

ENTER MORAL PANICS

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The place, Clacton, a small seaside resort community on England's eastern coast, one with an extremely limited range of facilities and amusements for young people. The time, Easter Sunday, 1964. The weather, cold and wet. Hundreds of adolescents and young adults are milling around on the streets and sidewalks, bored and irritated, seeking fun and adventure. A rumor—perhaps true, perhaps false—begins circulating that a bartender refused to serve several young people. A scuffle breaks out on the pavement; factions begin separating out. Youths on motorcycles and scooters roar up and down the street. A starter's pistol is fired into the air. The windows of a dance hall are smashed; some beach huts are destroyed. The damage—perhaps £500 in value, several times that in today's currency. The police, unaccustomed to such rowdiness, overreact by arresting nearly 100 young people, on charges ranging from "abusive behavior" to assaulting a police officer (Cohen, 1972, pp. 29ff).

Media Reaction

While not exactly raw material for a major story on youth violence, the seaside disturbances nonetheless touched off what can only be described as an orgy of sensationalistic news items. On Monday, the day after these events, every national newspaper with the exception of *The Times* ran a lead story on the Clacton disturbances. "Day of Terror by Scooter Groups" screamed the *Daily Telegraph*; claimed the *Daily Express*, "Youngsters Beat Up Town"; the *Daily Mirror* chimed in with, "Wild Ones Invade Seaside." On Tuesday, the press coverage was much the same. Editorials on the subject of youth violence began to appear. The Home Secretary was "urged" to take firm action to deal with the problem. Articles began to appear featuring interviews with Mods and Rockers, the two youth factions, current in Britain at

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the time, who were involved in the scuffles and the vandalism. The Mods (the term stood for "modernists") tended to be well-dressed, fashion-conscious teenagers and young adults who frequented discos, listened to the music of the Beatles, the Who, and the Rolling Stones, and, if they were on wheels, rode motor scooters. The Rockers tended to be tougher, more politically reactionary, more classically delinquent; they usually stemmed from a working-class background, and often rode motorbikes.

Theories were articulated in the press attempting to explain what was referred to as the mob violence. Accounts of police and court actions were reported; local residents were interviewed concerning the subject, their views widely publicized. The story was deemed so important that much of the press around the world covered the incidents, with major stories appearing in the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the European continent. *The New York Times* printed a large photograph of two adolescent girls accompanying its story. The Belgian newspapers captioned one photo "West Side Story on English Coast" (pp. 31ff). Youth fights and vandalism at resorts continued to be a major theme in the British press for some three years. Each time a disturbance broke out, much the same exaggerated, sensationalistic stories were repeated. But by the beginning of 1967, young Britishers no longer identified with the Mods or the Rockers, and the youth-violence angle gave way to other issues.

Enter Stanley Cohen

In 1964, Stanley Cohen was a graduate student at the University of London searching for a research topic for his dissertation. A South African who left his homeland for political reasons, a radical who was attracted to the causes and activities of underdogs and eager to critique the doings of the smug and powerful, Cohen found society's reaction to the exuberant activities of rebellious youth both disturbing and intriguing.

To Cohen, a major issue was the "fundamentally inappropriate" reaction by much of society to certain relatively minor events and conditions. The press, especially, had created a horror story practically out of whole cloth. The seriousness of events were exaggerated and distorted—in terms of the number of young people involved, the nature of the violence committed, the amount of damage inflicted, and their impact on the community, not to mention the importance of the events to the society as a whole. Obviously false stories were repeated as true; unconfirmed rumors were taken as fresh evidence of further atrocities (Cohen, 1972, pp. 31ff). During such times of overheated and exaggerated sense of threat, the society generally, including the press and the police, reacted toward the designated behavior and its enactors in a process Cohen referred to as "community sensitization" (1967, p. 280). Once a class of behavior, and a category of deviants, are identified, extremely small deviations from the norm become noticed, commented on, judged, and reacted to. In the case, the Clacton disturbances, minor offenses, or even gath-

erings which might become offenses, were instantly the focus of press and police attention. The process of sensitization was summed up in a headline at the time which read: "Seaside Resorts Prepare for the Hooligans' Invasion" (1967, p. 281). Moreover, on more than one occasion, the over-zealousness of the police resulted in an escalation of the conflict, where, for instance, by insisting that the crowd "move along," some of "the more labile members" of a crowd were provoked to resist, blows were exchanged, which led to their arrest (1967, p. 281). To Cohen, the sensitization and escalation processes were central to the public's reaction to the Mods and Rockers.

Cohen launched the term moral panic as a means of characterizing the reactions of the media, the public, and agents of social control to the youthful disturbances. In a moral panic, Cohen wrote:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or . . . resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself. (1972, p. 9)

Actors in the Drama of the Moral Panic

How is this panic expressed? How did Cohen know he had a panic on his hands after the 1964 Clacton disturbances? Cohen looked at the reaction of five segments of society: the press, the public, agents of social control, or law enforcement, lawmakers and politicians, and action groups.

The Press

The way the press handled the seaside events could be characterized by exaggerated attention, exaggerated events, distortion, and stereotyping (1972, pp. 31–8). As we saw, newspapers "over-reported" the events; the scuffles and minor acts of vandalism that took place were accorded a place in the media far out of proportion to their importance. Not only was the focus of attention exaggerated, but the stories describing the events also exaggerated their seriousness. Phrases such as "riot," "orgy of destruction," scenes being "smeared with blood and violence," "battle," and a "screaming mob," were used regularly. If one boat was overturned, reports claimed that "boats" were overturned. One story claimed that, in one resort, the windows of "all" the dance

halls by the beach were smashed, which was true—however, the town only had one dance hall, and some of its windows were smashed by youths (1972, pp. 32–3).

The stories also distorted the events and repeated obviously false stories. One youth told a judge that he would pay his fine with a £75 check. This was repeated as long as four years after the event, usually to show that the rebellious youths were affluent hordes whom “fines couldn’t touch.” In fact, the youth made this statement as a “pathetic gesture of bravado.” He not only did not have the money, he didn’t even have a bank account, and had never signed a check in his life (1972, p. 33). But because the tale confirmed a certain public image of the events and who perpetrated them, it was repeated and believed as true. Although myth-making characterizes all societies at all times, during times of the moral panic, the process is especially rapid, and a given myth is especially likely to be believed on relatively little evidence (1972, p. 33).

The youth violence and vandalism stories that ran in the British press between 1964 and 1967 tended to follow a stereotypical pattern. For the most part, they put together a composite picture, containing a number of central elements. It was almost as if a new story could be written simply by stitching these elements together. There was very little interest in what actually happened; what counted is how closely a news account conformed to the stereotype. The youths were depicted as being part of gangs, even though all of the youths involved were part of very loose assemblies rather than tightly structured gangs. The seaside villages were said to have been victims of an “invasion from London,” even though many—in all likelihood, most—were local youths or came from nearby towns and villages. Few stories omitted the fact that many of the offenders were on motor scooters or motorbikes, even though the overwhelming majority were on foot. Offenders were said to come from affluent families, even though those on whom data could be gathered lived in extremely modest economic circumstances. They were said to have come to the resorts deliberately to make trouble, even though, in reality, nearly all came merely hoping that there would be some trouble to watch. The offenses described in the press were nearly always violent ones, even though only a tenth of the offenders were charged with violent crimes; even most of the offenses that did take place entailed relatively trivial acts such as petty theft, threatening behavior, and obstruction. The financial loss to local businesses was said to have been drastic. If anything, the reverse was true: more people than usual came to the resorts to check out the action. In short, one indication that a moral panic is taking place is the stereotypical fashion in which the subject is treated in the press (1972, pp. 34–8).

The Public

Cohen’s conception of moral panics includes the dimension of public concern. There must be some latent potential on the part of the public to

react to a given issue to begin with, some raw material out of which a media campaign about a given issue can be built. The public may hold a more sophisticated view of the issue than the press (1972, pp. 65–70), but if the media is infused with hysteria about a particular issue or condition which does *not* generate public concern, then we do not have a moral panic on our hands. The media’s exaggerated attention must touch something of a responsive chord in the general public. The disturbances that attracted so much attention broke out in the 1960s, at a time when much of the adult British public, with the Second World War and the postwar era deprivations still fresh on their minds, saw a younger generation growing up in affluence (they “never had it so good,” was a common refrain), responding not with gratitude but with disdain, rebellion, and delinquency. The problem was that the younger generation had been coddled, indulged, treated with kid gloves; the solution—a tougher parental hand, stricter social control, harsher penalties for transgressions, stiffer fines and jail sentences. In short, the events at Clacton and other seaside communities were focused on and reacted to by much of the public as a symbol for some of the larger problems plaguing British society. The events themselves were not so important as what they seemed to represent. But in order to see these disturbances as central, it became necessary to exaggerate and distort their reality.

Law Enforcement

In addition to the press and the general public, the actions of the social (or “societal”) control culture demonstrated that a moral panic was taking place in Britain in the mid-1960s over the Mods and Rockers (1972, pp. 85ff). In a moral panic, segments of the society are sensitized to trouble from certain quarters (1972, pp. 77ff); the society is said to be faced with a “clear and present danger” the signs of which it is so sharply attuned to. In no sector is this principle more clearly evident than in public attitudes about what the police and the courts—law enforcement—ought to be doing about the perceived threat. Ties between and among local police forces are established and strengthened, and those between the local and national levels of law enforcement are activated, in order to more effectively deal with the problems faced by the putative threat (1972, p. 86). Cohen calls this process *diffusion*.

Efforts are made by officers to broaden the scope of law enforcement and increase its intensity; punitive and overly zealous actions already taken are justified on the basis of the enormity of the threat the society faces (1972, pp. 86–7). Cohen refers to this as *escalation*. New methods of control are proposed both to legislators and to the police: stiffer sentences, expanded police powers, confiscating motor scooters and motorbikes, banning Mod clothing, cutting long hair on youths, drafting troublemakers into the military, and so on (1972, pp. 88–91). Some police practices, previously rarely used, that were called up to deal with unacceptable Mod and Rocker behavior included: riding suspicious youths out of town or to the railroad station; keeping

crowds moving along; confiscating studded belts; keeping certain trouble-some locations free of Mods and Rockers; verbally harassing adolescents, particularly in a crowd situation, to "show them up" and "deflate their egos" (1972, p. 95), making immediate (and often wrongful) arrests, and so on (1972, pp. 92-8). The thinking among agents of social control is that "new situations need new remedies"; a national problem called for a drastic solution, and often, this entailed suspending rights and liberties previously enjoyed.

