3 The Media, Stereotyping and Moral Panics

The media are the providers of a great deal of the information we receive about what is happening in the world. The way this information is presented may shape and mould attitudes towards important issues. This is because the way the media present information is never entirely neutral or free of values. Rather, news stories can be full of hidden meanings and symbolism. This is particularly evident in the tabloid newspapers, such as the *Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*. Note how these newspapers use sensationalist headlines and selective reporting to create interest in particular news stories.

The effect is often to exaggerate and distort the truth. Certain groups may find that the media labels their actions in a negative way and this may create great public concern about them. Recent media treatment of asylum seekers in the UK provides an example of this point.

**Key concept**

**Stereotyping**

A stereotype is a conventional way of representing someone or something so that our view of them/is fixed and can give rise to prejudice. Outsiders often become the subject of stereotyping. The stereotype can easily be used to support an ideology. The presentation of blacks in USA films in the 1920s and 1930s saw them as servants and savages, confirming their place in American society of that period. The use of stereotyped images helps people to make sense of ambiguous situations, and a consequence can be that labelled troublemakers develop a self-image that fits.

**Moral panics**

The media’s role in stereotyping was explored in a groundbreaking study by British sociologist Stan Cohen. In 1964, at the Easter bank holiday, there was little news and as a result, some papers printed stories about trouble between mods and rockers at various seaside resorts, even though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. In his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen uses the term ‘moral panic’ to describe a situation when people fear that the major values and institutions are under attack. Scapegoats are needed to account for the problems. Young people often fit the requirements, he believes, because they are readily visible and relatively powerless to defend themselves.

The media’s role is to over-report and stylise the panics. Cohen identifies:

- **Exaggeration** – The overestimation of numbers involved and the use of emotive language.
- **Prediction** – Reporters ask leading questions about what will happen next, thus predicting trouble.
- **Symbolisation** – Associations are built up around certain labels. These labels are used to arouse readers’ interest.
Headlines and articles from the time graphically illustrated this over-reporting. When the reality of the events on the South Coast was compared with the media reports, it was found that the media had exaggerated the threat and importance. While there was certainly damage and trouble, the reporting played a major part in creating a moral panic and perhaps even increasing young people’s appearance at resorts on the next bank holiday. This latter point draws attention to the way the media can influence future behaviour through what is termed deviance amplification. This is a situation where a small initial deviation – such as minor skirmishes between rival gangs on a day when there is little other news to report – may spiral into ever-increasing significance through processes of labelling and over-reacting. Following the newspaper reports, for many young people a certain style of dress came to symbolise being a mod – and the behaviour of mods was to go to seaside resorts on bank holidays and to look for trouble with the rockers. The police and public, too, saw a style of dress signifying ‘trouble’. So anyone dressed like this was a possible troublemaker.

Questions
1. What stereotypes of asylum seekers does the media present?
2. What reasons might newspapers have for reporting some events in a sensationalist and exaggerated way?
3. What do you understand by the term ‘deviance amplification’?

The media and crime

On first consideration it might be thought that the media merely report crimes in a neutral and objective manner. This view of the relationship between crime and the media is outlined in Figure 1 below:

Crimes happen ➔ Police act to apprehend ➔ Courts punish ➔ This is news and gets reported as accurate information

However, this view is naive and misleading, for there is no consistent relationship between the rates for different kinds of crime in the criminal statistics and the relative frequency with which these are reported in the press. The media are commercial institutions trying to earn profits from attracting as many viewers, listeners or readers as possible (and even the BBC has to work in this commercial environment). The result is that some crimes that are of greater ‘human interest’ are grossly over-reported compared to others. For example, crimes of violence are over-reported by 36 times. The result is that people receive a highly distorted view of the sorts of crimes taking place, and thereby people’s fears are greatly increased.

The amount of crime may also be distorted by media coverage. Although it may often seem from reading newspaper reports that crime rates are increasing, the evidence shows that...
this is not the case. Though the rates for different kinds of crimes vary, the amount and patterns of crime remain remarkably constant over many years.

