CRIME AND THE MEDIA

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By Sarah E.H. Moore

For Alex, Sylvie, and Fraser

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Introduction

Try this experiment: go online and check today's newspaper headlines, best-seller novel lists, video games reviews, and 'top 20' movie chart. Now go and have a look through a television guide for the coming week. The test should confirm something that you might have long had a hunch about: a very significant proportion of mass media output is devoted in some way to crime – more than is given over to romance, war, or comedy. From video games that allow us to participate in Mafia-style violence to newspaper reports about the latest terrorist atrocity, from the Wallander mysteries that fill our bedside cabinets (and television schedules) to the legal dramas that are so beloved of Hollywood – the mass media are saturated with images of crime, justice, and disorder. Together, they create a cultural landscape of crime, one that is distinctly at odds with reality, as criminologists are apt to complain. The mass media tend to portray crime as widespread, out of control, and mainly violent. None of this is true – for most of us, at least. In most economically advanced countries, the overall crime rate has been on a steady decrease since the mid-1990s and the vast majority of recorded crime (roughly three-quarters) consists of property offences. In fact, for most of us, the only experience we have of serious crime, courts, and prison is vicarious and mediated by television, films, and news reports.

This book attempts to make sense of the cultural landscape of crime and its relationship to broader social trends and public attitudes. The discussion ranges across media formats and texts – from *CSI* to *Superman*, e-mailed crime legends to detective novels, Westerns to trial movies. We consider crime news as well as fictional representations of cops, courts, and corrections. The discussion draws particularly on British cases and media, but includes numerous examples and studies from around the world, with media output from the USA, Australia, and New Zealand especially well represented. The book has three main aims. First, to provide a critical discussion of crime and the media that is informed by scholarly work from a range of disciplines, principally sociology and criminology, but also cultural studies, social psychology, film studies, and media studies. Parts I and IV of this book contain chapters that

make use of this interdisciplinary approach to critically examine the depiction of criminals and victims in the news and fictional worlds of crime, justice, and order. The book's second aim is to equip students with a better understanding of key theoretical concepts and methodological tools to undertake analysis of media texts. Parts II and III are directed towards achieving this aim. Here you'll find chapters introducing key concepts for studying crime in the media and methods for analysing a range of media texts, including news, songs, television programmes, comic-books, and films. The book's final aim is to identify recurring narrative features in contemporary crime stories. To this end, the Conclusion draws together our discussion of various media texts and formats to consider what they have in common as crime stories.

The book is also structured around a set of core concerns to which we frequently return. These include the selective media representation of violence, victimhood, and crime control; the participation of mass media depictions of crime, justice, and order in broader cultural currents; the contribution of media texts to criminological understanding; the role of multimedia platforms and social media in changing media consumption; and the problems in presuming that specific elements of the media cause us to think, act, and feel a certain way. The latter might seem like an obvious point, but a good number of studies on crime in the media imply that whatever item or format is being looked at has a monolithic influence over public opinion – and that, I think, is a great mistake. Take, for example, the popular suggestion that the TV show *CSI* is responsible for raising the US public's expectations of scientific evidence in serious trials – the so-called '*CSI* Effect'. To draw a connection between one programme and public attitudes is to imagine the various elements of our culture as operating unilaterally, and that is a view this book actively works against. In Chapter 4 I consider this argument in relation to the 'Media Effects' debate (and we return, here, to the argument about the '*CSI* Effect'). For now it's enough to say that this book generally approaches the mass media as *elements* of a culture and society, as part of a *cultural landscape*, as I put it above. Looked at from this perspective, the *overall* picture of crime, justice, and order in mass media representations becomes something of real interest – hence the fact that this book ranges across media texts and formats.

Before any of this, and by way of introduction, we turn to something really foundational: the mass media's role in transforming raw events into stories. Below we look at the construction of crime categories, first in general terms and then by considering the example of 'knife crime' – and along the way we start to think about how to go about studying crime news. We turn then to a discussion of the global media coverage of the Madeleine McCann case to

consider further the mass media's role as a story-teller. The Introduction ends with an overview of the book.