Politicians and Legislators

Members of Parliament (MPs) "took an immediate and considerable interest in disturbances in their own constituencies" (p. 133). Stiffer penalties for youth offenses were called for. Local merchants were assured that "hooliganism" would not threaten their economic interests and would not be repeated. Statements by MPs were issued to the press; "Jail These Wild Ones—Call by MPs," ran one such story. A return to corporal punishment for hooliganism was called for by some. Meetings were held between MPs and local police chiefs, and summaries were sent to the Home Secretary. Suggestions were made by one MP that Britain revive non-military national service, such as construction or mining, as a punishment for hooliganism. A suggestion to raise the minimum driving age from 16 to 19 was introduced in the House of Lords. A Malicious Damage Bill was introduced and debated in the House of Commons only a month after the Clacton incident; in further debate on the Bill two months later, the seaside disturbances became the central imagery dominating the discussion. Though some politicians recognized that the concern was exaggerated, and had a moderating influence on the discussion, the dominant mood among politicians and legislators toward youth crime in the period following the initial incident was angry, self-righteous, vindictive, condemnatory, and punitive. Politicians and other groups aligned themselves against a devil and on the side of angels; the fact is, they picked an "easy target," one that "hardly existed." What counted was not the nature of the target but what side they were on and what they were against (1972, p. 138). Such symbolic alignments represent one defining quality of the moral panic.

Action Groups

At some point, moral panics generate appeals, campaigns, and finally, "fully fledged action groups" (p. 119) which arise to cope with the newly-existing threat. These are "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker, 1963, pp. 147ff) who believe that existing remedies are insufficient. Action groups can be seen as "germinal social movements" (Cohen, 1972, p. 120). Often, participants have something to gain personally from rallying against a problem, but this is not a necessary determinant. The Mods and the Rockers generated two local action groups, one of which proposed that convicted Mods and Rockers be subjected to a penal-style program of discipline and hard labor

(1972, p. 121), and the other of which favored the reintroduction of a variety of harsher penalties, including whippings of young offenders with a birch rod (1972, p. 125). These action groups did not grow into social movements, nor did they survive the demise of the Mods and the Rockers.

There are two additional features that characterize moral panics, two developments that inform the observer that a society is in the grip of a moral panic: the creation of *folk devils* (1972, pp. 40ff) and the development of a *disaster mentality* (pp. 144ff).

Folk Devils

A folk devil is the personification of evil. Folk devils permit instant recognition; they are "unambiguously unfavorable symbols" (Turner and Surace, 1956, pp. 16-20; Cohen, 1972, p. 41), that is, stripped of all favorable characteristics and imparted with exclusively negative ones. In such a symbolization process, "images are made much sharper than reality" (Cohen, 1972, p. 43). While all folk devils are created out of some existing and recognizable elements, a full-scale *demonology* takes place by which the members of a new evil category are placed "in the gallery of contemporary folk devils" (p. 44). Once a category has been identified in the media as consisting of trouble-makers, the supposed havoc-wreaking behavior of its members reported to the public, and their supposed stereotypical features litanized, the process of creating a new folk devil is complete; from then on, all mention of representatives of the new category revolves around their central, and exclusively negative, features. All moral panics, by their very nature, identify, denounce, and attempt to root out folk devils. A condition that generates such widespread public concern must have had a personal agent responsible for its inception and maintenance. Such evil does not arise by happenstance or out of thin air; there must be a circle of evil individuals who are engaged in undermining society as we know it. In short, folk devils are *deviants*; they are engaged in wrongdoing; their actions are harmful to society; they are selfish and evil; they must be stopped, their actions neutralized. Only an effort of substantial magnitude will permit us to return to normal.

The Disaster Analogy

And lastly, in moral panics, Cohen argues, preparations are taken very much like those taken before, during, and after a disaster, such as a hurricane, a volcano eruption, or an earthquake. As during disasters, in the moral panic, there are predictions of impending doom, a "warning phase," sensitization to cues of danger, coping mechanisms, frequent overreactions, the institutionalization of threat, rumors speculating about what is happening or will happen, false alarms, and, occasionally, mass delusion (1972, pp. 144-8). The perceived threat to, and subsequent reaction by, conventional society to the projected invasion of hordes of deviants and delinquents has many strong parallels with the steps taken before, during, and after a natural disaster.

The Contribution of the Moral Panics Concept

The concept of the moral panic expands our understanding of social structure, social process, and social change. It ties together concepts from a variety of disparate areas—deviance, crime, collective behavior, social problems, and social movements. Moral panics are likely to “clarify [the] normative contours” and “moral boundaries” of the society in which they occur, demonstrate that there are limits to how much diversity can be tolerated in a society. Focusing on moral panics emphasizes the fact that reactions to unconventional behavior do not arise solely as a consequence of a rational and realistic assessment of the concrete damage that the behavior in question is likely to inflict on the society. Without resorting to conspiratorial thinking, an investigation of the moral panic phenomenon arises as a consequence of that phenomenon’s real or supposed threat to certain “positions, statuses, interests, ideologies, and values” (Cohen, 1972, p. 191). The cast of characters Cohen located in the moral panic—the media, the general public, the agents of social control, lawmakers and politicians, and action groups—are distressed by a certain perceived threat for a reason. If all panics entailed a public reaction to a specific, clearly identifiable threat, the magnitude of which can be objectively assessed and readily agreed upon, then such reactions would require no explanation. On the other hand, if, as Cohen argues, the reaction is out of proportion to the threat, we are led to ask why it arises; the panic is problematic—it demands an explanation.

Why a moral panic over *this* supposed threat, but not *that*, potentially even more damaging, one? Why does *this* cast of characters become incensed by the threat the behavior supposedly poses, but not *that* cast of characters? Why a moral panic at this time, but not before or after? How and why do moral panics arise? How and why do they die out? What role do interests play in the moral panic? Are the dynamics of the moral panic different during different historical time periods, or different from one society to another? What does the moral panic tell us about how society is constituted, how it works, how it changes over time? Cohen’s concept introduces the observer of society to a wide range of questions and potential explorations.

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MEDIA CONSTRUCTIONS OF CRIME

Vincent F. Sacco

Crime, like an economic recession, a lack of affordable housing, or inadequate health care, is experienced as both a private trouble and a public issue. Quite obviously, for victims, a criminal offense and the resulting loss or injury present problems of a highly personal nature. For victims and nonvictims alike, however, the “plague of drugs,” the “epidemic of random violence,” and other manifestations of the crime problem are matters for intense public discussion and political debate.

While the distinction between private troubles and public issues is an important one, these dimensions are not independent.¹ Citizens’ personal troubles with crime provide the building blocks out of which public issues are constructed. On the other hand, the warnings of danger implicit in public pronouncements about the seriousness and pervasiveness of crime problems may be a source of private trouble if they exacerbate the fear of crime among those who have routine exposure to such pronouncements.

Central to the interplay between individuals’ private troubles with crime and the social issue of crime are the mass media. The news media, in particular, provide an important forum in which private troubles are selectively gathered up, invested with a broader meaning, and made available for public consumption. The dynamic character of these processes and the consequences that they have for public understanding of crime and its solution invite close scrutiny.

From Private Trouble . . .

Numerous studies of media content have documented the fact that crime reports are a durable news commodity.² While news about crime figures prominently in all types of media, important differences exist between print and electronic media, between more elite and more popular media, and

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between media markets. Because of this variability, estimates of the proportion of total news that is devoted to crime coverage range from 5 to 25 percent.³

News about crime is most frequently news about the occurrence or processing of private trouble in the form of specific criminal events. In her study of crime and justice news in Chicago in the late 1970s, Doris Graber found that while attention to crime varied across media, reports of individual crime dominated for all media.⁴ With respect to the three newspapers studied, the coverage of individual crimes surpassed the coverage of Congress and the presidency and equaled or surpassed election coverage.

Analyses of media content demonstrate that the news provides a map of the world of criminal events that differs in many ways from the one provided by official crime statistics. Variations in the volume of news about crime seem to bear little relationship to variations in the actual volume of crime between places or over time.⁵ Whereas crime statistics indicate that most crime is non-violent, media reports suggest, in the aggregate, that the opposite is true.⁶ While crime news tends to provide only sparse details about victims and offenders, that which is provided is frequently at odds with the official picture. Both offenders and victims, for instance, appear less youthful in media reports than they do in statistical records.⁷ In addition, news content does not reflect and frequently even reverses the relationship that, according to much social scientific evidence, exists between minority group membership and criminal offending.⁸ With respect to gender, however, both crime statistics and crime news portray offending as predominantly a male activity.⁹

News reports also distort the relationship between crime and legal control. In the news, the police appear to be more effective in apprehending offenders than police data would suggest they are.¹⁰ Moreover, while the activities of the police are prominently featured, the functioning of other actors in the criminal justice system is much less visible.¹¹ This probably reflects a professional judgment that criminal events are most newsworthy immediately following their occurrence and thus when they are in the early stages of justice system processing, when police activity is prominent.¹²

These images of crime, the criminal, and the victim that appear with patterned regularity in print and broadcast news emerge quite logically from the organizational processes of news production. News stories are most useful to news organizations when they are gathered easily from credible sources; for this reason, policing agencies have become the principal suppliers of these stories.¹³ In short, relationships involving news organizations and policing agencies allow the collection of news about common crime to be routinized in a manner that uses the resources of news agencies efficiently.¹⁴ In addition, the public view of the police as apolitical crime experts imbues police-generated crime news with authority and objectivity.

Ease of access to authoritative news is not the only advantage that police-generated crime stories offer, since such stories are consistent with several other professional values that structure the news production process. Much of what we call news consists of reports of specific incidents that have

occurred since the publication of the previous day's newspaper or the airing of the previous night's newscast. As discrete incidents that occur at particular times and places, individual crimes conform closely to this requirement of periodicity.