The media creates a stereotype of the ‘typical’ sort of crime, and creates public fear about it – which can lead to moral panic. People may get so worried about certain crimes as a result of the media coverage that all the forces of law and order are thrown against the stereotyped deviants, while other forms of crime are left alone.

The reporting of drug offences and football hooliganism provide examples of this process. In these two categories, there is a noticeable tendency to dramatise the seriousness and extent of the problems and to publicise ‘get tough’ statements in the press. This is not to suggest that there would be no football hooliganism without the press, but that the press does use the considerable power at its disposal to keep alive, direct and, to some extent, exaggerate the problem as it is conveyed to the public.

The way that crimes are defined and presented by the media reflects the selective attention of news reporters and news media. News values shape coverage. So, for instance, stories with drama, violence, personalities involved, or bizarre angles are selected:

- Mugger’s Victim Needed 20 Stitches
- Boy George Mugged
- Policeman Mugged

Members of the public have little, or no, direct experience or ‘expert’ knowledge of crime. The selective portrayal of crime in the mass media, therefore, plays an important part in shaping public definitions of the crime problem. This phenomenon was researched in a major study by the sociologist, Stuart Hall, in the 1970s.

Hall noted that in the early 1970s there was a sudden upsurge in the reporting of crime dubbed as ‘mugging’, in which a person or small group was attacked and robbed in the streets. The coverage in the media was intense, even though the actual number of muggings formed a small proportion of all crimes.

Hall argued that mugging, first and foremost, was a media label (no such crime existed). It was a label used to cluster stories in the press. ‘Mugging’ was first reported in a Sunday Times colour supplement, the public being given an early warning, even before it appeared, with a series of colour pictures of crimes in Harlem, New York, USA which were given the ‘mugging’ label. The mugger was characterised as working-class, black, unemployed, menacing and from the inner city, ‘out for kicks’.

The press played an active role in constructing the things that they would subsequently report (almost a self-fulfilling prophecy!). As a response to press coverage, a large number of police were drafted into Brixton, the area regarded as the centre of mugging in London. The number of young black working-class men arrested in the area for alleged crimes subsequently increased, and this in turn was used as evidence by the press that a ‘mugging crisis’ did indeed exist in inner city areas.
The idea that the media play a part in shaping public perceptions of crime and amplifying the problem in some areas is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Key issue

Do the media exaggerate and exacerbate the problems of crime?

Hall’s account emphasises the central role of the media in the creation of a moral panic. This can easily lead to a demand for more control (harsher sentences), the media accelerating this process by reporting ‘social anxiety’ and creating it in turn. Media images associate certain groups with particular crimes (eg working-class black youths are associated with mugging) and this may make it harder for members of these groups to avoid trouble with the police and lead law-abiding lives.

It has been argued though that the concern with mugging in the early 1970s was not simply a hysterical reaction; there was a real increase in mugging at that time. A more recent example of a well-publicised crime story is that of the alleged increase in rural crime. In the summer of 2000 headlines such as the following appeared in the national press:

• Villages of Crime
• Farms Under Siege
• Our Green and Not So Peaceful Land

The reaction of the media was probably exaggerated: crime rates in rural areas remain well below the national average. Nevertheless, the notion of a ‘moral panic’ lacks any criterion of proportionality and without this it is impossible to determine whether or not, or to what extent, concern about any crime problem is justified. For example, imagine that the crime rate in rural areas had increased by 10% over a five-year period – would this be sufficient to justify labelling it a ‘problem’?

It should also be questioned whether sensationalised media coverage of particular crimes necessarily leads to deviancy amplification. To be perceived as a potential mugger must be a difficult and demoralising experience for many young men growing up in inner city areas, but why should this lower rather than strengthen their commitment to staying out of trouble? People can and do fight back against negative labels that may be applied to them.

Questions

1 Which type of crimes are over-reported compared to others, and why?
2 Is sensationalist reporting of crimes by the media likely to help or hinder the police?
3 What do you understand by the term moral panic?