Crime categories in the news: creating new words in the 'dictionary of fear'

The US sociologist Joel Best has devoted considerable attention to how social problems are produced by claims-making groups, the media, and other social institutions. In his book *Random Violence* he makes a useful distinction between an *incident* and an *instance*: crime news often works towards transforming the former into the latter by suggesting that a single event is an example of a broader crime problem (an instance *of something*, in other words). We're all familiar with the news vernacular that marks this transition, the labelling of a given event as part of an 'epidemic', 'crime wave', 'spate', or 'outbreak'. Categorising a crime using a popular tag – 'knife crime' or 'mugging', say – is an integral part of this labelling process, and is often a stage in the production of a full-blown moral panic (see Chapter 5 for more on this). Let's leave aside the role of crime categories in producing moral panics for now, suffice it to say that the construction of such a label is a sufficient though not necessary condition for the emergence of a moral panic. Best, for one, is more interested in the use of such crime categories as a journalistic convention, that is, as a typical step in the production of crime news. He takes the cases of 'freeway shooting' and 'wilding' as examples. In the spring of 1989 a young woman was viciously attacked and gang-raped in Manhattan's Central Park. Within days news stories started to report that the incident was a case of 'wilding' – a term that the youths arrested for the attack had apparently used to describe the crime. As Best (1999: 29) comments,

> Wilding seized the media's imagination. What had been a local crime story now received coverage on all three network news broadcasts … on ABC's Nightline … and in newspapers nationwide (the *Los Angeles Times* called wilding 'a chilling new word … in the dictionary of fear') … Nevermind that no one seemed sure whether 'wilding' was actually a term from the youths' vernacular or just a product of a misunderstanding.

At their most successful, crime categories do indeed become 'chilling' new words in the 'dictionary of fear'. They sometimes emerge in the manner 'wilding' did: with one particularly newsworthy and horrific event. More often, though, they are the product of a more drawn-out process of journalistic invention. Journalists, Best observes, are always looking out for crime trends:

they have, he comments, 'a rule of thumb: the third time something happens, you have a trend' (p. 31). In practice this means that, after one or two incidents of a given crime, journalists are looking out for a third case that will warrant the creation of a category to describe a new crime wave. The case of 'freeway shooting' serves as a useful example here. Two unrelated shootings on freeways in 1987 meant that journalists were poised to pronounce a new crime problem. At the *Los Angeles Times* a reporter was even assigned to write an item on the issue in preparation for a third – and, in journalistic terms, conclusive – incident that remotely resembled the first and second. It is, of course, easy to find something if you actively go looking for it: after another vaguely similar incident occurred, newspapers started to report on the 'freeway shooting' crime wave. 'As the story received more attention', Best observes, 'the freeway shootings category began showing elasticity: not all reported incidents occurred on freeways, and not all involved shooting' (p. 32). Thus, once the crime category had caught on it came to be applied liberally – this had the double benefit of reinforcing the popularity of the label and transforming otherwise singular and un-newsworthy 'incidents' into 'instances' of a bigger problem.

Crime categories such as 'wilding' and 'freeway shooting' serve various functions: They condense a crime problem, providing a useful shorthand for headlines and stand-firsts. They also seem to suggest that a genuinely new social problem has emerged (one that even has a name!), thus ensuring public interest in the story. What should be abundantly clear from the above discussion is that the act of categorising a set of incidents as instances of a crime wave has more to do with journalistic enterprise than anything else. Let's have a look at an example of our own – and, along the way, I want to introduce you to five rules for studying crime news.

'Knife crime' in the news: or, five golden rules for studying crime news

In 2007 the British press started reporting on a new crime category – 'knife crime'. Figure 0.1 shows the number of mentions of 'knife crime' in national UK newspapers from 1998 to 2008.

We can clearly see the ascendancy of the crime category 'knife crime' in the British news here. The tempting conclusion to draw from all this is that there was an outbreak of 'knife crime' incidents during this period. Instead, as a rule:

> Never presume that a sharp increase in news coverage equates to more crime.
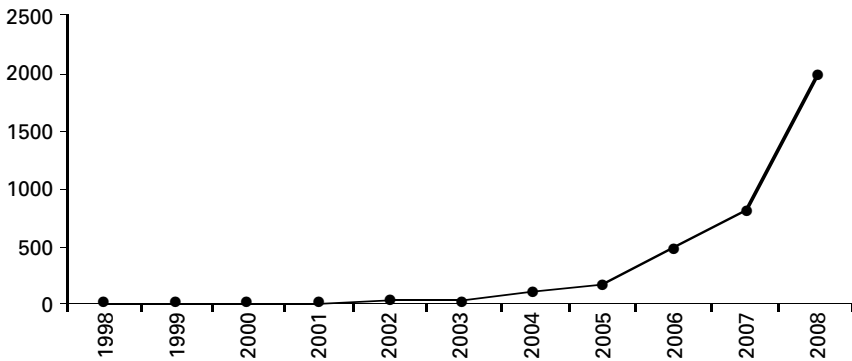
Figure 0.1 The number of mentions of 'knife crime' in UK national newspapers 1998—2008

Source: Nexis®. Figures are for the number of UK national newspaper articles that made 'major mention' of 'knife crime' 1998—2008. Reproduced by permission of Reed Elsevier (UK) Limited trading as LexisNexis.

In fact, if we dig a bit deeper, we find that the media emphasis on 'knife crime' is not commensurate with the official, statistical picture of 'knife crime'. The first thing we might notice when looking for statistical data to back up the media picture above is that 'knife crime' is not an official offence category at all (Eades *et al.* 2007: 10). This gives us our next golden rule for studying crime news:

> Ascertain whether the crime category used in media reports has an equivalence in legal or policing terms. If not, try to work out which institution created and originally promoted the category.

Hall *et al.* (2013), in their study of the mugging moral panic that beset the UK in the 1970s, trace the origin of the term 'mugging' and argue that the police were the 'primary definers' of the category – despite the fact that it had limited official application in terms of actual police-work. Best's work attests to the possibility of the media themselves being primary definers of a crime category, and this appears to be the case with the term 'knife crime'. During the period of media coverage we're looking at, the nearest concept in official Home Office terms was the offence category of 'knife-enabled crime'. It isn't as catchy as 'knife crime' and, more importantly, the Home Office only created this offence category in 2007, so there is no official statistical data on 'knife-enabled crime' prior to this (Silvestri *et al.* 2009: 10) . Yet, when we look closely at newspaper reports on 'knife crime' during this period many of them point to a sudden increase in incidents. The absence of long-term police

records on this crime undermines such suggestions. Herein lies our third rule for studying crime news:

> Any statistics cited in the news and allusions to trends or changes in incident rates need to be carefully scrutinised.

Just because the official police data is lacking, of course, doesn't mean that 'knife crime' hasn't been on the increase. Eades *et al.* (2007) do a brilliant job of reviewing the available evidence – and there's a striking lack of supporting data for a significant increase in 'knife crime' during this period. Take, for example, the statistics for deaths caused by stabbings. The Homicide Index provides us with the relevant information. Again, we're rather stymied by the disjuncture between official measures and the popular conception of 'knife crime': the closest approximation to deaths caused by 'knife crime' is the category 'homicides by sharp instrument', and these can involve screwdrivers, broken bottles, as well as knives (Eades *et al.* 2007: 18). We might nonetheless reason that a really significant increase in 'knife crime' would involve an increase in this category of homicide. Figure 0.2 is based on Eades *et al.*'s (2007: 19) assimilation of data for 1998–2006 and Home Office data for 2006–2008.

As Eades *et al.* (2007: 19) note, what's immediately striking here is that the number of 'homicides by sharp instrument' is relatively unchanging across
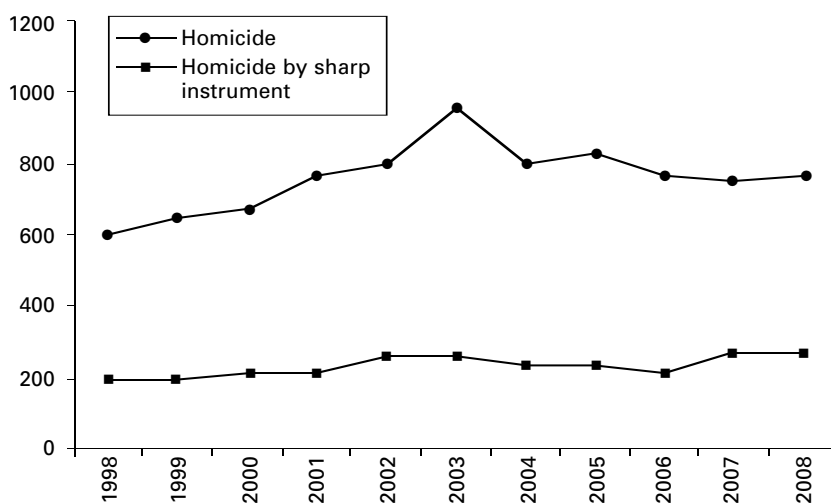
Figure 0.2 Total homicides and homicides by sharp instrument, 1998—2008
Source: Author's own graph based on Eades *et al.* (2007) and Home Office (2009).