Stories about individual crimes—with their characteristic portrayals of villains and victims—also have dramatic value. The dramatic potential is heightened when the victim or offender is a celebrity, when the incident is of a very serious nature, or when the circumstances of the offense are atypical. In addition, the routine crime story is a rather uncomplicated matter, and it is unnecessary for news workers to assume that readers or viewers require an extensive background in order to appreciate the story. The lack of factual complexity associated with the ordinary individual crime story generally means that it can be easily written and edited by news workers whose professional activities are consistently regulated by rigid deadlines.

The elastic character of the crime news supply offers a further advantage. On any given day, particularly in large metropolitan areas, there is an almost limitless supply of crimes that could be the object of media attention. However, from day to day, or from week to week, the demand of the news agency for crime news may vary due to other events that are seen to demand coverage. Depending on the size of the news hole, crime coverage may be expanded or contracted in compensatory fashion. A study by Sanford Shenzon of crime news in Chicago newspapers found, for instance, that crime reports were often located on the obituary pages so that layout difficulties resulting from the inability to plan these pages could be overcome through the use of crime news filler.¹⁵

Over the last several years, a number of changes in local and national media environments have altered the nature and extent of crime coverage. The growth of cable stations, for instance, has increased the carrying capacity for news generally and for crime news specifically. More stories can be covered, and those that are judged to be particularly newsworthy can be covered in greater detail. The live television coverage of court proceedings—as in the case of the Menendez brothers, Lorena Bobbitt, or O.J. Simpson—has become commonplace. The increasing sophistication of news gathering, surveillance, and home video technologies has meant that it is no longer unusual to capture thefts, robberies, or even homicides on tape. One consequence of the diffusion of these technologies has been to raise to national prominence stories with no real national significance. Crime stories that would have been a purely local affair in an earlier period now attract much wider attention because a videotape of the incident is available for broadcast.

The last two decades have also witnessed a redefinition of what can be considered an appropriate subject for news reporting. Changes in mores relating to public discussion of sex and violence have allowed respectable media outlets to report crimes that would have previously been seen as taboo and to do so at a level of detail that would once have been considered lurid. At the same time, the politicization of crimes such as sexual assault and domestic

violence has broadened the range of crime stories that, it can be argued, legitimately require coverage.¹⁶

Programmatic developments in commercial broadcast media have magnified the impact of these changes. The proliferation of newsmagazines, daytime talk shows, docudramas, and various other forms of infotainment has ushered in a programming cycle that is heavily dependent on crime news and victim accounts. The frequent reliance of many of these programs on dramatic reenactments of real events and their mixing of factual reports with rumor and speculation blurs the basic distinctions that analysts of crime content have traditionally drawn between news and entertainment media.¹⁷

... To Public Issues

Public issues grow up around private troubles when the experiences of individuals are understood as exemplifying a larger social problem, and the news media play a vital role in the construction of such problems.¹⁸ Most notably, professional judgments of newsworthiness and the selective use of news sources allow some groups, rather than others, the opportunity to express a view about what is and what is not a problem and how any such problem should be managed. By implication, the relationships that link the police to news agencies serve law enforcement as well as media interests. The police role as the dominant gatekeeper means that crime news is often police news and that the advancement of a police perspective on crime and its solution is facilitated.¹⁹ It has been argued that this results in the adoption of an uncritical posture with respect to the police view of crime and the measures necessary to control it.²⁰ More generally, the frame of reference offered by a government bureaucracy or other recognized authority with respect to crime problems may only infrequently be called into question and, as a consequence, competing perspectives may become marginalized.

This tendency may be no less true of in-depth issue coverage than of routine news reporting. Henry Brownstein maintains that during the 1980s, there was relatively little reporting that took issue with the official version of the drug problem constructed by government experts.²¹ In a similar way, Philip Jenkins has noted how experts of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were able to present themselves as the authorities on the subject of serial murder and how they made themselves available to journalists who reciprocated with favorable coverage of the agency.²²

It would be incorrect, however, to suggest that news media are merely the passive conveyors of the claims about problems offered up by government bureaucracies, political candidates, or other self-interested groups, since any such claims must be transformed to meet the requirements of the medium in question. In an analysis of television network news coverage of threats to children, Joel Best argued that "inevitably, network news stories distort the problems they explore,"²³ in large part because news conventions impose severe constraints on how stories are covered. Stories must be told in a few

minutes, frequently by reporters who may have little more than a surface familiarity with the complexities of the problem at hand. Moreover, the topic must be viewed as serious enough and as visual enough to be chosen over competing issues. Best found, in the case of child victimization, that the stories used frightening and dramatic examples to typify the problem and that they emphasized the existence of a consensus among knowledgeable experts regarding its scope and seriousness.

In other instances, news media may more actively engage in problem construction. Investigative reporting, or the coverage of an event judged to be especially newsworthy, may contribute to the establishment of a media agenda that finds expression in the reporting of further stories or in more detailed features. A study by David L. Prosser and his colleagues revealed how one Chicago newspaper set its own media agenda after an extensive investigative series on rape.²⁴ The researchers found that while the series did not appear to have a substantial impact on the perceptions of policymakers or the general public, there were significant changes in the extent and depth of rape coverage after the series ended, even though police reports of rape were unchanged. In a related way, during the summer of 1994, the O.J. Simpson case provided an opportunity for sidebar stories relating to the prevalence and causes of domestic violence, the inadequacy of justice system responses, and pending federal and state legislation. Such coverage contextualized the original incident in a way that helped construct the social issue of violence against women at the same time that it legitimated continuing, detailed attention to the original story.

The Content of Crime Problems

Media constructions of crime problems address both the frequency and the substance of private trouble with crime. Rhetoric regarding both of these dimensions serves to impress on readers and viewers the gravity of particular crime problems and the need to confront them in particular ways.

Large numbers of problems provide convincing evidence that problems exist. This is perhaps most evident in the case of crime waves, when it is argued that crime is becoming more frequent. A study by Steven Gorelick, for instance, of an anticrime campaign sponsored by a New York daily newspaper found that crime in the city was frequently described as a "mushrooming cloud," a "floodtide," a "spreading cancer," or in similar terms.²⁵ Sometimes these claims about the numbers of people affected have greater specificity in that some particular segment of the population is claimed to be experiencing rapidly increasing risks of offending or victimization.²⁶

Yet, with respect to many crime waves, it is the belief that crime is increasing, rather than crime itself, that is really on the rise.²⁷ A study by Mark Fishman of a 1976 New York crime wave against the elderly described how crime waves may be "things of the mind."²⁸ Fishman found that there was no compelling evidence to indicate that the criminal victimization of the

elderly actually increased during the study period. Instead, the crime wave originated in the efforts of journalists to organize individual crime stories around a compelling news theme. The theme of crime against the elderly was elaborated as competing news organizations responded to each other's coverage of the issue. In addition, the police, in their role as gatekeepers of crime news, reacted to the increased media interest by making available more stories that reflected and reinforced the crime-against-the-elderly theme.

A more recent example of a journalistic construction of rapidly rising crime is provided by James D. Orcutt and J. Blake Turner.²⁹ Their analysis focused on the way in which graphic artists in the national print media transformed survey data, which showed modest yearly changes in drug use, into evidence of a "coke plague." While the numbers were real, their graphical presentation in the weekly periodical under study was misleading. As in the case described by Fishman, the dynamics of competitive journalism created a media feeding frenzy that found news workers "snatching at shocking numbers" and "smothering reports of stable or decreasing use under more ominous headlines."³⁰

Claims about statistical frequency are not restricted to reports about how the numbers are increasing, however. With respect to the problem of violence against women, for instance, it is argued that the numbers have always been very high but that the failure to police such incidents, the stigma associated with victimization, and an institutional unwillingness to believe the accounts of victims have resulted in statistical counts that dramatically underestimate the problem. Thus, whether or not the numbers are going up is defined as less salient than the observation that they have always been higher than we have thought.

According to Neil Gilbert, outrageous claims about the prevalence of problems sometimes make their way into news reports in part because of journalists' general inability to evaluate the data supplied to them.³¹ Too often, they lack the technical sophistication to critically assess claims about the frequency of crime or victimization in an independent fashion. Instead, they collect and validate information by talking to experts who are expected to offer informed opinions. However, in the case of emergent problems, it is often the problem advocate, interested in advancing a particular point of view, who may be among the first to collect and publicize empirical evidence. As a result, the estimates yielded by advocacy research may be the only ones available at the earliest stages of problem development. Philip Jenkins has argued that the emergence of serial murder as a social issue in the early 1980s was spurred by "epidemic estimates" that placed the number of serial murder victims at between 20 and 25 percent of American homicides.³² While such numbers continue to circulate through popular and journalistic accounts, more reasoned analysis suggests that the number of serial murder victims is closer to 2 percent of American homicides.

The emergence of crime problems is related not only to claims about the frequency of criminal events but also to claims about their character. Exactly

what types of events such incidents are thought to be and who is thought to be typically involved in them matter as much as does the rate at which they are thought to occur.

Any particular social problem can be framed in many ways, and these various frames imply different causal attributions and prospective solutions.³³ Because they are able to legitimate some views and to marginalize others, the news media are an important part of this framing process. Depending on the sources accessed or the type of coverage, rape can be framed as a sex crime or as a crime of violence; the "drug problem" as a product of pushers who hook their victims or as an example of the overreach of criminal law; and violence on the part of youths as a condition necessitating either swift punishment or comprehensive community development.

More generally, when private troubles are constructed as a crime problem of any sort, they are framed in ways that assign primary responsibility for their solution to the criminal justice system. Joel Best has shown how crime problem interpretations of the 1987 freeway shooting incidents in California competed in the relevant news coverage with other interpretations of the incidents.³⁴ Whereas the crime problem frame implied the need for increased patrols, better investigation, and more effective prosecution, other definitions of the issue—as a gun problem, a traffic problem, or a courtesy problem—suggested other solutions.

