruth Micklem, or Melinda Beck (who first quoted Micklem). The trail turned out to be more circuitous than any precise and oft-quoted statistic ought to be. Examining references to this statistic, the earliest sources appeared to be from one of two primary candidates: (1) studies reported to Congress, or (2) an interview in a popular news magazine.

The "Detroit and Kansas City" Link

Senator Cohen (1993) claimed in testimony during the Judiciary Committee on Anti-stalking Legislation in 1992 that "There are studies in Detroit and Kansas City that reveal that some 90 percent of all those who are murdered by their intimate partners called the police at least once, and more than

Table 1 Exemplars of a Mythic Statistic

Beck et al. (1992, July 12, p. 61): "Nearly one third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, and, says Ruth Micklem, codirector of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, as many as 90 percent of them have been stalked."

Holmstrom (1992, Dec. 22, p. 1): "Of all those women murdered by their ex-husbands or boyfriends, studies indicate that 90 percent had called the police at least once for protection, and more than half had called five times or more."

Geberth (1992, p. 139): "According to Ruth Micklem, co-director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, 'Nearly one third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, and as many as 90 percent of them have been stalked.'" (*Newsweek*, July 13, 1992).

Cohen (1993, p. 8): "There are studies in Detroit and Kansas City that reveal that some 90 percent of all those who are murdered by their intimate partners called the police at least once, and more than half have called five times or more."

Cordes (1993, p. 13): "A study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that 90 percent of women killed by their husbands or boyfriends in 1991 were stalked before the attack."

Morin (1993, p. 125): "Statistical information from Kansas City and Detroit reveals that 90 percent of these women [who were killed by their husbands or boyfriends] made police contact at least once for assistance. Over 50 percent called a minimum of five times" (citing Cohen's [1993] congressional testimony).

Strikis (1993, p. 2772): Note 19: "It is possible that as many as ninety percent of women killed by former lovers or husbands have been stalked by the murderer prior to the attack (citing Melinda Beck et al., "Murderous obsession," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1992, at pp. 60, 61).

Tucker (1993, p. 614): Note 37: "It is estimated that up to 90 percent of women killed in the United States by intimate or former intimate partners have been stalked by them" (apparently citing Joanne Furio, "Can new state laws stop the stalker," *Ms.*, Jan.-Feb., 1993, p. 90; and Geberth, 1992, p. 139).

Gross (1994, 1998, 2000, p. 5): "In fact, 90 percent of the 1,500 women killed by their current or former mates each year in this country were stalked before being murdered" (citing Kenneth L. Woodward, "Murderous obsession," *Newsweek*, July 13, p. 61).

Kappeler & Potter (2005, p. 104): "There were estimates that . . . 90 percent of the women killed by their spouses or former boyfriends were stalked prior to their murder" (Beck, 1992).

Coleman (1997, p. 420): "Ruth Micklem, director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, estimates that as many as 90 percent of women murdered by boyfriends or husbands may have been stalked prior to their deaths" (Beck et al., 1992).

Davis & Chipman (1997, p. 168): "A total of 90 percent of women murdered by boyfriends or husbands were stalked by their killers" (citing Wells, 1996; and National Institute of Criminal Justice Project . . . , 1993).

Hueter (1997, p. 216): "As many as ninety percent of women killed by their former partners have been stalked prior to their murder" (citing Beck, 1992).

Snow (1998, p. 12): "National statistics show that 90 percent of the women killed every year by current or former spouses were stalked by these men before being murdered" (citing Gross, 1994, p. 9).

Best (1999, pp. 53-54): "In spite of the intense interest in stalking, as late as 1993 there were only two published scholarly studies of stalkers: an examination of LAPD TMU files (Zona et al., 1993); and a typology of 'criminal stalkers' (Holmes, 1993). Neither offered much original data, so antistalking crusaders routinely borrowed data from research on domestic violence to characterize stalking: . . . 'Studies in Detroit and Kansas City reveal that 90 percent of those murdered by their intimate partners called police at least once' (Senator William Cohen in Congressional Record 1992: 59527); 'Nearly one third of all women killed in America are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends, and, says Ruth Micklem, co-director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, as many as 90 percent of them have been stalked' (Beck 1992: 61). The juxtaposition of the latter two quotes reveals how evidence used to define new crimes evolves: Senator Cohen cited a finding that 90 percent of women killed by husbands or lovers had previously called the police; when later advocates repeated that statistic, they equated having called the police with being stalked, ignoring the likelihood that many women called to complain about abuse by partners living in the same residence (and therefore not stalkers)."

Schell & Lanteigne (2000, p. 19): "Ruth Micklem, director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence, estimates that as many as 90 percent of women murdered by abusive husbands and boyfriends may have been stalked prior to their deaths" (Beck et al., 1992).

half have called five times or more" (p. 8). Best (1999) later surmised that this claim was casually reinterpreted to imply that if calls were made, the victims were being stalked. He correctly noted the fallacy of the inference, given that calls can be made in reference to a current cohabitant, which strains the definition of stalking.

As it turns out, Senator Cohen took liberties with his representation of the studies from Kansas City and Detroit. A focused search of *Criminal Justice Abstracts* eventually yielded the source of Cohen's mysterious statistic. A study published by the Police Foundation (Wilt et al., 1977) investigated police involvement in domestic violence situations in Kansas City and Detroit. The Kansas City study revealed, based on 1970 and 1971 data, that 95 percent (in 1970) and 84 percent (1971) of homicides had previous disturbance calls to the same address, with 52 percent (1970) and 46 percent (1971) having been called to the address five or more times. For aggravated assaults, 87 percent (1970) and 81 percent (1971) had previous disturbance calls, with 50 percent (1970 & 1971) involving five or more calls to the same address. However, in the post-episode interviews, "close to half of the homicide and assault sample reported that they had never called the police for a disturbance" (p. 32). The Detroit data were even more mixed. Of 144 assault victims interviewed, 56 percent indicated they had been victims of previous conflict-based assaults and had reported these assaults to the police. Based on interviews of the perpetrators, only four percent of the homicide cases reported previous calls to the police.

Contrary to Cohen's testimony, therefore, (1) the data are not entirely consistent across both "Detroit and Kansas City," (2) the actual statistic is closer to 85 percent rather than 90 percent in Kansas City, and closer to 56 percent in Detroit, (3) the data refer to both domestic assault and homicide, thereby confounding the far more serious crime of murder with all domestic assaults, (4) the data were two decades old when Cohen reported them, (5) the data could only be linked to an address, and therefore could not be specified according to a "victim" or "perpetrator" in terms of who initiated the call, and (6) the data quite enigmatically suggest that the assaults and homicides were potentially relational, in that there was no difference in calls due to "victim" or "offender" status. Indeed, interviews in the Detroit data led to the conclusion that "in 145 (45.5 percent) of the homicides resulting from arguments, the victims initiated the conflicts, while offenders did so in 123 (38.6 percent) instances. In another 26 (8.3 percent) cases, victims and offenders together started the trouble, while in 25 (7.8 percent) cases some one other than offenders or victims did so" (p. 36). The relational instigation and reciprocity implicit in these latter findings seem ill suited to the attribution of stalking. Thus, although the "Detroit and Kansas City" studies are intriguing in their potential relevance to stalking, they require an excessive amount of extrapolation to be directly evidentiary. Furthermore, as is indicated below, these studies ultimately were clearly revealed not to be the source of the actual statistic in question.

The "Virginians against Domestic Violence" Link

The original source for the 90 percent quote turned out to be Ruth Micklem in an article in *Newsweek*, written by reporters Beck et al. (1992). After this article's debut, Micklem's statistic was subsequently cited in many other articles (see table 1). In the article by Beck et al., Micklem was quoted as co-director of Virginians Against Domestic Violence (VADV). An Internet search eventually yielded contact information for the VADV, including Micklem's office phone number, fax number, and e-mail. Ruth Micklem was contacted, whereupon the following conversation ensued, as reconstructed from the interviewer's notes of the conversation:

"Hello, this is Ruth, what can I do for you?"

"Hi my name is Marian and I am assisting my professor who is a behavioral scientist currently involved in studying the area of stalking . . ."

"Oh, yes?"

"Are you the Ruth Micklem who gave the statistic of 90 percent . . ."

Micklem immediately recognized where the inquiry was going. She claimed having received hundreds of calls on the *Newsweek* statistic ever since it had been published. She apologetically explained that the statistic is basically an inaccurate extrapolation. "There is no study whatsoever that the figure was derived from because there was no study anywhere in the country at that time [concerning stalking]." The 90 percent figure was merely the response to the reporter's question: "How many of the women that you work with are stalked?"

In short, this statistic, which has been cited repeatedly, is at best based on an offhand judgment regarding women who are not necessarily murdered and associated with a particular organization and with a highly self-selected population. Indeed, the only hard empirical data available through standard search engines appear in three recent studies. Moracco, Runyan, and Butts (1998) found that 23.4 percent of femicide cases had experienced "stalking" prior to the incident. McFarlane et al. (1999) found that 76 percent of femicide and 85 percent of attempted femicide cases involved "at least one episode of stalking within 12 months of the violent incident" (p. 308). Morton, Runyan, Moracco, and Butts (1998) conducted a study of partner murder-suicides. In the prototypical episode, 45 percent experienced partner separation or attempted separation as a precursor, and one third of victims had sought protection from the legal system in the form of a restraining order or arrest warrant. "In nearly 70 percent of cases in which the victim and perpetrator were separated, the perpetrator had harassed, followed, or otherwise monitored the activities of the victim in the weeks or days preceding the homicide-suicide event" (p. 96). The evidence of pre-murder stalking appears to be 70 percent of 45 percent, or 32 percent in this admittedly rather specialized sample. Thus, repetition and emphasis of startling quotes such as "90 percent of women murdered by their partner were stalked" illustrate the complicit

discourses of the media, legal, and expert domains in the construction of crime myths (Kappeler & Potter, 2005). Stalking would hardly seem to need embellishment, but receives it nonetheless.