the period. It's starting to look like the sharp increase in newspaper reporting on 'knife crime' doesn't reflect an increase in incident rates – the latter, in other words, does not adequately explain the former. Yet, and as most British readers of this book will recall, there has been real public and governmental concern about 'knife crime' during the last few years. We've even seen new, more punitive, legislation passed to punish those caught carrying knives (Eades *et al.* 2007: 8). All this should alert us to the fact that news coverage can construct a crime problem where none exists in official terms, and that the promotion of crime categories is central to this process.

As we found above in our discussion of 'freeway shootings', over time crime categories can be stretched and used to describe a whole range of incidents – and here we get our fourth rule:

> A crime category does not have a fixed meaning. We need to be alert to changes in the meaning of a category.

Take, for example, the crime category 'stalking'. In analysing the media's use of the term, Lowney and Best (1995) observe that the term (or 'typification', as they prefer) was originally used by US women's groups to refer to men following and harassing their female partners (so, again, it's not an official offence category). The term was only taken up by the US media once a female celebrity became a victim – and they co-opted the phrase to refer primarily to celebrities being followed by besotted, crazed male fans. As we'll see in Chapter 3, this is entirely in keeping with a focus on stranger-perpetrated crime in the news and a lack of media interest in acquaintance-perpetrated crime. The changing meaning of stalking is a striking example of this media bias, and it's by no means the only one. Elsewhere I've written about the shifting uses of the phrase 'date rape' in the US news (Moore 2011). Analysing US newspaper articles from the mid-1980s to the late-1990s I found that the original meaning of 'date rape' – a sexual assault by an intimate (literally, a date) – is now more generally used to refer to drug-facilitated sexual assault, a form of stranger rape. As with 'stalking', 'date rape' is a crime category that the media has co-opted from feminist groups and in both cases the original radical meaning of the term has been effaced.

All this alerts us to the importance of looking at the changing meaning and application of crime categories. It should also prompt us to think about the sort of social forces that are at work in the construction of the news. It's not just journalistic conventions that shape the creation of crime categories; more complex social factors, like norms and values, are at work too. Crime categories tend to support an overall picture of crime as random, inexplicable, and out of control: this, as we'll find at various points in this book, is a

politically expedient story to tell about the problem of crime. If crime is centrally an issue of crazed people lashing out at whoever happens to be nearest, we don't have to confront the idea that social conditions give rise to violence and that some people, simply by virtue of their social position, are more likely to be victimised. If we're really interested in studying the media we need to be alive to these sorts of biases, and so we get our last golden rule:

> Approach the news critically, and always with a sense of its role in reinforcing social norms and perpetuating convenient myths about human behaviour.

If crime problems don't arise naturally, as it were, but are selected and subject to media invention, then this should prick our curiosity about the social and cultural conditions that have allowed for the ascendancy of a particular crime category – we should think 'Why *this* category, why *this* meaning, and why has it hit headlines *now*?' News reporting on crime, rather than being subject to some sort of ahistorical, primal desire for blood, guts, and titillation, is a product of a particular historical and cultural moment. We therefore need to be sensitive to socio-cultural shifts when attempting to understand media coverage of crime.

The Madeleine McCann case: the mass media as 'institutionalised story-teller' and 'moral guardian'

Let's think a bit more deeply about the role of crime news in reinforcing social norms and values – in constructing convenient stories. We're going to focus here on the global media coverage of the kidnap of the British girl Madeleine McCann. I'd hazard a guess that this is a story all readers of this book are basically familiar with. In 2007 the McCann family were enjoying a holiday in Portugal. One evening, having put their children to bed, the McCanns decided to have dinner at a restaurant a little way from the holiday apartment. At some point during the evening, their eldest daughter Madeleine was taken from the bedroom, and hasn't been seen since. The global media response to this crime was extraordinary: rolling news was focused on the story for weeks and newspapers around the world ran headline stories day after day. A central feature of reports was the use of images. Pictures of the middle-class, professional McCanns filled the newspapers, and Madeleine's image was *everywhere* – front pages and news bulletins relied heavily on pictures of the blond-haired, blue-eyed three-year-old. As the search went on, and in response to police and media appeals that Madeleine could have been transported across national borders, people around the world began cutting

out her picture and putting it in their front windows, shop fronts, and on lamp posts. I remember, several years later, seeing a faded picture of her on a public notice board in a tiny Sicilian village.