In a related way, the social distributional character of victimization is frequently ignored by news coverage that stresses the random character of victimization. While the best social science literature indicates that the risks of crime, like the risks of other misfortunes, are not equally shared, media images often convey a different message. According to Brownstein, for instance, much of the coverage of the drug issue in New York City between 1986 and 1990 emphasized the random character of drug violence even though police statistics indicated that the risks of such violence were extremely low.³⁵ Themes relating to randomness serve the interests of both news workers and others who seek to frame crime problems. News stories about random crimes have great dramatic value, as the media frenzies that surround serial murders illustrate. Moreover, the advocates to whom news workers have access during the early stages of problem development often stress the random nature of a particular form of victimization since problems must be seen as more urgent when everyone is threatened.

While much routine crime reporting can be understood as maintaining established crime problem frames, new problems are always being discovered as old problem paradigms expand or as novel elements come together with established news themes. The discovery of new problems provides a journalistic opportunity to tell a story that has not been told before, but such stories are told most effectively when they resonate with existing cultural themes. In the 1970s, the problem of crime against the elderly brought together in one package an already familiar concern about crime in the streets and victims' rights with an emerging concern about the aging population.³⁶ The problem

of satanic crime, which received extensive media coverage in the 1980s, combined familiar news themes relating to religious cults, child abuse, and juvenile crime.³⁷ Media attention to date rape and stalking extends earlier news themes relating to violence against women.

The transition from private troubles to public issues is not always a linear process since media interest in particular crime problems can vary in intensity or decline over time. The 1987 shootings on California freeways never became a well-established problem, despite a strong start.³⁸ In the case of crimes against the elderly, Fay Lomax Cook and Wesley Skogan observe that while the issue achieved a prominent position on media and other agendas during the early 1970s, by the decade's end, it had declined precipitously.³⁹ On the other hand, Fishman has argued that as long as police departments are the routine sources of crime news, the media will reinforce a climate of opinion that keeps the attention of the police focused on "crime in the streets." He concludes that while social problems may come and go, "law-and-order news is here to stay."⁴⁰

... And Back Again?

There can be little doubt that media consumers have broad and regular exposure to crime news.⁴¹ What are the consequences of this exposure? One potential consequence that has generated considerable interest relates to the deleterious effects that media attention to crime problems may have on audience members' fear of victimization. On the surface, arguments about such effects seem plausible. Public fear of crime is pervasive, and it outstrips measured levels of victimization. By implication, public anxieties would appear to be rooted in vicarious rather than direct experiences, and since messages about crime are so prevalent in the media, it seems reasonable to conclude that much public fear originates in media coverage of crime problems. At issue is whether experience with media treatments of crime as a public issue contributes to fear as a personal trouble. There is a large body of empirical evidence that bears on the relationship between audience exposure to mass media and fear of crime. In the aggregate, however, the findings are equivocal regarding the strength of such a relationship or even whether such a relationship exists.⁴²

Some of the inconsistency in this respect is methodological in nature. Considerable variation exists regarding the ways in which crime news, crime news exposure, and fear of crime have been operationalized in the research literature.⁴³ In addition, since people not only read or watch crime news but also talk about it with friends and neighbors, measured variations in media exposure are not necessarily indicative of exposure to crime news.⁴⁴ Nor is it reasonable to assume for research purposes that people are always able to keep clear and report to researchers what is learned in which information channel.⁴⁵ Even when such methodological limitations are taken into account, however, the research indicates that the effects of media exposure on fear of crime are less significant than any naive hypothesis would suggest.

Several factors explain this apparent paradox. To begin with, it would be inappropriate to assume that audience members respond passively to the warnings of danger issued by omnipotent news media. Instead, as Paul Williams and Julie Dickinson note, news consumers are actively involved in investing the news with meaning.⁴⁶ Audience members bring to the reading and viewing experience their own predispositions, which influence what crime news means for them. These predispositions may include personal experiences with crime or violence,⁴⁷ perceptions of the credibility of news media,⁴⁸ or the extent of prior concern about personal safety.⁴⁹ In the context of cross-sectional research, these predispositions suggest the possibility that the correlation between media usage and fear of crime may be more indicative of selective exposure than of media influence.⁵⁰

While people avidly read and watch crime news, it is unclear that in so doing they extract lessons relating to their own safety. Such lessons, it appears, are more effectively learned in other contexts. The relevant research indicates that the news about crime that travels through interpersonal channels may be more likely to induce fear than is the news that travels through mass channels.⁵¹ To learn about crime by talking to one's neighbors is to learn about victims whose experiences cannot be easily dismissed because they are nameless or faceless or live somewhere else.

By contrast, the typical media crime story is stripped of much of its emotional character and is likely to involve victims about whom the viewer or reader has no personal knowledge. In addition, the average news story may provide readers and viewers with so little information about the victim, the setting in which the crime occurred, or other circumstances of commission that it may be irrelevant to any assessment of personal victimization risks.⁵² Most crime news is nonlocal and therefore far removed from judgments that must be made regarding the safety of the immediate environment. Not surprisingly, there is research that suggests that fear is, in fact, related to crime news exposure when local random violent crimes are reported in prominent fashion.⁵³ Taken together, these findings are consistent with a more general body of research that indicates that people may be less dependent on news media when they seek information about matters close to home.⁵⁴

Overall, it would appear that as crime news relates to matters of personal safety, consumers appear to exercise a healthy dose of skepticism.⁵⁵ As Dennis Howitt observes, newspaper readers do not necessarily think that crime rates are going up just because the number of column inches devoted to crime increases.⁵⁶ They are more likely to put what is learned from the media in the context of what they learn from other sources, and they may be well aware when media are behaving in a highly sensationalist manner.⁵⁷

Conclusion

If the news business is concerned with the production of crime problems, then the private troubles of criminal offenders and crime victims are the raw

materials. These troubles are not simply reported on, however, since they are fundamentally transformed by the news-gathering process. Screened through a law enforcement filter, contextualized by advocacy claims and culturally resonant news themes, and shaped and molded by the conventions and requirements of commercial media, these private troubles become public issues.

While news media coverage of crime may not have a powerful influence on the concern for personal safety, this should not obscure other, perhaps more significant effects. Such effects are not narrowly attitudinal or behavioral but are broadly ideological.

Some critics argue that the police perspective implicit in so much crime news reporting dramatically restricts the parameters of discussion and debate about the problem of crime. As a consequence, the causes of offending are individualized and the relationships that link crime to broader social forces are left largely unexplored.⁵⁸ Correspondingly, traditional law-and-order responses are reaffirmed as the most efficient way to manage crime problems. A study of media coverage of attacks against women in Toronto found that explanations of the phenomenon tended to focus attention on the ways in which victims placed themselves in conditions of risk, on offender pathology, and on the need for a more coercive criminal justice response.⁵⁹ The authors note that while these terms of reference were not unreasonable, the attention they received left little room for alternative interpretations of the problem, particularly those interpretations that link the victimization of women to structures of gender inequality.

When crime problems are successfully constructed, a consensus emerges regarding what kinds of public issues private troubles represent.⁶⁰ Yet the development of such a consensus—regarding what the problems are, who is responsible for them, and how they should be resolved—should not be understood in conspiratorial terms. While both news workers and their sources are interested in offering a convincing and credible construction of reality, for many in the media, the construction of these problems is not a matter of activism but just another day at the office.⁶¹

As news workers observe and influence each other, and as the line between news and entertainment becomes more confused, public discussion of crime problems reflects and reinforces this consensus, and popular views of these problems begin to assume a taken-for-granted character. Inevitably, but regrettably, the emergence of such a consensus relegates to the margins the search for alternative ways of thinking about crime and its solution.

Notes

- ¹ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 9–11.
- ² See, for example, James Garofalo, "Crime and the Mass Media: A Selective Review of Research," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 18:319–350 (1981); Ray Surette, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1992); Joseph R. Dominick, "Crime and Law Enforcement in the Mass Media," in *Deviance and Mass Media*, ed. Charles Winick (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978), pp. 105–128.
- ³ Surette, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice*, p. 62.

- ⁴ Doris A. Graber, *Crime News and the Public* (New York: Praeger, 1980).
- ⁵ F. James Davis, "Crime News in Colorado Newspapers," *American Journal of Sociology*, 57:325–330 (1952); Wesley G. Skogan and Michael G. Maxfield, *Coping with Crime: Individual and Neighborhood Reactions* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981).
- ⁶ Garofalo, "Crime and the Mass Media"; Skogan and Maxfield, *Coping with Crime*; Philip Schlesinger, Howard Tumber, and Graham Murdock, "The Media of Politics, Crime and Criminal Justice," *British Journal of Sociology*, 42:397–420 (1991).
- ⁷ Margaret T. Gordon and Stephanie Riger, *The Female Fear* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 70; Roy Edward Lotz, *Crime and the American Press* (New York: Praeger, 1991).
- ⁸ Lotz found, for instance, that in newspapers in New York, Miami, and Philadelphia, white offenders outnumbered black offenders by 7 to 1 in those news reports that allowed for the identification of race. Lotz, *Crime and the American Press*, p. 114.
- ⁹ M. A. Bortner, "Media Images and Public Attitudes toward Crime and Justice," in *Justice and the Media*, ed. Ray Surette (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 1984), pp. 15–30.
- ¹⁰ Harry L. Marsh, "A Comparative Analysis of Crime Coverage in Newspapers in the United States and Other Countries from 1960 to 1989: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 19:67–80 (1991); Bob Roshier, "The Selection of Crime News by the Press," in *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance and the Mass Media*, ed. Stanley Cohen and Jock Young (London: Constable, 1973) pp. 28–39.
- ¹¹ Steven M. Gorelick, "Join Our War": The Construction of Ideology in a Newspaper Crime-fighting Campaign," *Crime and Delinquency*, 35:421–436 (1989).
- ¹² Sanford Sherizen, "Social Creation of Crime News: All the News Fitted to Print," in *Deviance and Mass Media*, ed. Charles Winick (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1978), pp. 203–224.
- ¹³ Steve Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News: An Analysis of Crime Reporting in the British Press* (London: Tavistock, 1977); Mark Fishman, "Police News: Constructing an Image of Crime," *Urban Life*, 9:371–394 (1981); Richard V. Ericson, "Patrolling the Facts: Secrecy and Publicity in Police Work," *British Journal of Sociology*, 40:205–226 (1989).
- ¹⁴ In comparison to interpersonal crimes like homicide or robbery, corporate crimes are covered with greater difficulty. Generally, corporate crimes are more complex and more difficult to personalize, and well-established source-reporter relationships do not exist for corporate crime as they do for common crimes. Coverage of corporate, white-collar, and organized crime is more common, however, than is sometimes thought. See, for instance, Donna Randall, "The Portrayal of Business Malfeasance in the Elite and General Public Media," *Social Science Quarterly*, 68:28–93 (1987).
- ¹⁵ Sherizen, "Social Creation of Crime News," p. 221.
- ¹⁶ Keith Soothill and Sylvia Walby, *Sex Crime in the News* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 6.
- ¹⁷ Graeme R. Newman, "Popular Culture and Criminal Justice: A Preliminary Analysis," *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 18:261–274 (1990).
- ¹⁸ Joel Best, ed., *Images of Issues: Typifying Social Problems* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989); Joseph R. Gusfield, "Constructing the Ownership of Social Problems: Fun and Profit in the Welfare State," *Social Problems*, 36:431–441 (1989); Joseph W. Schneider, "Social Problems Theory: The Constructionist View," *Annual Review of Sociology*, 11:209–229 (1985).
- ¹⁹ Fishman, "Police News"; Ericson, "Patrolling the Facts."
- ²⁰ Richard V. Ericson, "Mass Media, Crime, Law and Justice," *British Journal of Sociology*, 31:219–249 (1991); Marjorie S. Zatz, "Chicano Youth Gangs and Crime: The Creation of a Moral Panic," *Contemporary Crises*, 11:129–158 (1987).
- ²¹ Henry H. Brownstein, "The Media and the Construction of Random Drug Violence," *Social Justice*, 18:85–103 (1991).
- ²² Philip Jenkins, *Using Murder: The Social Construction of Serial Homicide* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1994), pp. 212–213.
- ²³ Joel Best, "Secondary Claims-Making: Claims about Threats to Children on the Network News," *Perspectives on Social Problems*, 1:277 (1989).
- ²⁴ David L. Proffess et al., "Uncovering Rape: The Watchdog Press and the Limits of Agenda Setting," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 49:19–37 (1985).