The Science of Stalking

Statistics originally produced as an "educated guess" by the profiler and clinical psychologist Park Deitz during congressional hearings made it into the popular press (Mullen et al., 2000). Specifically, he estimated that there were as many as 200,000 stalkers in the U.S., and that as many as 1 in 20 women would be stalked in their lifetime. These estimates began taking on a life of their own in all three discourses—popular, scientific, and legal (Best, 1999, p. 52; Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 42; Mullen et al., 2000, p. 29). That the media would latch on to such precise guesses is not surprising, because a decade ago there was virtually no scientific research on stalking.

As of this writing, there are over 100 studies available across several countries. Reviews of this research, as well as descriptive meta-analytic data on stalking studies, reveal the following picture of the stalking phenomenon (Spitzberg, in press; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002, in press). Across studies, approximately 21 percent of people have been stalked or obsessively pursued to some degree. The more that fear or threat are required as definitional elements of pursuit to consider it stalking, the lower this percentage gets. Women (approximately 24 percent) appear victimized more than men (approximately 11 percent), but this difference tends to disappear in younger, college-based samples (e.g., Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 1998; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999). Proportionately about 75 percent of all stalking victims are female, and about 25 percent of all victims are male, although again there are exceptions based upon sampling method and type of sample. A representative adult sample found high proportions of men stalking men, although little is yet understood about what this finding means (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Finally, approximately 75 percent of victims are acquainted with their pursuer, and about 25 percent of pursuers are former romantic partners. Only about a fifth to a quarter of pursuers are complete strangers or unknown to the victim. If the early estimates of societal risk were significantly biased, the accuracy of other media representations of stalking deserve examination.

Media Typifications of Stalking

To date, surprisingly there have been no general surveys of the public's beliefs or stereotypes of stalking, and there has been only one systematic content analysis designed to examine trends in media reporting of stalking (Lowney & Best, 1995). There are several stereotypes that nevertheless appear to litter the media landscape. The most prominent stereotypes, often closely interrelated, seem to be that (1) stalking is a particular problem of celebrity, (2) stalkers tend to be strangers, (3) stalking is a gendered crime, (4)

stalkers tend to be mentally disturbed and dangerous, and (5) stalking is mutually exclusive of normal courtship.

Stalking as Celebrityphilic

Prior to 1989–1990, stalking legally did not exist, and was rhetorically constructed under the aegis of harassment, obsession, and psychological rape (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 37). However, with the sensationalistic media coverage of the stalking murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer, along with the association of this crime in the public and media with Theresa Saldana, Jodie Foster, and several, non-celebrity stalking murders in Southern California, watershed “anti-stalking” legislation was passed in California.

In their study of media typifications of stalking, Lowney and Best (1995) note: “During 1989 and 1990, national magazine articles and television broadcasts presented 16 typifying examples of stalking; 11 (69 percent) involved celebrity victims” (p. 39). An article in *Entertainment Weekly* illustrates the continued lack of connection between media reports of stalking and the actual phenomenon. In the wake of the murder of Robert Blake’s wife Bonny Bakley, the article examined “inappropriate pursuit in the entertainment industry.” In a surprising twist, it claimed that these people “are not stalkers” because “unlike stalkers and groupies, people like Bakley generally don’t develop crushes on the stars they pursue—it’s fame itself that flames their desires” (Svetkey, 2001, pp. 44, 47). This claim is odd in several respects. First, it suggests that stalking tends to be motivated by romantic “crushes.” Studies show, however, that as a population stalkers have many motives, including revenge, attention, romance, and fantasy (see Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002, in press). Second, the report seems to imply that stalking is defined motivationally rather than behaviorally. The motive behind unwanted pursuit, presuming the pursuit is intentional, is largely irrelevant to its criminality. Regardless, media reports eventually moved away from a dominant image of stalkers as exclusively experiencing “celebriphilia” (Svetkey, 2001). It is a good bet that any episode of stalking of any prominent celebrity, whether in politics, entertainment, or sports, would receive media attention, whereas stalking among non-celebrities likely would not be covered, short of a serious attendant crime (e.g., kidnapping, murder, etc.). Despite the allure of celebrity for both stalkers and the media, Lowney and Best (1995) found that reports in the media between 1992–1994 occurred far more frequently than in previous years, and stalking was finally depicted as something that affects the public at large.

Stalking as the Return of the Stranger

A corollary of the celebrityphilic stereotype is the mythic image of violent crime in general: The lurking stranger lying in wait to inflict harm on the unsuspecting victim. Indeed, people appear to believe there is greater risk of danger from strangers than from intimates (Harris & Miller, 2000). The

media equip the public with a stereotypical stalker profile. In the early period of popular media reporting of stalking (1989–1991), victims were most likely to be portrayed as celebrities (Lowney & Best, 1995). The image of stalking seems to persist of “a cunning stranger who has targeted an innocent victim for prey” (Kappeler & Potter, 2005, p. 101). This image seems to represent a corrupted vision of courtship, in which love is disjunctive and exploitative in nature. “The public is captivated by the idea of a total stranger becoming obsessed with a victim” (Hall, 1998, p. 114). If love with a stranger is often romanticized in popular culture (e.g., romance novels), love from a dangerous stranger may evoke deeper fantasies of taboo and risk in an otherwise culturally preferred courtship process.

Stalking as Gendered

One of the notable shifts in media portrayals of stalking is that victims are typically depicted as female while stalkers are typically depicted as male (Lowney & Best, 1995). This shift invokes common societal stereotypes about the nature of criminality and victimization. Combined with the early portrayals of stalking, “the most popular image is that of a celebrity who is stalked by a crazed fan or a battered woman who has left a physically abusive relationship and is now being stalked by the ex-lover” (Hall, 1998, p. 114). The research, indeed, clearly shows that stalking is a fairly gendered activity. Approximately 75–80 percent of stalking victims are female and approximately 75–80 percent of stalkers are male (Spitzberg, in press). Research in some populations, however, shows relatively no or small sex differences in either the victimization by, or perpetration of, unwanted pursuit (e.g., Adams, Pitre, & Smith, 2001; Brownstein, 2001; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Palarea, Cohen, & Rohling, 2000; Logan, Leukefeld, & Walker, 2000; Sinclair & Frieze, 2000; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002; Spitzberg, Nicastro, & Cousins, 1998; Spitzberg & Rhea, 1999). It seems that Hollywood pursues some movies that depict stalking episodes in ways that violate these gender stereotypes, such as showing a female stalking a male (e.g., *Fatal Attraction*), a female stalking a female (e.g., *Single White Female*), or a male stalking a male (e.g., *The Fan*). Such depictions may be viewed as sensational precisely because they violate traditional gender stereotypes for such a crime.

The media also portray stalking as relatively premeditated and, therefore, the victims as relatively helpless (Kappeler & Potter, 2005). The image of the helpless victim is consistent with both common stereotypes of women as reactive rather than proactive in courtship, and as less capable of taking care of themselves and in need of protection. In a potential double bind, another common stereotype is that women victims of violent crimes, especially sexual crimes, “ask for it” by the way they dress, or how much alcohol they may consume enables many to distance themselves from victims of violent crimes (Cuklanz, 1996). These stereotypes are not very consistent with the actual research on stalking that shows approximately 75 percent deriving from the

context of existing relationships, the majority of which were previously intimate (Meloy, 1996; Spitzberg, in press). That is, stalking emerges from contexts in which the participants often pursued voluntarily and comfortably a mutually preferred relationship, which only later became exploitative, potentially due to mutually reinforced problems in the relationship.

Stalking as Psychopathic and Violent

Lowney and Best (1995) found in their content analysis of early reports of stalking (circa 1989–1990) that “claimsmakers depicted star-stalkers as mentally disturbed, inappropriately obsessed with their celebrity victims” (p. 39). Later (mid-1990s), stalking was most likely to be depicted as leading to homicide, suggesting that the “if it bleeds, it leads” priority took over once the crime was no longer as novel and unusual in the public consciousness. The movie industry capitalizes on the fears and curiosities evoked by the images of mental disturbance and violence (e.g., *Pacific Heights*, *The Body Guard*, *The Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, *Stalked*). Such sensationalistic dramas reflect, and may reinforce, news reporting biases of reporting more on the glamorous, thrilling aspects of stalking than on the common, more normative, aspects of the crime. Research shows that stalkers brought to the attention of law enforcement do commonly have psychological disorders (see Meloy, 1996, 1999; Meloy & Gothard, 1995; Meyers, 1997). However, to date there is substantial evidence that processes of unwanted pursuit, even often threatening pursuit, occur in relatively “normal” populations (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1998; Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000; Spitzberg, in press). Intersecting with the previous stereotypes, these data indicate that victims of stalking have less to fear from strangers than from intimates.

Stalking as Clearly Distinguishable from Courtship

At the same time the media horrify stalking, the media ironically tend to glorify stalking-like actions. Romance narratives commonly entail romantic idealizations and adventurous endeavors overcoming great odds and involving great personal sacrifice, as the one obsessed with another invests in a campaign of pursuit despite the rejections by the object of affection (de Becker, 1997). Reflecting a common cultural romantic theme that persistence in courtship eventually pays off (Lowney & Best, 1995, p. 50), stalkers’ Quixotic quests are given vivid narrative life. Indeed, that the average duration of stalking tends to be approximately two years (Spitzberg, in press) indicates persistence is a hallmark of stalking and unwanted pursuit. Consequently, actions romanticized as persistence may in many cases exceed the boundaries of propriety. Research demonstrates that even relatively mild to moderate forms of unwanted pursuit and intrusion are often perceived as threatening (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2000). Thus, glorifying such events in the media makes identifying them for the public at large a more difficult task.