The first, and most obvious, observation to make about the mass media treatment of this crime is that it testifies to the possibility for crime to spark a tide of mutual outrage and grief on a global scale. Benedict Anderson (1991) suggests that the emergence of national news industries in the nineteenth century allowed for the emergence of 'imagined communities' in Western European countries, and this, in turn, helped foster a sense of nationalism. Today, we might make a similar claim about global news media producing a sense of international solidarity and collective identity – and the Madeleine McCann case is a fascinating example of this. Of course, none of this explains why the case received such extensive and enduring mass media coverage – and this should be something about which we're deeply curious. After all, the crime wasn't completely novel, and Madeleine wasn't the only little girl who went missing in 2007. What made this story particularly appealing to news outlets? (What made it so newsworthy, in other words? – but more on that in Chapter 1.) Madeleine's physical appearance was clearly one important factor: her picture quickly became iconic, and this was surely factored into media organisations' decisions to give the story a high profile. Gender, age, and social class were also important: consider the fact that we rarely hear about young boys, teenagers, or those from socially deprived backgrounds being kidnapped (even though people from these social groups are *more likely* to go missing than young middle-class girls). In short, Madeleine fitted dominant social norms concerning the innocent victim – again, social factors help determine what makes the headlines.

The other thing that the media treatment of the Madeleine McCann case highlighted was the news media's eagerness to transform an event into a *story*. This was a situation that never quite evolved into a discrete and easily digestible narrative of events. For one thing, it was a story without a conclusion (*is* a story without a conclusion: the British Prime Minister announced in 2012 that the case was to be reopened). Madeleine is still missing and suspects have been in turn dismissed. This indeterminacy shines a light on the mass media's attempts to gain control and frame a situation. One thing that initially piqued mass media interest in the case was the possibility of fitting the situation into what was by then a well-established narrative of stranger-perpetrated child sex abuse. A local man with a shady past was quickly lined up as a likely suspect – but this came to nothing. After several weeks of waiting to develop the story in this direction, the worldwide press's focus turned to the issue of parental negligence, and particularly the behaviour of Madeleine's mother. The McCanns' middle-class respectability made this

narrative difficult to sustain and the couple were articulate in dealing with the accusations. The mass media turned their attention to errors made by the local police, but they too were efficient at establishing a counter-discourse based on the idea that what looked like negligence could easily be explained by the fact that the Portuguese criminal justice system simply did things differently.

This reaching around for a standard narrative on which to hang the case illuminates something fundamental about how crime news works: it centrally involves fashioning a situation into a familiar story. There is another important observation to be made here. Each of the narratives the media attempted to establish was very centrally about allocating blame. As Wardle (2008: 139) suggests, the news media not only serve as an 'institutionalised story-teller', providing us with official stories of what happens in the world; they also fulfil the role of 'moral guardian', instructing us on how to morally judge a case and, in particular, where blame lies. In doing so they draw upon well-established ideas about, for example, maternal responsibility, youthful transgression, the sources of aggression, childhood innocence, predatory males, and female sin.

Overview of the book

This book is split into four parts, each of which starts with a brief introduction to draw out themes and common strands of argument across the chapters. Part I focuses on crime in the news. We start, in Chapter 1, by examining how crime makes the news. Here we consider the meaning of the term newsworthiness and the nature of news production. There are a wide range of variables that influence the selection and production of a news story, many of them indivisible from one another; so we find that a range of factors – socio-cultural, ideological, institutional, and practical – exert an influence. As a consequence the prioritisation of certain news stories needs to be carefully examined and we should resist the idea that there's an absolutely inexorable logic to what makes it onto the front page. Nonetheless, it is clear that certain stories are very *unlikely* to make it onto the front page, or, indeed, into a newspaper at all. The selectiveness of news reports on violence is the subject of Chapters 2 and 3. Here we discuss two specific types of violent crime in news reports: terrorism and sexual violence respectively. Studying terrorism in the news gives us a really good insight into the media's role in defining what is criminal and what is acceptable (indeed, morally necessary) violence. To put it differently, the news can urge us to see certain political groups' actions as legitimate, reasonable, and necessary – or, in contrast, it can urge us to see such actions as criminal. From terrorism we move on to consider an altogether