- 25 Gorelick, "Join Our War," p. 429.
- 26 Much has been made in the popular press about, for instance, crime waves that victimize the elderly. See Fay Lomax Cook and Wesley G. Skogan, "Agenda Setting and the Rise and Fall of Policy Issues: The Case of Criminal Victimization of the Elderly," *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 8:395-415 (1990).
- 27 Mary Holland Baker et al., "The Impact of a Crime Wave: Perceptions, Fear, and Confidence in the Police," *Law and Society Review*, 17:317-334 (1983).
- 28 Mark Fishman, "Crime Waves as Ideology," *Social Problems*, 25:531 (1978).
- 29 James D. Orcutt and J. Blake Turner, "Shocking Numbers and Graphic Accounts: Quantified Images of Drug Problems in the Print Media," *Social Problems*, 40:190-206 (1993).
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- 31 Neil Gilbert, "Miscounting Social Ills," *Society*, 31:24-25 (1994).
- 32 Jenkins, *Using Murder*, p. 22.
- 33 Gusfield, "Constructing the Ownership of Social Problems"; Schneider, "Social Problems Theory."
- 34 Joel Best, "'Road Warriors' on 'Hair-Trigger Highways': Cultural Resources and the Media's Construction of the 1987 Freeway Shootings Problem," *Sociological Inquiry* 61:327-345 (1991).
- 35 Brownstein states, for example, that of the 1051 homicides reported in New York City in 1991, less than 2 percent could be categorized as random. Brownstein, "Media and the Construction of Random Drug Violence," p. 95.
- 36 Cook and Skogan, "Agenda Setting and the Rise and Fall of Policy Issues."
- 37 Ben M. Crouch and Kelly R. Damphousse, "Newspapers and the Antisemitism Movement: A Content Analysis," *Sociological Spectrum*, 12:1-20 (1992); Philip Jenkins and Daniel Maier-Katkin, "Satanism: Myth and Reality in a Contemporary Moral Panic," *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 17:53-75 (1992).
- 38 Best, "'Road Warriors' on 'Hair-Trigger Highways.'"
- 39 Cook and Skogan, "Agenda Setting and the Rise and Fall of Policy Issues."
- 40 Fishman, "Police News," p. 389.
- 41 Garofalo, "Crime and the Mass Media"; Skogan and Maxfield, *Coping with Crime*.
- 42 For a range of views, see James M. Carlson, *Prime Time Law Enforcement: Crime Show Viewing and Attitudes toward the Criminal Justice System* (New York: Praeger, 1985) Guy Cumberbatch and Alan Beardsworth, "Criminals, Victims and Mass Communications," in *Victims and Society*, ed. Emilio C. Viano (Washington, DC: Visage Press, 1976) pp. 72-90; Anthony N. Doob and Glen E. MacDonald, "Television Viewing and Fear of Victimization: Is the Relationship Causal?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37:170-179 (1979); Garofalo, "Crime and the Mass Media"; George Gerbner et al., "The Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile No. 10," *Journal of Communication*, 10:177-196 (1979); Garrett J. O'Keefe, "Public Views on Crime: Television Exposure and Media Credibility," in *Communication Yearbook* 8, ed. Robert N. Bostrom (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage 1984), pp. 514-535; Richard Sparks, Television and the Drama of Crime (Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 1992); Vincent F. Sacco, "The Effects of Mass Media on Perceptions of Crime: A Reanalysis of the Issues," *Pacific Sociological Review*, 25:475-493 (1982).
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- 45 Gordon and Riger, *Female Fear*, p. 85.
- 46 Paul Williams and Julie Dickinson, "Fear of Crime: Read All about It: The Relationship between Newspaper Reporting and Fear of Crime," *British Journal of Sociology*, 33:34 (1993).
- 47 Philip Schlesinger et al., *Women Viewing Violence* (London: BFI, 1992), p. 165.
- 48 O'Keefe, "Public Views on Crime."
- 49 Sacco, "Effects of Mass Media," p. 483.

- 50 Williams and Dickinson, "Fear of Crime," p. 51; Dolf Zillmann and Jacob Wakshlag, "Fear of Victimization and the Appeal of Crime Drama," in *Selective Exposure to Communication*, ed. Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1987), pp. 141-156.
- 51 Skogan and Maxfield, *Coping with Crime*; Susan J. Smith, "Crime in the News," *British Journal of Criminology*, 24:289-295 (1984); Tom R. Tyler, "Assessing the Risk of Crime Victimization: The Integration of Personal Victimization Experience and Socially Transmitted Information," *Journal of Social Issues*, 40:27-38 (1984).
- 52 Gordon and Riger, *Female Fear*, p. 75; Tyler, "Assessing the Risk of Crime Victimization," p. 34.
- 53 Linda Heath, "Impact of Newspaper Crime Reports on Fear of Crime: Multimethodological Investigation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47:263-276 (1984); Allen E. Liska and William Baccaglini, "Feeling Safe by Comparison: Crime in the Newspapers," *Social Problems*, 37:360-374 (1990). Interestingly, these studies also suggest that coverage of nonlocal violence may decrease fear among news consumers by allowing them to feel safer by comparison.
- 54 Philip Palmgreen and Peter Clarke, "Agenda-Setting with Local and National Issues," *Communication Research*, 4:435-452 (1977).
- 55 Jack Katz, "What Makes Crime 'News'?" *Media, Culture and Society*, 9:60 (1987).
- 56 Dennis Howitt, *The Mass Media and Social Problems* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1982), pp. 125-126.
- 57 Williams and Dickinson, "Fear of Crime," p. 50.
- 58 Gorelick, "Join Our War"; Drew Humphries, "Serious Crime, News Coverage and Ideology: A Content Analysis of Crime Coverage in a Metropolitan Newspaper," *Crime and Delinquency*, 27:191-205 (1981).
- 59 Sophia E. Voumvakis and Richard V. Ericson, *News Accounts of Attacks On Women: A Comparison of Three Toronto Newspapers* (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre of Criminology, 1984).
- 60 Gusfield, "Constructing the Ownership of Social Problems," pp. 434-436.
- 61 Stephen Hilgartner and Charles L. Bosk, "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model," *American Journal of Sociology*, 94:57 (1988).

CRIME WAVES AS IDEOLOGY

Mark Fishman

When we speak of a crime wave, we are talking about a kind of social awareness of crime, crime brought to public consciousness. It is something to be remarked upon at the corner grocery store, complained about in a community meeting, and denounced at the mayor's press conference. One cannot be mugged by a crime wave, but one can be scared. And one can put more police on the streets and enact new laws on the basis of fear. Crime waves may be "things of the mind," but they have real consequences.

Crime waves are prime candidates for ideology. This study analyzes a specific crime wave that occurred in New York City in late 1976. This case both illustrates and informs my analysis that the crime waves which periodically appear in the press are constructs of the mass media and contribute to an ideological conception of crime in America.¹

My use of the term ideology follows Dorothy Smith (1972). All knowledge is knowledge from some point of view, resulting from the use of procedures for knowing a part of the world. Ideological accounts arise from "procedures which people use as a means *not to know*" (1972:3, emphasis mine). Routine news gathering and editing involve "procedures not to know." The business of news is embedded in a configuration of institutions. These include a community of news organizations from which journalists derive a sense of "what's news now," and governmental agencies upon which journalists depend for their raw materials. Through their interactions and reliance on official sources, news organizations both invoke and reproduce prevailing conceptions of "serious crime."

Crimes against the Elderly

In late 1976, New York City experienced a major crime wave. The city's three daily newspapers and five local television stations reported a surge of

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violence against elderly people. The crime wave lasted approximately seven weeks, eventually receiving national television and newspaper coverage.

One consequence of this was the public definition of a new type of crime.² "Crimes against the elderly" became a typical crime with typical victims, offenders, and circumstances. Reported muggers, murderers, and rapists of the elderly were usually black or Hispanic youths with long juvenile records. They came from ghetto neighborhoods near enclaves of elderly whites who, for various reasons (usually poverty), had not fled the inner city. Using this scenario, journalists reported incident after brutal incident throughout November and December 1976.