Discussion

Several interrelated media-fostered stereotypes of violent crime in general, and stalking in particular, have been suggested by this analysis. By way of summary, it appears that the media create, or at least reinforce, the following portrayals: Stalking is celebriphilic; Stalkers are strangers; Stalking is gendered; Stalkers are disturbed; Stalking is violent; and Stalking is culturally deviant. Specifically, stalking is portrayed as threatening and violent, despite data that suggest violence occurs in a minority of stalking relationships. Stalking is portrayed as a product of sick, psychopathic individuals, despite data indicating that most stalking results from preexisting relationships, suggesting the relative normality of the perpetrators. Stalking is often portrayed as a social and cultural aberration, something bizarre and deviant. Yet, stalking itself is little more than an extreme version of existing norms and rituals of courtship. Stalking is portrayed as a highly gendered crime, in which women are at higher risk and threat than males, and males are portrayed as the primary perpetrator. While data support the statistical norms for this stereotype, and despite some notable Hollywood exceptions (e.g., *The Fan*, *Fatal Attraction*, the stalking of Steven Spielberg, David Letterman, etc.), in general women are portrayed as the more prototypical victim, and at much greater risk, and men are portrayed as the prototypical perpetrator. Such stereotypes may ultimately undermine the possibility, let alone the credibility, of male victims and female perpetrators. Finally, stalking continues to be associated with stars and status. In part, simply because those with high status are more likely to be considered newsworthy, stalking stories will disproportionately imply this link. In the process, however, the vastly more common stalking of the far more common person becomes a relatively hidden crime.

An important caveat to any attempt at depicting media typifications and trends is that there is the risk of overgeneralizing the overgeneralizations. The media are far from univocal in their activities and tendencies. Furthermore, while “it is too simplistic to seek a mono-dimensional stereotype of a victim, so too is it too simplistic to seek a mono-dimensional stereotype of a stalker” (Keenahan & Barlow, 1997, p. 294). Thus, an effort has been made to reflect some of the complexity of the process of media portrayals. To characterize any tendency in the media as a whole is a process fraught with ironic potential.

Examining stalking under the light of previous research literature that examines crime depictions in the media allows for an understanding of how stalking is often misunderstood by society. For example, in Great Britain Sheridan and Davies (2001) compared legislative definitions of stalking with public perceptions of stalking, and found significant differences between the two. In another study, subjects clearly distinguished stalking from non-stalking behaviors, and the clusters identified were viewed as “constituents of stalking as recently portrayed by the media” (Sheridan, Gillett, & Davies, 2000, p. 276). However, these authors also found that verbal forms of pursuit and intrusion were largely lacking from people’s perceptions of stalking, and con-

cluded that only 20 of the 40 behaviors examined achieved greater than 70 percent shared agreement as stalking behaviors. Hills and Taplin (1997) found in an experimental scenario study that females tend to perceive stalking behaviors as less threatening than males, a finding suggested by Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison's (2000) report that men who meet the legal definition of being victims of stalking are less likely to view themselves as stalking victims. Perhaps most telling is that police, who should be far more informed than the average person, face many difficulties responding to stalking cases (Spitzberg, 2002). One study presented a stalking scenario to police officers and only slightly over half of them considered treating it as a stalking incident (Farrell, Weisburd & Wyckoff, 2000). A study of actual case files found that out of 285 domestic violence police reports containing narrative elements of stalking, only one resulted in a formal charge of stalking (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Some have suggested that there are powerful institutional forces at work to "manufacture" victims and victimization (e.g., Dineen, 1996). Indeed, it has been argued that it was the intense media attention to stalking that created sufficient public consciousness to find "political expression in a series of anti-stalking laws" (Mullen et al., 2000, p. 11). "New crimes offer government officials opportunities for media coverage; . . ." and experts, activists, and the media thereby obtain visibility and resources (Best, 1999, p. 67). The argument of self-interested manufacture of public policy, however, appears largely based on two important assumptions. First, it is assumed that economic motives (e.g., law enforcement budgets, political agendas to pander to public interest in the rhetoric of safe streets, psychologists' profit motive in maintaining a steady stream of clients, etc.) equate to actual political collusion in creating victims *ex nihilo*. Second, such an institutional collusion hypothesis assumes that estimates and diagnoses of victimization are exaggerated relative to the facts. The first assumption seems paranoid *a priori*, and is not evidenced by actual exemplars of collusive discourse or paper trails. The second assumption, even if true, hardly denies the existence of a large number of victims, whether counted in the thousands, tens of thousands, or millions. In short, as Spitzberg (1999) suggested in his meta-analysis of studies of rape and sexual coercion prevalence, even if the estimates are lower than some studies and authors have claimed, the best estimates summarized across almost 100 studies still make it obvious that the problems are real and significant enough to stop debating *whether* there is a problem (Spitzberg, in press).

One of the obvious biases in the media typifications of stalking is that reporters' crime beats are dominated by police as information sources about crime (Chermak, 1995). Yet, research reveals that women consistently experience gender-specific difficulties in their experiences with police as a source of assistance with their victimization (e.g., Chaudhuri & Daly, 1992; Fischer & Rose, 1995; Gondolf, McWilliams, Hart, & Stuehling, 1994; Kaci, 1994; Keilitz, Davis, Efkeeman, Flango, & Hannaford, 1998; Klein, 1996; Spitzberg, in press; Wallace & Kely, 1995; Zoellner et al., 2000). Victims often are sufficiently traumatized by their experience that they neither seek nor want greater

exposure under the media spotlight. Lowney and Best (1995) found that medical, mental health, and legal, criminal justice experts were far more likely to be cited as authorities in stalking reports than were women's victims movement experts. Furthermore, Chermak's (1995) research on crime reports showed that "psychological effects were mentioned in approximately one percent of the sampled stories" (p. 70). In short, stalking reporting is likely to be framed from a law enforcement perspective rather than a victims' perspective. Such a bias may emphasize issues of motive, method, and narrative rather than elaborate victims' sense-making and coping in the face of such unwanted pursuit.

Thus, the official version of crimes often come only from the police, or from clinical psychologists, who have a motive and a worldview to construct crimes as non-routine and products of sick, pathological, and unpredictable individuals. Once again, this would seem to distort the "normality" of stalking in society, and the extent to which it may at once be both a crime perpetrated by men and women, and yet a crime that allows men to terrorize women through routine stalking activities so long as they do not cross the intangible lines that would elicit police response. Police can only report on crimes that come to their attention, and only the most egregious stalking crimes are likely to come to their attention, which are also likely to be those stalking crimes that involve women as victims and psychologically disturbed, male perpetrators. Furthermore, men may be embarrassed to report stalking victimization, especially if it is at the hands of a woman. Such victimization may be considered emasculating by men. This permits men in society to (1) distance themselves and their own mundane relational intrusions from the crime of stalking, and (2) be deterred from ever seeking police intervention in their own stalking victimizations for fear that such incidents would not be regarded as real crimes. At the same time, (3) women would still be likely to experience a background of everyday terrorism by the realization that the next man they say hello to may be a psychopath as depicted in the media (Brockway & Heath, 1998; Ferraro, 1996; Kelly & DeKeseredy, 1994; Stanko, 1985, 1990).

As a potentially paradoxical contrast, once a crime of stalking has come to the attention of the police and media, subsequent instances of arrest, sentencing, and imprisonment are all disproportionately likely to suggest a veil of regulated order and protection. By contrast, in fictional crime shows "estimates put the solution rate on television at greater than 90 percent" (Surette, 1998, p. 21). Only a relatively small fraction of all stalking is likely to be reported to police, subsequently prosecuted, and subsequently resulting in actual punishment of the perpetrator (e.g., Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Indeed, it is difficult to locate cases of romantic stalking reported in the media in which the perpetrator was not already apprehended at the time of the report.

One area for future research will be investigation of media effects due to format of presentation. For example, Chermak (1995) reports that television and newspapers differed in their coverage of crimes in a variety of ways. Crime was the second most covered topic on television news, but fifth in newspapers. But certain stages of crimes are more visual, and thus more

likely to be covered by television (e.g., police investigation) relative to what is covered by newspapers (e.g., court proceedings). Given the extended time period and intentionally stealthy nature of stalking, it may be a relatively "non-visual" crime unless it ends in a particularly violent manner. Sensational stalking events may be covered more by television, and less violent, routine stalking events may be more covered by newspapers. To the extent that television continues to dominate newspapers as a primary source of news, such a difference between media in their coverage of stalking may perpetuate the sensationalistic stereotypes regarding stalking processes.

A second important arena for research is to conduct random and representative samples of media reports of stalking. These data could then be systematically coded for narrative content and structures, as well as visual content. Such analyses, especially if sensitive to time, could reveal whether stalking reportage has, indeed, evolved (e.g., Lowney & Best, 1995). Furthermore, if these analyses could then be yoked to public opinion surveys regarding fear of stalking as a crime, then a much more comprehensive picture could emerge regarding the role that media and their consumers play in the co-construction of crime stereotypes.