different category of violence – sex crime. If an important aim of the chapter on terrorism is to establish that perpetrators of violence are treated variously in news reporting, a central aim of Chapter 3 is to establish the differential treatment of victims of violence. The media helps reinforce the idea that certain victims of crime are less deserving of victim-status than others – not everyone, to paraphrase Christie, is an 'ideal victim', and this is amply evident in reporting on sexual offences. The implicit suggestion here is that news reporting on crime influences people's perceptions of victims and offenders of crime. It's unlikely that there is a direct relationship, however, between these two things: instead, and as argued above, the media should be seen as participating in general cultural currents. This point of argument is of direct relevance to the material covered in Chapter 4. Here we consider, amongst other things, the '*CSI* Effect', the relationship between fear of crime and crime news consumption, and methodological difficulties in studying media effects.

Part II of the book is concerned with concepts that help describe and explain sustained media coverage of crime. The aim here is to equip students with a conceptual toolkit for studying crime in the media – and to encourage them to see beyond the concept of 'moral panic' when thinking about intensive media coverage of crime. This enduringly popular concept is the subject of Chapter 5. From there we go on to consider the cautionary tale in Chapter 6 – that is, a media story that focuses on the negligence of (generally female) victims and would-be victims in failing to guard against crime. Chapter 7 introduces students to crime legends – salacious, empirically unverified crime stories generally spread via e-mail forwards and Internet news groups. The final chapter in this section, Chapter 8, focuses on the media as a representational arena for cultural trauma, and we look at studies of the media coverage of 9/11 and the assassination of Theo van Gogh. The introduction to Part II compares the four concepts and draws out their core differences.

Part III of the book focuses on methods for analysing media content. We look at a wide range of media here, and consider how techniques of analysis can be used to study written texts, images, and audiovisual media. Chapter 9 introduces students to content analysis, both as a quantitative and qualitative technique of analysis. Chapter 10 outlines narrative analysis as an approach to analysis, and Chapter 11 focuses on discourse analysis. Each chapter in this section starts by outlining analytical techniques and working through practical examples. The second half of each chapter describes and evaluates studies that make use of the given method to analyse crime in the media, and draws attention to good practice and problems. Each chapter ends with a suggested workshop session so that students can further develop their skills of analysis.

Part IV of the book takes a focused look at fictional worlds of crime, justice, and order. We look carefully at television programmes, films, and novels here and discuss the representation of lawlessness, revenge and retribution, prison and rehabilitation, detective-work, trials and the courtroom, and police-work. This final set of chapters is based upon focused readings of texts and deeper engagement with theory. As the discussion is more nuanced, these chapters have concluding discussions rather than the bullet-point summaries that are provided for the other chapters in this book. These chapters are much more akin to the traditional coursework essays that students taking 'Crime and the Media' courses are often asked to write, and in this sense they provide models for student writing. Beyond this pedagogical value, the chapters in this part of the book seek to extend our thinking about the cultural landscape of crime and consider how specific media texts can spark our criminological imagination. In Chapter 12 we carry out a close reading of the pilot episode of the television Western *Deadwood* (2004, dir. Walter Hill) and consider what it can tell us about the nature of the shift from revenge-based justice to more official, retributive forms of justice. The underlying idea here is that certain media texts can contribute to and deepen criminological understanding. This approach is also used in Chapter 13 where we consider what the film *A Clockwork Orange* (1971 USA, 1972 UK, dir. Stanley Kubrick) tells us about the ethical problems in trying to change someone – more specifically, we're interested in the representation of prison and rehabilitation here. An alternative approach is taken in Chapters 14 and 15. Here media texts are treated as indicative of broader cultural currents and social trends – as cultural products rather than works of art, in other words. These chapters focus on detective fiction and Hollywood legal dramas respectively and compare media texts from different historical periods, thus allowing us to think about crime stories in the context of broader cultural-historical shifts. From the representation of detective-work and the courtroom we move on to consider the media depiction of police-work. Chapter 16 considers what the US documentary series *Cops* suggests about the nature of police-work and crime. We give particular attention to camera work here, and in doing so try to demonstrate that even 'real-life' depictions of crime are constructed.