The outcry against these crimes was immediate. The Mayor of New York City, who was preparing to run for re-election, criticized the juvenile justice system and the criminal courts. The New York City Police Department gave its Senior Citizens Robbery Unit (S.C.R.U.) manpower to extend plain-clothes operations. Camera crews from local news stations filmed S.C.R.U. officers dressed as old people and arresting muggers. Local police precincts held community meetings to advise the elderly how to protect themselves. New York State legislators introduced bills to make juvenile records available to a judge at the time of sentencing, to deny sixteen- to nineteen-year-olds juvenile status if they victimized an old person, and to mandate prison sentences for crimes of violence against the aged. These proposals were passed in both the State Senate and Assembly, but were eventually vetoed by the Governor on August 19, 1977—nine months after the crime wave had ended.

A May 1977 Harris poll suggested the crime wave also had a nation-wide effect on people's fear of crime. Moreover, it had an effect on the crime categories which the Harris organization used in its surveys; this poll included a new type of crime, crimes against the elderly, not previously present in Harris polls. Harris found that 60 percent of his respondents felt that assaults against elderly people in their home areas had been going up, and that 50 percent of those age fifty or older said they were more uneasy on the streets than they had been one year ago.³

It is doubtful that there really was a crime wave or any unusual surge of violence against elderly people. No one really knows, least of all the journalists who reported the crime wave. The police statistics from the N.Y.P.D. do not show a crime wave.⁴ In fact, for one type of crime, homicide, the police showed a 19 percent drop over the previous year's rate of elderly people murdered. This is significant because the news media began their reporting with coverage of several gruesome murders. (Twenty-eight percent of the stories reported by the three media organizations I surveyed were stories about homicides. In contrast, the police reported that homicides made up less than 1 percent of crimes against the elderly in 1976.)

For other types of crime with elderly victims police statistics showed an increase over the previous year. Crime victimization, however, rose for all age categories in 1976. In some cases, the increases were greater for elderly vic-

tims, in others less. Robbery was up 10 percent in the general population, 19 percent for the elderly. Grand larceny was up 29 percent for the general population, 25 percent for the elderly. In short, police statistics substantiate only that there was a continuing increase in victimization of the elderly (as well as of the general population), not that old people were singled out, as never before. Moreover, the homicide rate contradicts the media presentation of a crime wave.

This article, however, is not a study in the disparity between police statistics and crime news. Prior studies of crime news and crime waves (Davis, 1952; Roshier, 1973), as well as anecdotal reports (Steffens, 1931:285-91), have shown the irony of crime waves: although the public is alarmed and politicians respond to media reports of a dramatic increase in crime, such "waves" have no basis in police statistics. This study goes beyond sociological irony to examine *how and why news organizations construct crime waves*. Crime waves are taken to be waves of coverage of some topic in crime. Crime waves as *media waves* may or may not be related to something happening "on the streets" or in the police crime rates. Studying crime waves means studying processes in the mass media.

Method

I collected two kinds of data. First, two student researchers and I conducted participant observation from November 1976 to April 1977 on a New York City local television station, WAVE (a pseudonym). One student was a full-time WAVE journalist who worked as a news writer, program producer, and assignment editor. We focused on how the assignment editor assembled the daily news program by deciding what major stories would be covered for the day and assigning reporters and camera crews to these stories. In addition, we conducted interviews with journalists from WAVE and the New York *Daily News*.

Second, we kept a record of all news relating to crimes against the elderly reported from September 1976 through February 1977 in two newspapers, the New York *Daily News* and the New York *Post*, and on WAVE, which aired a one-hour newscast in the evening. This enabled us to "locate" the New York crime wave, to determine when it began and ended, and to determine the kind of coverage crimes against the elderly received before, during, and after the crime wave period.

The Crime Wave: A View from the Outside

Over the six-month period of observation the *News*, the *Post*, and WAVE presented eighty-nine stories of crimes against the elderly. Fifty-six stories or 63 percent occurred during the crime wave period. The weekly frequencies of news stories from all three media are shown in the appendix. This graph clearly indicates a wave of media reporting that began in the last week of

October and trailed off by the second week of December. It shows a sharp, swift rise in coverage for the first two weeks, then a slow, uneven decline for the remaining five weeks.

Examining the individual patterns of coverage for each news organization reveals that prior to the crime wave each organization was reporting approximately one story of crime against the elderly every other week. After the wave, coverage in all three media was sporadic, but heavier than coverage during the prewave period, indicating that the media appear to have been sensitized to the topic.

The three individual crime waves in the *News*, the *Post*, and WAVE show that the marked increase in coverage did not coincide in all three media. The *News* had a sudden increase in the third week of October; WAVE and the *Post* did not increase their coverage until the fourth week of October. Further, in this fourth week the two "latecomers" began their increase *simultaneously*. Prior to their increased coverage, the *Post* and WAVE did not parallel each other. It was only after the *News* began reporting a wave that the others developed a synchronous pattern. This trend suggests that the other media simultaneously responded to the *Daily News'* portrayal of a wave of violence against the elderly.

All three media show different crime wave profiles. WAVE steeply increased coverage to a single peak, then had an equally steep decline (seven days rising and sixteen days falling). In contrast, the *Daily News* and the *Post* show bimodal curves. In the *News* there was a swift initial rise (ten days), from which coverage subsided slowly, then it turned upward to a second peak (lower than the first), and finally declined.

The unevenness of the *Daily News's* wave was echoed in the *Post*. The *Post* participated less actively in the crime wave than did the *News* or WAVE. We might even say that the *Post* did not show a crime wave, except that the period of its heaviest coverage coincided with the crime wave period in the other media. Moreover, the *Post's* pre- and post-wave patterns were similar to [those of] the other media, and during the crime wave it showed a bimodal wave which paralleled that of the *Daily News*. Thus, the *Post's* wave seems to have been a weak reflection of the *Daily News's* curve.

How can we explain these bimodal patterns? The likely reason why the *News* and *Post* reduced their coverage after the first peaks involves a major news event coinciding with this drop: the 1976 Presidential Election of November 2. The elections seem to have crowded out crimes against the elderly from the newspapers, but not from local TV news, since stations like WAVE were not trying to compete with network coverage of the presidential race. Thus, during the slow news period after the elections, the *News* and *Post* seemed to have "rediscovered" the crime wave, which was still present in local TV news.

In other words, it seems the *News'* and the *Post's* second peak was a response to the continuing crime wave in the television media (assuming other TV stations behaved like WAVE). Just as the initial appearance of the

crime wave in the *Daily News* seems to have spurred increased coverage by the *Post* and WAVE, so the continuing coverage of the crime wave on television seems to have “re-awakened” interest in the topic by the *Daily News* and the *Post*. Thus, the behavior of each news organization during the crime wave seems to have been in response to the other media.

Seeing Themes in Crime: A View from the Inside

How do individual crimes come to be seen as a crime wave? The answer is found in the methods by which news is organized. News workers make crime waves by seeing “themes” in the news. Crime waves are little more than the continued and heavy coverage of numerous occurrences which journalists report as a single topic (for example, “crimes against the elderly”).

News themes are various: “everything Jimmy Carter did today,” “the taxi cab strike,” “Vietnam,” “the disintegrating American family,” or “labor disputes.” A news theme is a unifying concept. It presents a specific news event, or a number of such events, in terms of some broader concept. For example, the mugging of an eighty-two-year-old Bronx woman can be reported as “the latest instance of the continuing trend in crimes against the elderly.” A news theme allows journalists to cast an incident as an instance of something.

The Glasgow Media Group (1976:355) provides an interesting example of thematized news events from one British television newscast:

The week had its share of unrest. Trouble in Glasgow with striking dustmen and ambulance controllers, short time in the car industry, no Sunday Mirror or Sunday People today and a fair amount of general trouble in Fleet Street and a continuing rumble over the matter of two builders pickets jailed for conspiracy.

As the authors point out, disparate incidents are reported together under the single theme of “unrest.” Calling these things “unrest” imposes order on the events reported. Audience members are meant to see the events as unified, as instances of a single theme.

Themes give news shows and newspapers a presentational order. Items are presented in groups organized around a theme. Some themes are related to others, making it possible for groups of news stories to be placed near each other. For instance, during the crime wave against the elderly, the first ten minutes of a sixty-minute news program at WAVE was organized around interrelated themes:

1. Police apprehend three youngsters who allegedly mugged an elderly Queens couple.
2. Police and senior citizens meet at a Queens precinct to discuss fighting crimes against the elderly.
3. A feature report on the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit.
4. Police seize guns and drugs intended for warring gangs in the Bronx.

5. Two members of a youth gang are arrested for robbing someone at knife point.
6. R.O.T.C. cadet charged in the stabbing death of another cadet.
7. New York State audit finds the city police have been mishandling \$9.1 million of federal funds.
8. New York City and the police union are still working on a new contract, at the same time that some laid-off firemen and subway cops will be rehired.

First, there are small groups of stories, each containing a theme that the stories in the group share in common (the first three stories are about “crimes against the elderly” and the next three about “youth crime”). Second, groups of stories are placed next to other groups, since the different themes of each group share common features (the group of crimes against the elderly and the group of youth crimes both can be seen to be about youthful perpetrators and police responses to them).

Journalists do not create themes merely to show an audience the appearance of order. News themes are very useful in the newswork itself. In particular, editors selecting and organizing the day’s stories need themes.⁵ Every day, news editors face a glut of “raw materials” (wire service reports, press releases, police crime dispatches) out of which they must fashion relatively few news stories. This task involves a selection process which operates somewhat differently in television and newspaper newsrooms. The essentials of the process are the same: individual news items are identified and sorted according to possible themes.

The chances that any event or incident will be reported increase once it has been associated with a current theme in the news. Crime incidents are rarely reported unless news workers see them related to a past or emerging trend in criminality or law enforcement. A brief description of how the assignment editor at WAVE developed the first segment of the news show just cited illustrates this point. The assignment editor determined the top stories for the day when he noticed that several previously unrelated stories were all part of the same current newsworthy theme: crimes against the elderly. And the discovery of this theme was no coincidence: that day’s program was in the midst of the crime wave period.

