

Media and the shaping of public knowledge and attitudes towards crime & punishment

This briefing draws on research conducted by the Open University, which analyses how the media shapes public knowledge about, and attitudes towards, different types of sentencing. Focus groups and questionnaires were used to investigate the knowledge gained from crime fiction, documentary-dramas, reconstructions, soaps, chat shows, news, current affairs and documentaries. While this is a small-scale study, its findings are of interest to criminal justice practitioners and to the media and suggest some key issues worth further research.

The key findings include:

- Crime stories are common in entertainment and information TV programmes
- Most viewers know little about sentencing, are negative about sentencers and understand little about alternatives to prison
- Viewers learn a lot about crime and policing but little about punishment and sentencing. As much information is gained from dramas and soaps as from factual programmes
- Tabloid newspapers are more influential than TV in shaping punitive attitudes
- Focus groups show that people can change their views when confronted with different perspectives on sentencing, although entrenched views are hard to dislodge.

rethink

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The criminal justice system: knowledge and attitudes

Almost all respondents regarded the criminal justice system with contempt and cynicism. It stood accused of being ineffective and 'soft on crime' at a moment when crime was perceived as not only on the increase but 'spiralling out of control'. Focus group discussions indicated that there were considerable gaps in informants' knowledge and understanding of the workings of the criminal justice system. Sentencing and sentences were one of informants' greatest areas of ignorance.

There was a strong tension between the dual demands for general consistency of sentencing (based on a wish for 'objectivity' and for greater certainty about the justice of sentences), and for just sentencing to fit the particularities of individual cases. What limited information is available, whether in fictional or factual formats, appears to give an impression of over-leniency, inconsistency and injustice. Pervasive personal experience of crime whether direct or indirect (62% in the sample), and fear of crime to oneself and one's property affects what respondents take from stories in the media, the press especially.

Viewing crime

TV crime stories are extremely popular: 96% of our sample watch crime programmes every week. Those in social classes D and E, and aged 36-55 years, watch crime programmes most regularly. Detective series are most commonly watched and preferred (50%). No clear differences in expressing punitive attitudes emerged between viewers who prefer factual and those who prefer fictional crime programmes.

Regular viewers of soaps, especially 'EastEnders' with its ongoing crime stories, show a higher awareness of crime and punishment issues, and a more precise knowledge of criminal justice than regular viewers of some other fictional formats. 'Crimewatch' has a regular fan base. It is seen to inform viewers about how crimes are committed, which crimes are prevalent and what to watch out for but also it is blamed for heightening fear of crime. It is also regarded as something of an indictment of the police: as some said 'they ask us for God's sake!'

Attitudes to sentencing in television crime stories

Most viewers in the sample tend to agree that television usually portrays community sentencing (like collecting rubbish or wiping out graffiti) as 'soft' and as 'a joke punishment that doesn't work' (57%). They also tend to agree that television and radio experiences 'make you think that prison is the only solution to most serious forms of crime' (57%). A significant minority of viewers tend to agree that they are less likely to express punitive attitudes towards an offender when the programme goes into their background and explains why they ended up committing a crime (44%). Most viewers sway in their attitudes. Statements made in focus group discussions and in questionnaires are often contradictory and ambivalent views emerge when the details of specific cases are discussed. Programmes that stimulate moral ambivalence in viewers, as do soap operas quite often, tend to be more successful in challenging extremely punitive attitudes.

Punitive attitudes

Over half the respondents commonly expressed punitive attitudes. The punitive rhetoric expressed by informants is articulated in emotive terms and tends to be passionately felt rather than necessarily rationalised or thought through carefully. The profoundly affective foundations of punitive dispositions (which in some cases seem to relate to early childhood experiences of physical and/or psychological punishment) suggests that in order to tackle extreme forms of punitiveness, viewers' emotions as well as their reason need to be engaged.

Punitive attitudes are often articulated through the language and phrases of tabloid and mid-market newspapers. News headlines and sound bites appear in the kind of punitive rhetoric that characterises initial discussions in focus groups but more subtle moral positions are adopted as the complexities of particular individual cases emerge.