The book's Conclusion considers the overall impression of crime and criminal justice in the mass media. Here we identify recurring narrative features in contemporary crime stories by ranging across the different media texts and formats discussed in the book.

Crime in the news

Introduction

This part of the book examines crime in the news. The chapters look, in turn, at where crime news comes from, terrorism in the news, sexual violence in the news, and the idea that crime news shapes our behaviour and attitudes. Before any of this, though, let's consider a few preliminary questions: How much news is about crime? Have there been any notable changes in crime news reporting over the last few decades? And are all crimes just as likely to make the front page?

Despite an intuition we might have that crime is an especially popular news topic there is actually little consensus amongst academics about the proportion of news that is given over to reporting crime. Sacco (1995: 142) notes that estimates of the proportion of US newspaper coverage focused on crime vary dramatically from 5 to 25 per cent. In an early and influential study of US crime news, Graber (1980: 26) found that *at least* 25 per cent of news reporting is focused on crime. This is all rather confusing. One thing we can be confident about, though, is that the amount of space devoted to crime in newspapers has risen over the past 25 years – in the economically developed world, at least. Take the UK as a case in point. Ditton and Duffy's (1983) study showed 6.5 per cent of British newspapers was given over to crime reporting in the early 1980s. Williams and Dickinson's (1993) subsequent study of ten British national newspapers in the late 1980s demonstrated a rise to 12.7 per cent – that's a near doubling of content. Reiner, Livingstone, and Allen's (2003) study of crime coverage in *The Times* and the *Mirror* from 1945 to 1991 reinforced the idea that there had been a growth during this period and reported that, by the early 1990s, crime coverage had come to account for 21 per cent of newspaper content. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) make a similar observation: their study is based on interviews with British journalists and editors and concludes that, since the 1970s, crime has become an ever more popular news topic. As one of their interviewees, an experienced crime reporter for a British tabloid newspaper, put it: 'You have gone from smash-and-grabs and the odd murder story into this vast field of crime that's developed in the last twenty years … you find that there is more and more crime to cover and many offices are increasing their coverage and their crime teams' (p. 144). A similar trend is evident in the USA. Robert McChesney (1999: 54), for example, has found an even more marked increase in US news television broadcasting on crime: he indicates that between 1990 and 1996 the number of crime stories on network news shows *tripled*. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), an organisation that carries out research on US

media coverage, found that during the 1990s crime was 'the biggest topic of the decade', with economic news a distant second (CMPA July/August 1997).

Of course, not all crimes make the front page. In fact, we know that certain types of crime are much more likely than others to make the news. Studies demonstrate that roughly 50 per cent of crime news focuses on violence, despite the fact that violent crime accounts for less than 10 per cent of police-recorded crime. Graber (1980), in what remains a fascinating study of four US newspapers in the mid-1970s, found that whilst murder was the focus for a massive 26 per cent of crimes reported in the *Chicago Tribune* during 1976 it only represented 0.2 per cent of crimes in the police statistics for that year. The opposite pattern is evident with other crimes. Property crime, for example, is highly unlikely to make the news, even though it accounts for roughly three-quarters of police-recorded crime (see, for example, Sherizen 1978; Ditton and Duffy 1983; Reiner *et al.* 2003). Interestingly, these patterns in reporting are evident across economically advanced countries (see 'Crime news around the world').

All this helps confirm a widely held view amongst scholars in this field: news reporting on crime runs directly counter to what we know about the 'reality' of crime from official statistics. The media analyst Jack Katz (1987: 57) noted this some two decades ago: 'the picture one obtains about crime from reading the newspapers', he commented, 'inverts the picture about crime one gets from reading police statistics'. Ray Surette (2010: 47) refers to this phenomenon as the 'law of opposites'. News outlets, he argues, suggest that crime is predominantly violent, that the usual victim is middle class, and that crime is spiralling out of control, whilst crime statistics show that violent crime is rare, victims generally belong to socially disadvantaged groups, and crime is decreasing (from a historic high in the mid-1990s, at least). All this raises a really important question, one that we attend to further in Chapter 4: Is it the media-spun image of crime or the 'reality' of crime that influences public attitudes?