The assignment editor did not begin his day knowing that crime news, and, in particular, the crimes against the elderly, would receive top billing in the evening’s news show. When he started work at 8:45 A.M. he already knew of two stories that he would most likely cover.⁶ One was a feature report on the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit fighting crimes against the elderly. This feature, which eventually ran as the third story in the evening newscast, had been taped days before; it was part of a continuing series on S.C.R.U. the station had been airing for the past few weeks. The second story was a feature report on a “food fair” that afternoon in Manhattan. The editor planned to send a reporter and camera crew to cover it, but also wanted to line up, as he put it, “some better stories” for the day.

Ten minutes after he arrived in the newsroom the assignment editor began scanning his news sources for lead stories. He sifted through reams of wire service news that had collected overnight under the wire machines; he scanned the police dispatches of the previous night's and that morning's crime incidents (about ten or twelve) received through a teletype called "the police wire." He also looked to other news media for story ideas: he read the *Daily News* and *New York Times* and he listened to an all-news radio station.

In the *Daily News* he found a small story about rehiring firemen and Transit Authority police who had been laid off. He thought this would be a good story because "this indicates things may be turning around in the city." This incident became newsworthy when the assignment editor could see it as part of a current newsworthy theme (New York's fiscal crisis).

Still, the assignment editor despaired that he had "no real news," that this was "a slow news day." However, around ten A.M. two things happened. First: when scanning the police crime dispatches, the assignment editor found that in the 113th precinct in Queens an elderly couple had been mugged, and that one perpetrator was wounded by police. As he was clipping this dispatch, he heard over the all-news radio that the 112th precinct in Queens, very close to where the mugging occurred, was holding a crime prevention meeting with senior citizens. He now knew what his lead stories for the day would be, and he knew what he had to do to line them up:

1. He would send a reporter out to the 113th precinct to find, and get on film whatever he could about the mugging (interviews with police, perhaps with some witnesses or with the victims themselves; and, if he was lucky, film of any suspects that were apprehended).
2. Then the reporter could go over to the nearby 112th precinct to film the police meeting with senior citizens.
3. These two reports would be followed by the pre-taped feature on S.C.R.U.
4. The story on rehiring firemen and Transit police, as well as a few other brief wire service reports relevant to crime which might come in during the rest of the day, would all follow the above three lead stories in some as yet undetermined order. The story on the "food fair" would be placed further back in the show.

Each story, seen independently, might not have merited attention. But seen together, all of them were made newsworthy by the perception of a common theme. The editor's "discovery" of the theme of crime against the elderly made the day's news come together. He knew how to assign a schedule to his reporter and camera crew; and he knew pretty much what the day's work was going to be.

The selection of news on the basis of themes is one component in the ideological production of crime news. It constitutes a "procedure not to know." This procedure requires that an incident be stripped of the actual content of its occurrence so that it may be relocated in a new, symbolic context:

the news theme. Because newsworthiness is based on themes, the attention devoted to an event may exceed its importance, relevance, or timeliness were these qualities determined with reference to some theory of society. In place of any such theoretical understanding of the phenomena they report, newsworkers make incidents meaningful only as *instances of themes*—themes which are generated within the news production process. Thus, something becomes a "serious type of crime" on the basis of what is going on inside newsrooms, not outside them.

From Crime Themes to Crime Waves

Crime themes are potential crime waves. A news organization cannot make a crime wave without the collaboration of other media reporting the same crime theme. Crime waves emerge out of an interaction among news organizations.

The Indefinite Overlapping Character of News Judgments

All newswriters depend on other media organizations for their sense of "what's news today." For example, the WAVE assignment editor began his day by reading the morning papers, the *Daily News* and the *New York Times*, and by listening to an all-news radio station. He later read the *New York Post* and watched when other TV stations aired their news. This editor told me that he did not mind using "anything, any source of news. I'm not proud. I'll steal any source of news."

In reality, stories were not stolen wholesale; rather, the other news media provided an important pool of ideas for story assignments. The noon and evening TV news shows rarely were used for this purpose because, by the time these shows were aired, most of the editor's news was set. The news on other stations mainly confirmed the assignment editor's news judgments, since his planned 10 P.M. news, was, with few exceptions, identical to what his competitors were broadcasting. It seems his competitors were doing just what he was doing: reading the *Times* and the *News*, listening to the all-news radio, and taking stories from the same news sources (wire services, police news dispatches, and press releases).⁷

News judgments continuously overlap in space and time. Editors of afternoon and evening media look for, and are oriented by, the news in the morning media. Editors of the morning media derive their sense of news from afternoon and evening media. Since these media may be in different regions and different cities, news judgments spread throughout an indefinite expanse of territory. The wire services and a few nationally-read newspapers, *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, increase the diffusion of news judgments through the United States.

Moreover, this overlap provides a continuity of news judgments. A specific incident or theme presented in the morning will be covered in the evening, perhaps with fresh incidents, more details, a new development or a

"local angle" on the story. The process may repeat itself the next day, reproducing the theme of the previous evening.

The Crime Wave Dynamic

When journalists notice each other reporting the same crime theme, it becomes entrenched in a community of media organizations. Reporters and editors will know that "this kind of crime is news." To use Sacks's (1972:333) term, journalists have established a "consistency rule": *every crime incident that can be seen as an instance of the theme will be seen and reported as such*. The rule is used to identify the newsworthiness of certain crimes. Reporters and editors will know, for example, that a certain incident is "another one of those crimes against the elderly" and not just an incident that can be categorized in a variety of ways.

Each use of the consistency rule reestablishes the rule. Any use of the principle invites readers or viewers of the news, including other journalists, to use the same principle. In order to recognize a crime incident as an instance of a theme, readers or viewers must use the same consistency rule which was used to produce that news.

Journalists who have not yet seen a particular crime theme learn to see it simply by watching their competition. They are able, using the consistency rule, to report the same crime theme their competition taught them to see. At this point, when a crime theme is beginning to spread through more and more media organizations, the "reality" of the theme is confirmed for the media organizations who first reported it. They now see others using the theme. Moreover, as the theme persists, news organizations already using the theme will not hesitate to report new instances, because they confirm a past news judgment that "this thing really is a type of crime happening now." Thus, each use of the theme confirms and justifies its prior uses.

If it continues long enough, the process constitutes a crime wave dynamic. All crime waves begin as simple themes but by means of this dynamic can swell into waves. Crime themes constantly appear in the media and few reach the proportions of full-scale crime waves. After all, it only takes one editor with a little imagination to introduce a new theme into the news. Why is it that few crime themes go beyond a few days of coverage by one or two news organizations?

Clearly, something more than the crime wave dynamic is necessary for a theme to grow into a wave: *There must be a continuous supply of crime incidents that can be seen as instances of a theme*. Journalists may be primed to report a wave of crime incidents, but they also must know of enough incidents to report the wave. (During the period of my research, New York City journalists had been frustrated in reporting an expected "mafia war." This theme never persisted long enough for lack of enough incidents. Thus, "mafia war" was a hungry crime theme, starved of enough incidents to make it the crime wave it could have become.) The supply of incidents is crucial in determining the growth of crime waves. What are journalists' sources of crime news?

Perpetrators of crime could be a source, but news workers rarely learn of crimes directly from offenders. The primary source is law enforcement agencies.⁸ In the newsroom of WAVE, journalists first learned of crime incidents through three sources:⁹ the "police wire," the police radio, and other news organizations (wire service reports, the all-news radio station, and the *Daily News*). The first two of these were direct links to the city police. Crime news is really police news. Thus, *the media's supply of crime incidents is a function of the crime reporting practices of law enforcement agencies*. This reliance on law enforcement agencies constitutes another component of the ideological production of crime news. News workers will not know what the police do not routinely detect or transmit to them. What journalists do know of crime is formulated for them by law enforcement agencies.

The Pool of Potential Crime Waves

The police supply news organizations with an assortment of crime incidents every day. For media organizations in towns and small cities this assortment often consists of *all* crimes known to the police in a twenty-four-hour period. But in large urban areas there are far too many crimes known to the police for any reporter to know them all. Therefore, urban journalists depend on the police to provide a "summary" of these incidents.

In New York City, the daily summary is known as the "police wire." All the city's major media have a teletype that receives crime dispatches from the N.Y.P.D.'s Office of Public Information. In one day, this police wire types out anywhere from twelve to twenty-five messages. The crime items appearing over the police wire constitute a "crime wave pool": a collection of crime incidents known to the media and having the potential of being seen as certain crime themes. Crime themes steadily supplied with instances over the police wire can become crime waves.

While journalists may invent crime themes (I suspect the police suggest and encourage many of them), a crime wave needs enough incidents on the police wire to support it. The police have power to both veto and promote the media's construction of crime waves. The collection of crime incidents the police provide to news organizations may systematically preclude certain themes from becoming waves (the veto power). Moreover, the same collection of incidents may contain enough crime items of a certain type to allow only a restricted class of crime themes to become crime waves (the enabling power).

For three ten-day periods from mid-February to the end of March 1977, a copy of all crime dispatches of the police wire was kept. Over this thirty-day period, 468 individual dispatches (averaging 15.6 per day) were received. Of these, I ignored ninety-seven (21%) which the police and journalists did not consider crime items. (They were mostly traffic advisories and non-suspicious fires.)

The remaining 371 crime dispatches reveal that the police wire provides journalists with a heavy and steady diet of "street crimes." Two-thirds (246

items or 66.3%) of the crime items consisted of: a) robberies and burglaries (85 items or 23% of all crime items), b) unspecified shootings and stabbings (156 items or 42%) and c) a sprinkling of other assaults (five items or 1 percent—mostly rapes).

The remaining one-third of the police wire consisted of a variety of incidents: thirteen bombings; nine police suspended or arrested; six demonstrations requiring police action; five hostage situations; four raids for gambling, pornography, and drugs; three people run over by subway trains; one arson, and one hit-and-run. In addition, this third contained incidents which, I assume, the police considered "strange" and consequently of interest to the media (for example, a bus stolen, the theft of a large amount of poisons, a man threatening to set himself on fire, a person crushed by an elevator, and the discovery of a disembodied head).

The first thing worth noting about the police wire is what it does *not* contain: incidents of price-fixing, consumer fraud, sub-standard housing, unhealthy food, environmental pollution, political bribery and corruption, and the like. None appear in this pool of crime incidents from which crime waves arise, yet all of these may occur enough to constitute a crime wave if the media were to have routine access to knowledge of their occurrence.