Research is only now coming to grips with the need for scientifically reliable information on stalking, only slightly beyond a decade after the crime splashed onto the headlines and television screens of American culture (e.g., Meloy, 1999; Mullen et al., 2000; Spitzberg, in press; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2001, 2002, in press). It is never easy to strip away fact from myth in the domain of media portrayals, as all such efforts come from an ideological position that interacts imperceptibly with the ideological positions being critiqued. Such efforts, however, provide vital insight both into the process of media influence of public perception, and into the phenomena portrayed, such as stalking.

Note

¹ The authors would like to extend appreciation to Marian Cabuto, a communication student at San Diego State University, who was instrumental in tracking down the original sources for the claims examined under this heading.

References

Adams, S. J., Pitre, N. L., & Smith, A. (2001). Criminal harassment by patients with mental disorders. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 46, 173-176.

Altheide, D. L. (1997). The news media, the problem frame, and the production of fear. *Sociological Quarterly*, 38, 647-668.

Altheide, D. L., & Michalowski, R. S. (1999). Fear in the news: A discourse of control. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 40, 475-503.

Aust, C. F., & Zillmann, D. (1996). Effects of victim exemplification in television news on viewer perception of social issues. *Journalism and Media Communication Quarterly*, 73, 787-803.

Beck, M., Rosenberg, D., Chideya, F., Miller, S., Foote, D., Manly, H., & Katel, P. (1992, July 13). Murderous obsession. *Newsweek*, 60-62.

Berger, C. (1998). Processing the quantitative data about risk and threat in news reports. *Journal of Communication*, 48, 87-106.

Best, J. (1999). *Random violence: How we talk about new crimes and new victims*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Brockway, J. H., & Heath, L. (1998). Risk at night: Contextual effects of perceived control on fear of rape. *Representative Research in Social Psychology*, 22, 52-60.

Brownstein, H. H. (1996). *The rise and fall of a violent crime wave: Crack cocaine and the social construction of a crime problem*. Guilderland, NY: Harrow and Heston.

Brownstein, A. (2001, December 8). In the campus shadows, women are stalkers as well as the stalked: New studies on college victim rates prompt debate. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, A40-A42.

Bufkin, J., & Eschholz, S. (2000). Images of sex and rape: A content analysis of popular film. *Violence Against Women*, 6, 1317-1344.

Bullock, C. F., & Cubert, J. (2002). Coverage of domestic violence fatalities by newspapers in Washington State. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 17, 475-499.

Chaudhuri, M., & Daly, K. (1992). Do restraining orders help? Battered women's experience with male violence and legal process. In E. S. Buzawa & C. G. Buzawa (Eds.), *Domestic violence: The changing criminal justice response* (pp. 227-252). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Chermak, S. M. (1995). *Victims in the news: Crime and the American media*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Chiricos, T., Eschholz, S., & Gertz, M. (1997). Crime, news and fear of crime: Toward an identification of audience effects. *Social Problems*, 44, 342-357.

Cohen, W. S. (1993). Antistalking proposals. *Hearing before the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate* (J-103-5). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Coleman, F. L. (1997). Stalking behavior and the cycle of domestic violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 12, 420-433.

Cordes, R. (1993). Watching over the watched: Greater protection sought for stalking victims. *Trial*, 29, 12-13.

Cuklanz, L. M. (1996). *Rape on trial: How the mass media construct legal reform and social change*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cupach, W. R., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1998). Obsessive relational intrusion and stalking. In B. H. Spitzberg & W. R. Cupach (Eds.), *The dark side of close relationships* (pp. 233-263). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Cupach, W. R., & Spitzberg, B. H. (2000). Obsessive relational intrusion: Incidence, perceived severity, and coping. *Violence and Victims*, 15, 357-372.

Davis, J. A., & Chipman, M. A. (1997). Stalkers and other obsessional types: A review and forensic psychological typology of those who stalk. *Journal of Clinical Forensic Medicine*, 4, 166-172.

de Becker, G. (1997). *The gift of fear: Survival signals that protect us from violence*. Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Dexter, H. R., Penrod, S., Linz, D., & Saunders, D. (1997). Attributing responsibility to female victims after exposure to sexually violent films. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 27, 2149-2171.

Dineen, T. (1996). *Manufacturing victims: What the psychology industry is doing to people*. Montreal: Robert Davies Multimedia Publishing.

Farrell, G., Weisburd, D., & Wyckoff, L. (2000). Survey results suggest need for stalking training. *The Police Chief*, 67(10), 162-167.

- Ferraro, K. J. (1996). Women's fear of victimization: Shadow of sexual assault? *Social Forces*, 75, 667-690.
- Fischer, K., & Rose, M. (1995). When "enough is enough": Battered women's decision making around court orders of protection. *Crime and Delinquency*, 41, 414-429.
- Geberth, V. J. (1992). Stalkers. *Law and Order*, 40, 138-143.
- Glassner, B. (1999). *The culture of fear*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gondolf, E. W., McWilliams, J., Hart, B., & Stuehling, J. (1994). Court response to petitions for civil protection orders. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 9, 503-517.
- Gross, L. (1994). *To have or to harm: From infatuation to fatal attraction*. New York: Warner Books.
- Gross, L. (2000). *Surviving a stalker: Everything you need to know to keep yourself safe* (rpt., previous title: *To have or to harm*). New York: Marlowe & Company.
- Hall, D. M. (1998). The victims of stalking. In J. R. Meloy (Ed.), *The psychology of stalking* (pp. 113-137). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Harris, M. B., & Miller, K. C. (2000). Gender and perceptions of danger. *Sex Roles*, 43, 843-863.
- Hills, A. M., & Taplin, J. L. (1998). Anticipated responses to stalking: Effect of threat and target-stalker relationship. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 5, 139-146.
- Holmstrom, D. (1992, Dec. 22). Efforts to protect women from "stalkers" gain momentum at state, federal levels. *Christian Science Monitor*, p. 1.
- Hueter, J. A. (1997). Lifesaving legislation: But will the Washington stalking law survive constitutional scrutiny? *Washington Law Review*, 72, 213-240.
- Kaci, J. H. (1994). Aftermath of seeking domestic violence protective orders: The victim's perspective. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 10, 204-219.
- Kamir, O. (2001). *Every breath you take: Stalking narratives and the law*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Kappeler, V. E., & Potter, G. W. (2005). *The mythology of crime and criminal justice* (4th ed.). Long Grove, IL: Waveland.
- Keenahan, D., & Barlow, A. (1997). Stalking: A paradoxical crime of the nineties. *International Journal of Risk, Security, and Crime Prevention*, 2, 291-300.
- Keilitz, S. L., Davis, C., Efkenan, H. S., Flango, C., & Hannaford, P. L. (1998, January). *Civil protection orders: Victims' views on effectiveness* (National Institute of Justice Research Preview). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Kelly, K. D., & DeKeseredy, W. S. (1994). Women's fear of crime and abuse in college and university dating relationships. *Violence and Victims*, 9, 17-30.
- Klein, A. R. (1996). Re-abuse in a population of court-restrained male batterers: Why restraining orders don't work. In E. S. Buzawa & C. G. Buzawa (Eds.), *Do arrests and restraining orders work?* (pp. 192-213). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Langhinrichsen-Rohling, J., Palarea, R. E., Cohen, J., & Rohling, M. L. (2000). Breaking up is hard to do: Unwanted pursuit behaviors following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. *Violence and Victims*, 15, 73-90.
- Lawson-Cruttenden, T. (1996). Is there a law against stalking? *New Law Journal*, 6736, 418-420.
- Logan, TK, Leukefeld, C., & Walker, B. (2000). Stalking as a variant of intimate violence: Implications from a young adult sample. *Violence and Victims*, 15, 91-111.
- Lowney, K. S., & Best, J. (1995). Stalking strangers and lovers: Changing media typifications of a new crime problem. In J. Best (Ed.), *Images of issues: Typifying contemporary social problems* (2nd ed., pp. 33-57). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- MacKay, N. J., & Covell, K. (1997). The impact of women in advertisements on attitudes toward women. *Sex Roles*, 36, 573-583.
- McFarlane, J., Campbell, J. C., Wilt, S., Sachs, C. J., Ulrich, Y., & Xu, X. (1999). Stalking and intimate partner femicide. *Homicide Studies*, 3, 300-316.
- Meloy, J. R. (1996). Stalking (obsessional following): A review of some preliminary studies. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 1, 147-162.
- Meloy, J. R. (1999). Stalking: An old behavior, a new crime. *Forensic Psychiatry*, 22, 85-99.
- Meloy, J. R., & Gothard, S. (1995). Demographic and clinical comparison of obsessional followers and offenders with mental disorders. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152, 258-263.
- Meyers, M. (1994). News of battering. *Journal of Communication*, 44, 47-63.
- Meyers, M. (1997). *News coverage of violence against women: Engendering blame*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Millburn, M. A., Mather, R., & Conrad, S. D. (2000). The effects of viewing R-rated movie scenes that objectify women on perceptions of date rape. *Sex Roles*, 43, 645-664.
- Moracco, K. E., Runyan, C. W., & Butts, J. D. (1998). Femicide in North Carolina, 1991-1993. *Homicide Studies*, 2, 422-446.
- Morin, K. S. (1993). The phenomenon of stalking: Do existing state statutes provide adequate protection? *San Diego Justice Journal*, 1, 123-162.
- Morton, K., Runyan, C. W., Moracco, K. E., & Butts, J. (1998). Partner homicide-suicide involving female homicide victims: A population-based study in North Carolina, 1988-1992. *Violence and Victims*, 13, 91-106.
- Mullen, P. E., Pathé, M., & Purcell, R. (2000). *Stalkers and their victims*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Keefe, G. J., & Reid-Nash, K. (1987). Crime news and real-world blues: The effects of media on social reality. *Communication Research*, 14, 147-163.
- Pritchard, D., & Hughes, K. D. (1997). Patterns of deviance in crime news. *Journal of Communication*, 47, 49-67.
- Ruscio, J. (2000). Risky business: Vividness, availability, and the media paradox. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 24, 22-26.
- Schell, B. H., & Lantaigne, N. M. (2000). *Stalking, harassment, and murder in the workplace: Guidelines for protection and prevention*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Sheridan, L., & Davies, G. M. (2001). What is stalking? The match between legislation and public perception. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 6, 3-17.
- Sheridan, L., Gillett, R., & Davies, G. M. (2000). "Stalking"—Seeking the victim's perspective. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 6, 267-280.
- Shoemaker, P. J. (1996). Media gatekeeping. In M. B. Salwen & D. W. Stacks (Eds.), *An integrated approach to communication theory* (pp. 79-92). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Signorielli, N. (1989). Television and conceptions about sex roles: Maintaining conventionality and the status quo. *Sex Roles*, 21, 341-360.
- Sinclair, H. C., & Frieze, I. H. (2000). Initial courtship behavior and stalking: How should we draw the line? *Violence and Victims*, 15, 23-40.
- Snow, R. L. (1998). *Stopping a stalker: A cop's guide to making the system work for you*. New York: Plenum Trade.
- Spitzberg, B. H. (1999). An analysis of empirical estimates of rape and sexual coercion. *Violence and Victims*, 14, 241-260.
- Spitzberg, B. H. (2002). In the shadow of the stalker: The problem of policing unwanted pursuit? In H. Giles (Ed.), *Law enforcement, communication, and the community* (pp. 173-200). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