Alternatives to imprisonment

'Knowledge' of the ineffectiveness of prisons as a deterrent (drawn from the media; drawn from personal experience) makes people think quite positively about the idea of 'alternatives to imprisonment' for many crimes

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and certain types of offender. But there is widespread ignorance about alternative sentences. In the sample the preferred form was tagging but this had only been briefly and ‘factually’ related in news programmes. The indications are that tagging could have more impact and more support if portrayed positively in a popular drama. Not surprisingly, viewers are more likely to respond favourably to alternatives when the story or drama focuses less on the crime and the police investigation and more on encouraging sympathetic identification with offenders.

Lenient attitudes towards punishment are often attributed to ‘do-gooders’ and ‘lefties’ who are considered naïve and held in contempt for failing to recognise the important deterrent factor attached to severe punishment. Entrenched punitive attitudes are resistant to change as they are founded on beliefs about the value of punishment formed in childhood, deeply held political values and world views. Group discussions enabled informants to work through some of the contradictions in their views and opinions and to shift position. More meaningful knowledge of alternatives to imprisonment is essential if community sentencing is to gain legitimacy.

Interpreting crime stories

Personal experience of being a crime victim or knowing a victim of crime shapes the way people interpret crime media and develops attitudes towards appropriate forms of punishment. Direct and indirect experiences of crime also powerfully shape more fundamental values and beliefs about crime and punishment. These in turn also affect the ways in which media crime stories are judged. The values and belief systems that underlie attitudes to punishment are hard to dislodge and generally appear to be unaffected by information provided by media.

The interpretation of crime stories is both an individual and a social activity. Collective processes of interpretation (crime talk) take place in local social networks and are crucial in shaping views on particular crime stories in the news. The findings suggest that it is through the discussion of the moral ambiguities of crime stories that underlying values and beliefs are challenged. While many initially express deeply punitive tabloid or sound bite inspired rhetoric, they fail to sustain it. The kinds of deliberation

and debate about crime and punishment that take place in focus groups tend to engender less punitive rhetoric as the discussion proceeds.

Information gleaned from crime media is transformed into knowledge when placed into a real life or dramatic context. Crime stories are framed by wider ideological discourses prevalent in the society at a particular moment but the ability to interpret these depends on educational and cultural competence. Where viewers display large information deficits or a serious lack of knowledge about the criminal justice system they tend to fall back on pre-formed assumptions and prejudices.

Judging crime and punishment

Viewers’ judgements of media crime stories indicate significant ‘attitude sway’ depending on the story line, sometimes dramatic and sometimes minimal, between strong moral condemnation and a more understanding approach. Those with more awareness of the circumstances of specific crimes and offenders (usually as viewers of a fictional genre) were inclined to be less punitive and more positive towards alternative forms of sentencing. When they shared this awareness with non-viewers, these usually adopted more favourable views towards alternative sentences.

Viewers are more likely to respond favourably to alternatives to prison when the story or drama offers multiple perspectives and identifications. When a drama focuses on the crime and the police investigation (detective or police genres which use crime as spectacle or for the purposes of titillation), rather than on common humanity and shared experiences (as in soaps), viewers are less likely to consider alternatives to prison as satisfactory options

Viewers’ knowledge and attitudes appeared to be shaped more by fictional media (often non-crime specific genres e.g. soaps), coupled with their personal experience, rather than by factual media. Programmes like ‘Crimewatch’ and the news may have a greater short-term impact, but fictional crime, especially in soaps, is often more salient in people’s lives, memories and imaginations: ‘You know the people and the circumstances’, ‘Brings it home more’, ‘Could be your neighbours or you’.

Notes

93 viewers were interviewed in nine focus groups and given a questionnaire between January and March 2002 in Swansea, South Wales. Approximately three-quarters of the sample were from working class backgrounds, 75% were female and 25% male. There was good balance across age groups. The focus groups were self-selecting and drawn from pre-existing social and communication groups. For example, the working class male group was drawn from a local Working Men's Club; the middle class women's group was drawn from a professional social network. This ensured that the groups were already familiar with each other and used to communicating and discussing topical issues.

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RCP has supported this project but the findings presented here are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Rethinking Crime & Punishment is a three year strategic grantmaking initiative funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation which aims to raise the level of public debate about the use of prison and alternative forms of punishment.

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