One reason why these do not appear over the police wire is that agencies other than the city police enforce the laws governing these kinds of crime. Because police manpower is devoted to street crimes, it is street crime reports that the police wire carries. If journalists are to report other kinds of crime, they must draw on other sources (usually the wire services and other media organizations) which provide instances of such crime only sporadically.

Moreover, in the police wire one is unable to find a number of very common crimes which local police *do* know about but consider "uninteresting" and, thus, not worth transmitting to the media.¹⁰ These included what journalists told me were "too common" to be news: everything from bicycle theft, liquor store stick-ups and rapes, to wife beating, child molesting and other "family matters" not resulting in homicide or hospitalization.

It is likely that a large number of the street crimes reported over the police wire were, in fact, family disputes, crimes against women, and racial conflict. But it was difficult to tell this from the information in the crime dispatches. This is particularly true of the large number of shootings and stabbings, which reporters tended to ignore.

Any descriptive features in a crime dispatch provide important clues to newswriters looking for themes in crime. From reading the police wire, I was struck by the lack of detail. Victims, if they were identified at all, and if they were persons, not businesses, were identified by sex and age. When more was told, they were described as: 1) "elderly" (for homicides and robberies), 2) policemen (for any assaults), or 3) banks (for robberies). Perpetrators (and in the police wire these were always persons, not businesses) were usually identified by sex and a specific age. When more was said, it was almost always in connection with a "youth gang" or the offender's youth.

Victim-offender relationships were rarely mentioned. It was quite difficult to identify cases where the victim and offender knew each other. Thus the police wire gives one the impression most crimes occur between strangers. Finally, the location of a crime was usually provided in terms of a specific address or intersection. But a *type* of location was mentioned only when it could be said the incident occurred in a public or semi-public place, for example, a street, a subway, a schoolyard, or an apartment hallway.

Thus, the kinds of crime items and the descriptions of them in the police wire support only special sorts of crime themes that journalists may report. Crime in public places, crimes between strangers, and crime specific to age are themes that the police wire can and does provide numerous instances of. "Crimes against the elderly" is one theme that has already blossomed into a crime wave with the help of the police wire. But other themes such as "youth gang crime," "subway crime," and "school yard crime" have an excellent chance of becoming new crime waves.

Apparently, the police who transmit crime dispatches to the media select incidents that they think will interest journalists. This criterion of selectivity has two consequences, both keeping the present image of "serious crime" from changing in the news. First, when the police perceive that the media are interested in a certain type of crime (for example, crimes against the elderly), they include instances of it in the police wire whenever they can. Thus, the police bolster emerging crime waves as long as those waves pertain to crimes the police routinely detect (that is, street crime). Second, the police decide what the media are interested in on the basis of what the media have reported before.

The police-supplied incidents that make up the media's crime wave pool all support prevailing notions of "serious crime." The crime wave pool leads the media to reproduce a common image that "real crime" is crime on the streets, crime occurring between strangers, crime which brutalizes the weak and defenseless, and crime perpetrated by vicious youths. Such crimes exist, but this imagery becomes *the only reality of crime* which people will take seriously because it is the only reality impressed upon them in the media. And it is the only reality newswriters are able to report continuously as themes in crime, and periodically, as full-scale crime waves.

The Role of Authorities

I have described the crime wave pool as if it were only composed of crime incidents. This description is only partially true. During the initial phase of crime waves, media organizations mostly report crime incidents as instances of their theme-becoming-a-wave. But as soon as a crime theme looks like it is catching on and becoming a wave, journalists have another kind of news to report: the responses of politicians, police, and other officials.

The first signs of New York's crime wave against the elderly appeared in the last week of October 1976, when the city's media began reporting incidents of crime against old people. There was widespread coverage of three incidents:

the murder of two aged sisters in their Bronx apartment, the rape-murder of an eighty-five-year-old Manhattan woman, and the release on fifty dollars bail of a youth who beat an elderly person. After this third incident, the first official response appeared: Mayor Beame called a news conference and, with the Police Commissioner at his side, he vowed to make the city safe for old people by beefing up the police's Senior Citizens Robbery Unit and by working for reforms in the criminal justice system. From this point on, "crimes against the elderly" became a favorite topic for political rhetoric and proposed reforms.

Starting from the very first week of the crime wave, the media could report both crimes against the elderly *and* stories of what authorities were saying and doing about it. The entire wave was bolstered throughout its seven-week course by coverage of official statements, possible reforms of the criminal justice system, legislative debate and action, the formation of new police programs, and community conferences on the problem. These kinds of stories made up 35 percent of the crime-wave-related news published during the period.

Officials and authorities were willing to assume from the outset that the crime wave represented something real or, at least, they were unwilling to express any doubts in public. Thus, by making public statements and taking official action on the basis of this assumption, authorities made the wave look even more real. And they guaranteed that the wave would go on for some time. As official responses to "the problem" trailed off in mid-December, so did the number of crime incidents known to the media from the police wire and other police sources. The wave finally died.

It is clear that officials with a stake in "doing something" about crime have power over crime waves. Whether or not they inspire crime waves, they can attempt to redirect the focus of coverage of a crime wave already being reported. Nowhere is this clearer than in the first four weeks of *Daily News* coverage of the wave of crimes against the elderly. News headlines during the first week emphasized "the problem," citing instance after instance. But in the next three weeks the stories (starting with the Mayor's first press conference) shifted focus to "what is being done about the problem."

Politicians and police use their news-making power to channel the coverage of social problems into a definite direction (Molotch and Lester, 1974): news of the problem becomes news of how the system is working to remedy the situation. Authorities may also use their news-making powers to stop certain crime themes from becoming crime waves. There is tentative data indicating that another crime theme, "crimes on the subways," was stopped from becoming a full-scale crime wave by the New York City Transit Authority.

In the third week of February 1977, the *Daily News*, the *New York Post*, and WAVE all suddenly increased their coverage of murders and muggings in subways. In the middle of that week the Police Chief of the Transit Authority told a *Daily News* reporter there was not crime wave and, soon thereafter, three senior Transit officials called a news conference to assert that the subways were safer than the city streets. From that point on, coverage of subway crime steadily decreased to its pre-wave level.

If an unwanted crime should arise, officials can use their newsmaking powers to deny the wave's existence or to redirect crime coverage into a "safe" direction. There is some evidence, however, that crimes against the elderly was not an "unwanted crime wave"—at least for some officials in the New York City Police Department.

The *Daily News* reporter who wrote the feature articles which turned out to be the beginning of the crime wave, told me that he received "considerable help" from the Senior Citizens Robbery Unit, whose job it was to catch muggers and murderers of the elderly (and the same unit that the Mayor expanded early in the crime wave). On October seventh, the reporter first wrote a story on two crimes with elderly victims that appeared over the police wire on the same day. This story was published October 8, two weeks before the wave. At that time, a *Daily News* editor thought it would be a good idea for the reporter to do a series of feature stories on "this kind of crime." (Such features had shown up periodically in other media organizations before.)

While he was first researching these feature stories, the reporter was in frequent contact with S.C.R.U. This police unit let him know they felt beleaguered, understaffed, and that they were fighting a battle that deserved more attention. (According to the reporter, "They proselytized a lot.") After he had written his feature stories, police from S.C.R.U. began calling him whenever they knew of a mugging or murder of an elderly person. This enabled the reporter to follow up his series with reports of specific crime incidents. Finally, it was S.C.R.U. which first told the reporter about the youth who was let out on fifty dollars bail after beating an elderly person. All major media in New York quickly picked up this story after the *News* reported it. At that point, the crime wave had begun.

I do not want to assert that from this brief history of one crime wave all waves are inspired by the police or politicians. It is not that simple. The crime wave against the elderly in New York seems to have resulted from a mixture of happenstance and police assistance. The history of this crime wave, however, does show that officials can and do use their positions to nurture fledgling crime themes first identified by journalists. Equally, they may use their position to deny the reality of crime waves.

Summary and Conclusions

Crime waves begin as crime themes that journalists perceive in the process of organizing and selecting news to be presented to a public. Because journalists depend on one another for their sense of "what's news," a crime theme can spread throughout a community of news organizations. As each news organization sees the theme presented by other organizations, they learn to use the theme and present it in their news.

But for this crime wave dynamic to occur, journalists must be able to associate a crime theme with a continuous supply of incidents that can be seen as instances of the theme. Media organizations know of crime almost

⁶ The assignment editor started with these two stories because his superior in the newsroom had suggested that they be covered.

⁷ While my example of overlapping news judgments is drawn from a local television station, the same phenomenon occurs both on newspapers and national network news (Epstein, 1973:150).

⁸ The only exception that comes to mind is the coverage of mafia news by specialized reporters on large New York publications: *The New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsday*.

⁹ There was an occasional fourth source: phone calls from the police.

¹⁰ There were some exceptions. A handful of common crimes did appear over the police wire (e.g., four rapes in a thirty-day observation period). The journalists I observed could not explain why these were there, and they ignored them.

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FEAR AND LOATHING ON REALITY TELEVISION

AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICA'S MOST WANTED AND UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

Gray Cavender & Lisa Bond-Maupin

The media serve to stimulate our interest in crime. Newspapers, for example, detail the exploits of criminals, while television news and crime drama focus on crimes. Although most crime drama is fictional representation, programs like *The F.B.I.* modify actual cases.

Recently, a new type of crime program has been presented to the public. *America's Most Wanted* (AMW) and *Unsolved Mysteries* (UM) present vignettes depicting actual crimes in which theories of crime are dramatized. These dramatizations feature actors, actual photographs or film footage, and interviews conducted with participants and the police. Viewers are urged to call the police or program representatives with information related to the crime, and police officers are on standby in the television studio to take these calls.

AMW and UM represent a hybrid programming format in that a news or public service format is superimposed on entertainment to produce a new television genre, reality programming. But the line between fact and fiction is not so distinct in the media (Williams 1989, p. 5). Even the news represents a social construction of reality in which reporters transform occurrences into news events (Molotch and Lester 1974; Tuchman 1978). On television genres tend to blend together (Gitlin 1985, p. 6). However, such blending of fact and fiction represents a defining characteristic of reality programming inasmuch as these programs are intended to draw the audience into their reality through active participation.

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