THE ROLE OF TELEVISION NEWS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE AS A "MORAL PANIC"

Donna Killingbeck

Abstract

This work examines the representation of school shootings in the television news media and how these representations have contributed to the construction of school violence as a "moral panic." A review of the literature as it pertains to the media and the social construction of moral panics is provided as well as an overview of the news making process. The discussion is situated within Stanley Cohen's stages of a "moral panic." The article concludes that the presentation of specific events (i.e., school shootings) and elements of popular culture have contributed to increasing levels of fear, misguided political policy, and the development of an industry focused on school violence. In addition, an integrative, broader definition of school violence is suggested.

Introduction

During the 1997-1998 school year, the American public was riveted by magnified coverage of highly unusual crime stories of school shootings that turned into what some news outlets described as an "all too familiar story." Rather than providing context, the media's labeling of these shootings as "a trend" has tended to exacerbate people's fears about the safety of their children and youth in schools. The result is that misdirected public policy is being generated to safeguard the schools, even though the real threat may lie elsewhere. To remedy the purported "crisis" of classroom violence, politicians have proposed solutions ranging from posting additional police officers

Source: *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2001, pp. 186-202, © 2001 by the University of Albany School of Criminal Justice. Reprinted with permission.

- Spitzberg, B. H. (in press). The tactical topography of stalking victimization and management. *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse: A Review Journal*.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (2001). Paradoxes of pursuit: Toward a relational model of stalking-related phenomena. In J. Davis (Ed.), *Stalking, stalkers and their victims: Prevention, intervention, and threat assessment* (pp. 97-136). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (2002). The inappropriateness of relational intrusion. In R. Goodwin & D. Cramer (Eds.), *Inappropriate relationships* (pp. 191-219). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Cupach, W. R. (in press). What mad pursuit: Conceptualization and assessment of obsessive relational intrusion and stalking-related phenomena. *Aggression and Violent Behavior: A Review Journal*.
- Spitzberg, B. H., Nicastro, A. M., & Cousins, A. V. (1998). Exploring the interactional phenomenon of stalking and obsessive relational intrusion. *Communication Reports*, 11, 33-48.
- Spitzberg, B. H., & Rhea, J. (1999). Obsessive relational intrusion and sexual coercion victimization. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14, 3-20.
- Stanko, E. (1985). *Intimate intrusions: Women's experience of male violence*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Stanko, E. (1990). *Everyday violence: How women and men experience sexual and physical danger*. San Francisco: Pandora/HarperCollins.
- Strikis, S. A. (1993). Stopping stalking. *Georgetown Law Journal*, 81, 2771-2813.
- Surette, R. (1998). *Media, crime, and criminal justice: Images and realities*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Svetkey, B. (with Wiener, A. H.). (2001, June 22). Dangerous game. *Entertainment Weekly*, 42-48.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (1998). *Stalking in America: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (NCJ 169592).
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). The role of stalking in domestic violence crime reports generated by the Colorado Springs Police Department. *Violence and Victims*, 15, 427-441.
- Tjaden, P., Thoennes, N., & Allison, C. J. (2000). Comparing stalking victimization from legal and victim perspectives. *Violence and Victims*, 15, 7-22.
- Tucker, J. T. (1993). Stalking the problems with stalking laws. *Florida Law Review*, 45, 609-707.
- Turell, S. C. (2000). A descriptive analysis of same-sex relationship violence for a diverse sample. *Journal of Family Violence*, 15, 281-293.
- Vounvakis, S. E., & Ericson, R. V. (1984). *News accounts of attacks on women: A comparison of three Toronto newspapers*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto.
- Wachs, E. (1988). *Crime-victim stories: New York City's urban folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Wallace, H., & Keltz, K. (1995). Stalking and restraining orders: A legal and psychological perspective. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 18, 99-111.
- Wilt, G. M., Bannon, J. D., Breedlove, R. K., Kennish, J. W., Sandker, D. M., & Sawtell, R. K. (1977). *Domestic violence and the police: Studies in Detroit and Kansas City*. Washington, D.C.: Police Foundation.
- Zoellner, L. A., Feeny, N. C., Alvarez, J., Watlington, C., O'Neill, M. L., Zager, R., & Foa, E. B. (2000). Factors associated with completion of the restraining order process in female victims of partner violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 15, 1081-1099.

in our schools, to eliminating any minimum age at which children may be tried as adults, to expanding the death penalty to juveniles.

According to Barak (1994:6): "The consideration or examination of the interrelationships between media, society and criminology is essentially a dynamic and complex enterprise. It involves the interaction of journalists, sources and audiences that co-exist within a diverse and eclectic cultural and social system." To add value, the study also requires attention to the developing political economy and the sociohistorical experience of news production that exist within the larger organization of mass media. In an attempt to provide equal attention to these interactions, this paper begins with a review of the research concerning the media's role in the construction of moral panics. Next, the discussion turns toward the historical representation of criminals and crime in the film and television genre and how these representations have changed over time and is then followed by an outline of the news making process. Finally, the article considers the social impact and importance of the news media's role in policy making and the construction of societal fears, focusing particularly on political and corporate decisions in response to the increasing fears of school violence and how each of these are situated in the framework of a moral panic.

The Construction of Moral Panics

In 1971 Stanley Cohen investigated a series of "moral panics." Cohen (1980) used the term "moral panic" to characterize the reactions of the media, the public, and agents of social control to youth disturbances. This work, involving the Mods and Rockers, demonstrated how agents of social control amplified deviance. According to Cohen (1980), these groups were labeled as being outside the central core values of consensual society and as posing a threat to both the values of society and society itself, hence the term "folk devils." In addition to Cohen's work, Jock Young's (1971a) book, *The Drugtakers*, also demonstrated the role of the media in the amplification of deviance and thus drew attention to the ideological role of the media in actively constructing meanings, rather than simply reflecting a shared meaning. When discussing the public concern about statistics showing an apparent alarming increase in drug abuse, Young (1971b) observed that the "moral panic over drug taking results in setting up of police drug squads, which in turn produces an increase in drug related arrests." This observation highlights the effect produced by the interaction of the media, public opinion, interest groups, and the authorities, which gives rise to a moral panic.

According to Cohen (1980:9), the key elements or stages in a moral panic are:

1. Someone or something is defined as a threat to values or interests;
2. This threat is depicted in an easily recognizable form by the media;
3. There is a rapid build up of public concern;

4. There is a response from authorities or opinion makers;
5. The panic recedes or results in social changes.

It was through Stuart Hall's (1978) approach to ideology that the media's use of moral panics to both define and distort social problems was fleshed out into a general critique of the media's construction of social reality. For instance, mugging was presented in the media as a new and growing phenomenon, when in fact the crime was not new, only the label was. Official statistics did not support the view that mugging was rapidly growing; however, with a name for the crime now in existence old offenses were categorized as such, creating the impression of growth. According to Hall et al. (1978), the media whipped up a moral panic around the issue which served to legitimate an increase in punitive measures; they conclude that the media played a key role in developing and maintaining the pressure for law and order measures.

According to Hall et al. (1978), the media obtain their information from the primary definers of social reality, those in powerful and authoritative positions. The media (secondary definers) amplify the perceived threat to the existing social order, and the police and courts then act to eliminate the threat. The media ensure that the dominant ideas or ideologies are constantly reproduced by relying on the information of the definers of the dominant ideology. Thus, Hall and his colleagues demonstrate the media's ability to enlarge the state's influence into everyday life, the moral panic becoming the vehicle for transmission of the dominant ideology. In other words, "the media tend to reproduce the definitions of the powerful" (Hall et al. 1978: 57). They faithfully reproduce, symbolically, the existing structure of power in today's institutional order. However, Hall et al. (1978) argue that this is not conspiratorial; the media do not set out to divert attention from root problems, such as economic problems. But these economic problems create strain and the media responds by amplifying the symptoms of the strain.

The term "moral" implies that the perceived threat is not something mundane, but is a threat to the social order itself or an idealized conception of it. The threat and its perpetrators are regarded as evil "folk devils" and excite feelings of righteousness. The response is likely to be a demand for greater social regulation or control and a demand for a return to traditional values. Although there is some disagreement on what constitutes a "panic," there is some agreement on the characteristics of concern and hostility. Concern is over the behavior of a certain group or category of people and hostility, or an increase in fear, is directed toward the group or category regarded as a threat. In addition to hostility and concern, other characteristics such as volatility and disproportionality may be emphasized. Volatility means that the moral panics are likely to appear suddenly and that the level of feverish concern is not likely to last, even if the problem is long-standing. Finally, disproportionality refers to an assumption that the threat or danger is more substantial than is warranted by a realistic appraisal (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). During a moral panic, public anxiety is amplified by publicity in the

press which portrays these events as signifying a widespread and deeper moral malaise and as a sign of social disintegration. However, public concern about an issue, in complex societies, seldom results from the indignation of the citizenry alone, but as a result of the roles of many contributors, including the role of the moral entrepreneurs.

Howard Becker (1963) emphasizes the role of "moral entrepreneurs" in defining behavior and individuals as deviant and criminal. Becker (1963) asserts that the public is often stirred up through the mass media by efforts of moral entrepreneurs or moral crusaders, who attempt to rouse public opinion through the media by leading social movements and organizations to bring pressure on the authorities to exercise social control and moral regulation. Becker (1963) describes the moral crusader as fervent and righteous and holding to an absolute ethic; what he or she sees is truly evil with no qualification.

Joseph Gusfield (1963), in his study of prohibition, explains the success of moral crusades in terms of Max Weber's status defense. Gusfield (1963) argues that these crusades stand in for the social discontents of particular social classes or groups. By controlling status issues, the group feeling threatened reasserts its power and values through legislation. Although this single factor explanation is far too simplistic to explain the persistence and rise of moral panics, it does, however, add to the understanding of contextual factors that contribute to moral panics.

Philip Jenkins (1992) contributes the role of "symbolic politics" and "politics of substitution" to the understanding of moral panics. Jenkins (1992) argues that claims makers draw attention to a specific problem, in part because it symbolizes another issue. For example, school shootings raise issues concerning gender relations, without ever actually stating it. Whether an accused shooter is from a dual working parent family or a single parent family, simply reporting the shooter's family arrangement says something about the breakdown of the traditional family structure; thus, the idea is conveyed that someone (usually the mother) has done (or hasn't done) something that either led to this situation or allowed it.

Historical Trends in Media Representation of Crime and Criminals

Film was introduced in 1895 and by 1923 was the most influential entertainment medium in America. The images were universally available, widely consumed, and came to shape and reflect American culture. Film affected the public's values, political views, social behavior, consumption patterns, and worldviews. Film was the first mass medium with the ability to create a mass public—a homogenous group made up of people with different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. From 1920 to 1950 criminals, whether heroic or villainous, were portrayed as decisive, intelligent, and attractive individuals (Surette 1992).

Enter Television

The growth and public acceptance of television since the 1950s has been enormous and with that acceptance the impact on society's norms, values, consumption, social behavior, public policy, and expectations has been shaped and reflected. In 1987 approximately one quarter of all prime time shows were crime related, whether factual or fictional. According to Ray Surette (1992:32): "The popular mass entertainment media, first in the form of film and today led by television, have thus become a significant social factor, conveying thematic messages and lessons about whom to emulate and fear in society, what the basic causes of crime are and how crime should be fought." Concerns about the images and messages portrayed have steadily risen. The entertainment media do not claim to be an accurate portrayal of reality, nor do they accurately portray crime and its causation. However, society's ability to discern between fact and fiction is often blurred, resulting in inaccurate perceptions of whom to fear, the basic causes of crime, and the appropriate responses. Media repeatedly convey misleading messages and lessons, consistently pointing to individual predatory traits as the cause of crime. Media criminals have consistently become more violent, animalistic, irrational, and predatory and their crimes are increasingly senseless, more violent, and random. Criminality is viewed as an individual choice and other social and economic explanations are irrelevant and ignored (Surette 1992).

Understanding the Newsmaking Process

In order to investigate cases of apparent moral panic, it is necessary to understand how news is developed. The distortions of reality conveyed by the entertainment media are not surprising; they are fiction. However, the similarities between entertainment media and news media, which are expected to depict an accurate and objective view of reality, are unsettling considering the enormous impact of the latter on the social construction of reality.

The images and messages put forth by the news media are remarkably similar to those of the entertainment media. There are two models used to describe the process and criteria by which news media content is created. Realistically, news agencies do not fit neatly into either model but operate somewhere in the middle. At one end is the market model, where the newsworthiness of an event is determined by what is of interest to the public; the facts are objectively reported and realistic information about the world is reproduced. The other extreme is the manipulative model, where newsworthiness is determined not by what is of interest to the public, but by what is of interest to the news agency owners. The ability of the news media, operating under a strict manipulative model, to shape and distort the image of reality is frighteningly apparent (Cohen and Young 1981).

However, it is far too simplistic to assume that these models are the norm in the arena of news reporting. An organizational model of news processing con-

tains components of both the manipulative and market models (Surette 1992). Similar to the manipulative model, under the organizational model news is selected based on the needs of the agency. The periodicity, or timing, of the events and how they match the scheduling needs of the agency is a consideration when determining what is reported. Consonance, or how the story ties into prior news themes and explanations, is also a consideration. It is at this point that routinization allows for a threat to be depicted in an easily recognizable form by the media, one of Cohen's (1980) elements of a moral panic. The organizational model differs from the manipulative and market models in that it is not totally reactive (market) or totally proactive (manipulative). The agency reacts to non-routine events yet takes part in the creation process for the rest of the news.

In the process of routinization, news agencies rely on respected social institutions or officials who are credible and provide reliable information. This easy influx of news allows the news agencies to utilize their financial resources elsewhere. However it also, as Hall et al. (1978) suggest, leads to the reproduction of the definitions of the powerful. This results in news that is dominated by information and interpretations that tend to support the status quo. It also reinforces the respectability of the institutions and organizations providing the information (Chibnall 1981). Hall et al. (1978) also suggest that it is this process that symbolically reproduces the existing power structure.

Crime news makes up a large part of the entire news. Being prepackaged (manipulative) and popular (market), it helps the news organization in its routinization process. Thus, a cycle of newsworthiness is created in which one type of crime is defined as news and will continue to be news. "If this focus on a particular type of event becomes industry wide, a media crime wave results. The crimes chosen as news during this span in effect become the typical 'atypical' event for that period" (Surette 1992:63). Since the traditional definition of news is "that which is uncommon or new," violent crime is seen as more newsworthy because it occurs less frequently. This focus on a particular type of event leads to disproportionality, or the belief that the threat is more substantial than it is truly, a characteristic of a moral panic.

The social importance of these media constructed crime waves is, according to Fishman (1978:533): "(1) They enable the media to influence policy by raising public outrage affecting everything from sentencing and preventative measures to society's level of fear. (2) By operating around these themes, other, more often serious significant events or issues do not become news." Therefore, they are less likely to receive public attention, raise concern or fear, or receive resources. Hall et al. (1978) argue that the media do not consciously set out to divert the attention, yet the end result is the same. The root problems are often neglected and do not receive attention.

Local Television News

Homicide rates have continued to decrease since 1993, yet one out of every seven news stories covered the topic. Coverage of murder has increased

700 percent while overall crime coverage has tripled since 1993. According to a recent survey by Louis Harris for the Center for Media and Public Affairs, local television newscasts are the public's number one source of news. Not only do they get the biggest ratings, but people also rank them as higher in quality and credibility than network news, local newspapers, and any other news source (Grossman 1997). A study conducted by the Rocky Mountain Media Watch found that crime occupied 30 percent of what little time was actually devoted to news (40 percent) in 100 local television newscasts in 56 cities. Incidentally, 36 percent of the airtime was spent on commercials and promos; sports and weather filled 22 percent and another two percent was anchor chatter (Grossman 1997). However, what is most significant and follows from Fishman's (1978) assertion that "more serious and significant events do not become news" is the absence of social and economic investigations, such that the national and local political scene was entirely absent from these newscasts.

Crime has become the focus of local television news for several reasons, and each is consistent with the characteristics of the manipulative, market, and organizational models outlined by Surette (1992). Local television newscasts are relatively cheap to produce and a major profit maker for stations. The "eyewitness news" formula has become the standard thematic scheme and there is a lack of pressure on broadcasters to serve their community's needs and interests (Grossman 1997). Marty Haag, Senior News Vice President for the A. H. Belo stations, reports that: "Covering crime is the easiest, fastest, cheapest and most efficient kind of news coverage for T.V. stations. News directors and station owners love crime because it has a one-to-one ratio between making the assignment and getting a story on the air" (Grossman 1997). The crime scene doesn't move; no matter when the reporter arrives, there is always a picture to shoot. There is no need to spend time and money researching; when the cameras arrive, so do supposed witnesses.

National News

On the national network news, the story is much the same. In the school year 1997-1998 there were 6,146 deaths by firearms for the age group 15-24 (Hoyert, Kochanek, and Murphy 1999:68). Thirty-five of these deaths were a result of school shootings. School shootings represent .5 percent of the gun related deaths for this age group (National School Safety Center 2001). Network evening news crime coverage for 1998 reported 1392 stories about crime on NBC, CBS, and ABC. Stories on two school shootings—Jonesboro, Arkansas, on March 24, 1998, and Springfield, Oregon, on May 21, 1998—represented nine percent of ALL network evening news crime coverage in 1998 (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1999). This is a significant amount of news coverage for a topic that represents only .4 percent of homicides. There were a total of 126 network evening news stories on these two events. In comparison, there were 113 stories on all environmental issues

(Center for Media and Public Affairs 1999). The leading cause of death for the age group 15-19 was accidents with a total of 13,367, more than double the amount of homicides; however, accidents only made up five percent of news reports (Hoyert, Kochanek, and Murphy 1999). Thirty-five deaths in a single school year is horrifying and tragic, yet small when compared to the approximately 6,000 youth homicides that didn't become national news (these numbers do not include the number of talk show, infotainment shows, and news magazine shows who ran specials on the school shootings).

Increasing Fear

The effects of the "media crime wave," which the Center for Media and Public Affairs (1997) has deemed number 10 on the "Top Ten List of Media Distortions of the 20th Century," are apparent throughout the nation. One element of a moral panic, a rapid build up of public concern, is evidenced in public opinion polls. Eighty-five percent of Oklahomans in both rural and urban areas report being "very concerned about school violence," while actual incidents of school violence are rare. The number one reason that police come to school isn't violence in the school building, but to take reports of violence in the home. School officials in Tulsa, Oklahoma, confirmed that major incidents of school violence elsewhere are exaggerating perceptions of armed and violent students (Associated Press 1998).

Cohen (1980) asserts that a key stage in the development of a moral panic is that there is a response from authorities and/or opinion makers. President Clinton added to the fear of school shootings in this 1997 speech: "We've got about six years to turn this juvenile crime thing around or our country is going to be living with chaos." This said, he then acknowledged that the youth violent crime rate had fallen 9.2 percent the previous year (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice 1999). While youth violence continued to decline, CNN reported: "Teenage time bomb's becoming increasingly more commonplace in America." NBC's *Today Show* news anchor Ann Curry introduced a child psychologist to the audience by asking him to address parents on this "new trend" in our schools, shooting each other. When he stated that children are safer in school than anywhere else, she reminded him that this was the fourth incident. Vincent Schiraldi, the director of the Justice Policy Institute, reminded viewers that three times as many people were struck by lightning as were killed in school shootings, while *Today Show* host, Katie Couric, declared that "today's youth are more likely to pull a gun than make a fist" (Glassner 1999:xiv). Lead-ins and sound bites such as these are a complete contradiction of the truth. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics (1999), an average of 50 percent of all schools report fights without a weapon; only 12.5 percent of all schools report fights with a weapon and those weapons are not necessarily guns. These newscasters are opinion makers and the interviews are with authority figures, filling two of Cohen's (1980) elements

of a moral panic. . . . [Newscasters defining] . . . guns and kids as a threat to the values and interests of society is also a stage in the development of a moral panic.

Policy Implications

Schools are safer than all other locations where kids congregate, including cars and homes. However, municipalities continue to raise taxes to buy state of the art surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and police mini-stations for schools in response to concerns raised by media reports that proclaimed: "The coming of Super-Predators—teenage boys who have no respect for human life and kill and maim on impulse, without any tangible motive" (Associated Press 1995:3A). Responses by authorities and claims makers, a stage in the development of a moral panic, are evidenced by the reactions of several school districts and officials. School districts across the country are taking steps to improve the security of students, faculty, and staff. A boom has erupted in the school security business such that security technology has become a major budget topic for school administrators as well as politicians. Proposed changes in policy are occurring across the country. For instance, [former] California Governor Gray Davis proposed spending \$100 million of a budget surplus to strengthen school safety programs in his state. The money would allow districts to purchase more metal detectors, video surveillance, and other security devices. [Former] Washington Governor Gary Locke wanted legislators to allocate \$9 million for a grant program to improve school safety. In Wisconsin, it has been proposed that spending on safety measures be exempt from fiscal limits placed on schools. In San Francisco, [former] Mayor Willie Brown asked for an additional \$1.5 million in his budget to put 26 more police officers in public schools; 56 officers were already deployed in San Francisco schools (Kennedy 1999).

President Clinton, at the White House Conference on School Safety, proposed \$12 million for project SERV, the School Emergency Response to Violence, which responds to school violence in a similar way that FEMA responds to emergencies. The president also issued a \$65 million initiative to hire 2,000 community police and school resource officers to work in schools and a minimum of \$25 million in grants to develop and implement community-wide school safety plans (Clinton 2000). Just as Jock Young's (1971b) work demonstrated how the media's amplification of an issue can result in a moral panic leading to the legitimization of punitive policy measures, the amplification of school shootings has led to both legal and economic changes. These changes are what Cohen (1980) listed as the final stage in a moral panic.

School Safety is Big Business

With the large amounts of dollars available, a business that once served private investigators, retail companies, and corporate security details has

found an entirely new customer base: schools and government funds. Capitalizing on the fears of citizens, and the policy changes that attempt to alleviate these fears, is big business. Companies not only compound the fears through advertising, but also shape the types of solutions that are offered.

The types of equipment available range in cost and effectiveness, and numerous companies offer consulting and safety plan designs. Emergency communication devices, according to Mike Fickes (1999) of Roland Borg Corporation, are needed because "conventional telephones are inadequate in an emergency. Intercom systems with emergency calling capabilities are vandal proof and one does not need to dial emergency numbers." The company recommends a station in every room, in hallways, and in offices. The cost is \$300 per station. Experts also recommended photo badging systems using bar codes. Not only do these systems act as an alarm system (students, faculty, and staff will notice any unbadged person and report them to security), they are also used to control access. Cards cost approximately \$2.50 each, midrange card printers cost \$3800, and the camera badging station and its software cost \$1800. However, these access control systems require an initial investment of \$10,000 and approximately \$4000 per year in maintenance (Fickes 1999:22). In the 1997-1998 school year, there were approximately 54 million students; if each student were issued a photo badge (this does not include teachers and staff or the initial investment, maintenance fees, and the expense of printers), the cost would be \$135 million. Sensormatic Electronics Corporation recommends closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitors at the cost of \$10,000 per four cameras, monitor, and videocassette recorder. While CCTVs are mainly used for reactive purposes such as illegal entry and vandalism, schools across the country are purchasing them in hopes of preventing violence. As for metal detection and x-ray screening, experts disagree on which is the best method; however, they agree that one or both are necessary. Handheld units for random searches begin at \$150.00 and walk-through units at \$2500. Prices for x-ray screening equipment range from \$15,000 to \$30,000 (Fickes 1999:31). In the 1997-1998 school year there were 136,012 public and private elementary and secondary schools across the nation. If each school bought only one handheld metal detector, the cost would be approximately \$20 million. If each school in the country bought four cameras (CCTV), the cost would be a whopping \$1.36 billion. With these large sums of potential revenues available, it is no wonder that companies such as Siemens Building Technologies have begun to address society's unwarranted fears with advertisements such as "maintaining a safe and secure environment for our schools and our children requires solutions that work." Best Access Systems advertises expertise in "securing a world where kids are free to learn." Finally, Mosler offers the assertion that "schools today need all the answers technology can give them, and then some" (Fickes 1999:30).

All of this comes despite a special report issued by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Bilchik 1999) in which the reader is told that in the school year 1997-98: "Juvenile violence peaked in the after school

hours on school days and in the evening hours on non school days." The violent victimization of juveniles is greatest between 3 and 9 p.m. The highest percent of violent incidents involving a firearm for those under 18 years old, nine percent, occur between 8 and 9 pm followed by seven percent occurring between 3 and 4 pm (Bilchik 1999).

School Shootings in Context

In the academic school year 1997-1998, there were 44,351 public and private secondary schools and 91,661 public and private elementary schools for a total of 136,012 schools (Moody 1998). There are on average 180 days of school per year when schools are in session for a total of 24.5 million school sessions. The nine school shootings in this year represent .00003 percent of the approximately 24.5 million times school was in session for the day somewhere in America. As horrific and tragic as each of these events was, given the number of days individual schools in America are in session, on most days and in most places it is safe for a child to go to school.

Despite the small numbers and percentages of school shootings, stories of youth violence are used by the news media to present a distorted image of the true state of affairs in our schools. In fact, in 1998 the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that 29 percent of all teenagers believed drug use/abuse was the biggest problem facing kids their age, followed by social pressures, good grades, and sexual issues; only five percent listed crime and violence in school as the biggest problem (Maguire and Pastore 1999). In 1997, parents listed lack of funding and discipline (15 percent each) as the biggest problems facing schools; violence came in fourth behind drug use/abuse. However, in 1998, at a time when teens believed drugs were the biggest problem, parents' fear of school violence rose to 20 percent (Maguire and Pastore 1999). According to Ray Surette (1992:88): "the media emphasis on crime has frequently been credited with raising the public's fear of being victimized to disproportionate levels, hence giving crime an inappropriately high ranking on the public agenda." Surette (1992) concludes that the importance of the relationship between mass media news and the criminal justice system may be greater today than ever before.

Columbine

In 1999 crime news jumped into second place on the list of broadcasts for ABC, NBC, and CBS. Crime news followed the "War in Kosovo" by only two broadcasts. The Columbine High School shooting topped the list of crime stories covered on those evening broadcasts with 319 stories, more than five times the total of any other incident (Center for Media and Public Affairs 2000). After the smoke cleared, 16 students and one teacher were dead, including the shooters. Students and faculty at Columbine High School, as well as reporters, referred to the shooters as members of the "Trench Coat Mafia." For weeks following the shootings, reports about these modern-day

"folk devils" saturated the news. These students were labeled "outsiders," "different," and even "strange." Just as Cohen's (1980) Mod and Rockers were easily identifiable, so were the members of the "Trench Coat Mafia." They wore black clothes and makeup, listened to rocker Marilyn Manson, played violent video games, and designed elaborate web pages. Claims making draw attention to the breakdown of traditional values, to attack the entertainment industry, and to rail against those who opposed gun control legislation. "We can no longer shut our eyes to the impact that the media is [sic] having on all of our children," said Mrs. Clinton (Fleeman 1999). Criminologist Jeff Ferrell (1998:148) asserts that "as the production and consumption of popular culture lay the foundations for contemporary social life, they also become the basis for a variety of contemporary controversies." It is interesting that not only has popular culture become the basis of controversies, but these controversies are also used by claims makers to argue their beliefs on other issues. These controversies include attempts by politicians, legal authorities, religious leaders, and others to criminalize popular culture.

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of a booming economy, low interest rates, a dot.com generation, latchkey children, a war fought in a faraway land but portrayed via the media using video game like re-creations of bombings, and the potential to become extremely rich through technology and start-up Internet companies. In addition to computerized everything, there was an aging generation of authority figures, claims makers, and moral entrepreneurs who found themselves out of the loop due to the widespread use of a communications system (the computer and the Internet) that was not what they were used to. In the 1950s rock and roll was blamed for the breakdown of teenage morality and their outrageous behaviors; today Marilyn Manson and rockers like him, video games, and the computer are the elements of popular culture that moral entrepreneurs attempt to criminalize or at least censor. School shootings, and more generally school violence, have become what Jenkins (1992) calls "symbolic politics" or the "politics of substitution." Politicians and claims makers draw attention to these specific events because they represent other issues such as gun control, censorship, and morality. One week after the Columbine shootings, President Clinton introduced legislation requiring background checks on sales of explosives and holding parents liable when their children commit crimes with guns. White House Press Secretary Joe Lockhart said: "Clinton is counting on outrage over the shootings to help push the legislation through, unfortunately oftentimes it takes tragic events to catalyze work here in Washington" (Sobieraj 1999). Cohen (1980) suggests that one response to a moral panic is a call to return to traditional values. This is echoed in both Joe Lockhart's comment as well as Senator George Voinovich's (R-Ohio) statement: "There is something wrong with our society. I think a lot of it has to do with a return to traditional morals and values. Youngsters are not getting the kinds of moral and religious training they once got at home" (Lowy 1999).

Conclusion

The public has not received the kind of analysis or examination from the media that is needed to give worried parents or concerned policy makers the context with which to judge safety in schools. In reality, kids are more likely to be shot by adults. Adults kill 90 percent of homicide victims under the age of 12 and 75 percent of homicide victims age 12-17 are killed by adults (Donohue, Schiraldi, and Zeidenberg 1998). This is not to say that children face no threats to their safety in school; however, America cannot set rational public policy in the important area of child killings without better information from the media. No one expects the press to ignore tragic killings of kids, whether they occur on school grounds or in other places. But the data contained in this report show that the public and policy makers are done a great disservice if they are led to believe that schoolhouses are a primary locus for juvenile homicides in America (Donohue, Schiraldi, and Zeidenberg 1998).

As other school shootings occur and/or the juveniles involved in the previous shootings are brought to trial, the public discourse could tremendously benefit from the presentation of a broader perspective on juvenile killings. To provide greater context to such cases, the media should at least explain: (1) that school killings are not on the increase; (2) that such killings make up a small minority of all killings of and by juveniles; (3) that children are three times more likely to be killed by adults than by other juveniles; and (4) that there is no trend toward younger and younger juvenile killings. These data are readily available and would tremendously benefit the public's understanding of youth crime.

Nine incidents of school shootings in the 1997-1998 school year provided the opportunity for news agencies to develop a thematic routinization of incidents of school violence. What was an atypical event, hence newsworthy, became the typical event; therefore, under the organizational process model, it became routinized and increased in newsworthiness. The results of this media constructed crime wave shaped public opinion, increasing fear of school shootings, contributing to fears of violent teens, fueling public policy such as government funded school safety, and prompting public consumption patterns and an increase in security technology purchases that fulfilled Fishman's (1978) assertion: "Media constructed crime waves can influence public policy by raising public outrage, effecting preventative measures and levels of fear."

According to Cohen's (1980) stages of a moral panic, school shootings can be included in the long list of moral panics that arise in all modern societies. The results and effects of this panic can be seen in misdirected policies and changes in the behaviors and actions of school officials, parents, and students. According to Barak (1994:35): "Nothing can be more important than the mass content of crime and justice news. The omission of certain types of criminality is equally, if not more important than the types of criminality included." One omission that stands out is a broad definition of school violence. The images associated with school violence, via news broadcasts, are

bloody and emotional and involve physical attacks. The perpetrators are associated with death, darkness, and some form of "differentness," whether it is appearance or moral. News production is caught up in the need for dramatic structuring and according to Barak (1994:33): "Crime news is over simplified and reduced to subtle and not so subtle forms of stereotyping that socially construct criminals and victims alike." In the process it erases considerations of structure and political economy that may deconstruct reality and thereby destabilize our sense of order (Barak 1994). These omissions and lack of considerations contribute to a moral panic.

A Broader Integrative Definition of School Violence

In light of the dramatic and often detrimental effects a moral panic has on policy decisions and levels of societal fear, it is imperative that the images and definitions of school violence be expanded and integrated. For example, the current definition is one-dimensional and involves physical force or intimidation. Missing in the news media's coverage of school violence are several elements of harm. According to Stuart Henry (2000): "the omission of these broader dimensions causes us to miss much of the content and many of the causes of violence in schools." Henry (2000) asserts that these missing elements of harm include: (1) the emotional and psychological pain that results from the domination of some over others, (2) the focus on interpersonal relationships that ignore the violence of social processes which produce systemic social injury, such as that perpetuated through institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism, and (3) the symbolic violence of domination, or the subtle form of violence that brings coercion through power exercised in hierarchical relationships. It is not until the media apply this multilevel definition to the problem of school violence that a multilevel causal analysis and a comprehensive policy response that takes account of the full range of constitutive elements will follow. In addition to the inclusion of these dimensions, it is important to realize that, as Barak (1994:ix) argues: "Crime and justice news are subject to and inseparable from political, economic and social struggle." These dimensions must be included in representations of school violence if a broader understanding and effective policy decisions are to develop and the news media are to become forums that promote understanding and social movement rather than moral panic.

References

- Associated Press. 1995. "U.S. Children: Armed and Dangerous." *The Baltimore Sun*, September 8, p. 3A.
- Associated Press. 1998. "School Violence Worries Oklahomans." *Amarillo Globe-News*. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.amarillonet.com/stories>).
- Barak, Gregg (Ed.). 1994. *Media, Process and the Social Construction of Crime: Studies in Newsmaking Criminology*. New York and London: Garland Publishing.
- Becker, Howard. 1963. *Outsiders*. New York: Free Press.
- Bilchik, Shay. 1999. "Violence after School." Washington, DC: Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (http://www.ncjrs.org/html/ojdp/9911_1/contents.html).
- Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Center for Education Statistics. 1999. "Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998." Bureau of Justice Statistics. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/AnnSchoolRept98/index.html>).
- Center for Media and Public Affairs. 1997. "Network News in the Nineties: The Top Topics and Trends of the Decade." *Media Monitor*, 11(3). Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.cmpa.com/Mediamon/mm070897.htm>).
- . 1999. "1998 Year in Review: TV's Leading News Topics, Reporters, and Political Jokes." *Media Monitor*, 13(1). Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.cmpa.com/Mediamon/mm010299.htm>).
- . 2000. "1999 Year in Review: TV's Leading News Topics, Reporters and Political Jokes." *Media Monitor*, 14(1). Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.cmpa.com/Mediamon/mm010200.htm>).
- Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice. 1999. "School House Hype: Links to Hyperbolic Coverage of Kids." *Justice Policy Institute*. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (www.cjcj.org/jpi/thehype.html).
- Chibnall, S. 1981. "The Production of Knowledge by Crime Reporters." In *The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problem, and the Mass Media*, edited by S. Cohen and J. Young. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Clinton, William J. 2000. "New Initiatives Announced at the White House Conference on School Safety." Safe and Drug Free Schools Program. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS/initiati.html>).
- Cohen, Stanley. 1980. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (New Edition). Oxford, UK: Martin Robertson.
- Cohen, Stanley and Jock Young (Eds.). 1981. *The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problem, and the Mass Media*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Donohue, Elizabeth, Vincent Schiraldi, and Jason Zeidenberg. 1998. "School House Hype: School Shootings and the Real Risks Kids Face in America." Washington DC: Justice Policy Institute. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.cjcj.org/jpi/schoolhouse.html>).
- Ferrell, Jeff. 1998. "Criminalizing Popular Culture." In *Popular Culture, Crime, and Justice*, edited by F. Y. Bailey and D. C. Hale. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Fickes, Mike. 1999. "The ABC's of Security Technology." *Under Siege: Schools as the New Battleground*.
- Fishman, Mark S. 1978. "Crime Waves as Ideology." *Social Problems*, 25: 531-543.
- Fleeman, Michael. 1999. "Colorado Shootings Spur Debate on Entertainment's Role in Youth Violence." *Times Record News*, April 24.
- Glassner, Barry. 1999. *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goode, Erich and Nachman Ben-Yehuda. 1994. *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. Oxford & Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Grossman, Lawrence K. 1997. "Why Local TV News Is So Awful." *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved August 19, 2001 (<http://www.cjcj.org/year/97/6/grossman.asp>).
- Gusfield, Joseph. 1963. *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Hall, Stuart, C. Critcher, T. Jefferson, J. Clark, and B. Roberts. 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.