Crime news around the world

Marsh (1991) looked at crime news in fifteen countries from 1965 to 1988. His aim was to ascertain whether the trends in crime reporting in the USA held across different countries, including the UK, Canada, Australia, Israel, India, and Norway. Interestingly, his results suggest a striking similarity in newspaper coverage of crime between the USA and other countries in terms of the over-emphasis of violent crime (relative to official statistics), the understating of property crime, the exaggeration of the crime rate, and a lack of information concerning the social causes of crime.

Discussion Question: How might we explain the international nature of these trends?

How does crime become news?

This chapter is concerned with how journalists find out about crime and select stories for coverage – and how the increasing importance of the Internet as a news provider might be altering things. These matters are intimately linked to the question of why so much news is devoted to crime. As we'll find below, the commercial constraints on journalists, the appeal of official sources, and news values all contribute to making crime an ideal topic for news reporting. Before any of this, and by way of introduction, we need to briefly consider the press's historical role in reporting events of public interest as well as the ownership of news outlets.

It has become commonplace to express open cynicism concerning news organisations. Many believe that newspaper articles are heavily biased and journalists are shady characters using underhand (and sometimes outright illegal) tactics. Even media commentators are quick to point out that the quality of journalism has deteriorated and the influence of big media conglomerations has increased. Despite the apocalyptic tone of such accounts, concerns about the press's integrity have been around for a long time. In the late nineteenth century, the British playwright Oscar Wilde had cause to complain about the dominance of the press – good cause, in fact: his arrest and eventual imprisonment for taking part in homosexual acts were in no small part due to the salacious newspaper reporting on the matter. What I want us to focus on here, though, is how familiar his tone and argument are in the following diatribe against the press, published in his extended essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism*:

> In old days men had the rack. Now they have the press. That is an improvement certainly. But still it is very bad, and wrong, and demoralizing. Somebody – was it Burke? – called journalism the fourth estate. That was true at the time no doubt. But at the present moment it is the only estate … We are dominated by Journalism. (Wilde 2008 [originally 1891]: 26)

Wilde refers here to the popular idea that the press represents the 'fourth estate' (or seat of power) alongside the English House of Commons and the two sections of the House of Lords. As far as Wilde is concerned the press has 'eaten up' the political elite to become the dominant power broker in our society. His argument, made well over a century ago, may well strike you as deeply familiar. It seems, then, that the press's power has long been a source of consternation and complaint.

What *is* distinctive to the current period, though, is the concentration of power within the media, so that, increasingly, media outlets are owned by a small number of conglomerations – in this sense, at least, the press has become potentially more powerful than even Wilde could have dreamed. Trevor Barr, in his excellent review of the growth of new media in Australia, gives a succinct example: 'In 1903 the twenty-one capital city newspapers were owned by seventeen independent owners; by 1960 the fourteen daily newspapers had seven owners; and by 1999, two groups owned ten of the twelve dailies in Australia' (Barr 2000: 2–3). Of course, the concentration of media ownership is a global phenomenon affecting all media, not just news organisations. The media analyst Robert McChesney (1999) estimates that most of the world's media are owned by just nine big media conglomerations, and, importantly, the trend is for ownership to concentrate still further into the hands of an even smaller number of organisations. In the news industry, the process of centralisation started over one hundred years ago, and was aided by the creation, in the mid-nineteenth century, of press agencies, organisations that produce and sell news stories en masse (see 'Press agencies – the kings of the newspaper industry?', p. 25). Early news-holding companies tended towards expansion, possibly because they were often family-ran, and the cultivation of a family trade requires, we might surmise, the development of a portfolio of related companies.

In the early twenty-first century many of the really powerful media conglomerations remain family-run (if not family-owned). The most famous of these is perhaps News Corporation, headed by the Australian-born Rupert Murdoch. The company owns a set of prestigious and widely read newspapers, including the *Wall Street Journal*, and the British newspapers the *Sun* and *The Times* – the former has the highest circulation figures in the country. News Corporation also owns the influential news channels Fox News and the British-based Sky News. To return to our more general point here, such conglomerations have, increasingly, come to dominate the news industry so that a small number of companies own a large number of titles and news channels. Take Canada's CanWest Global, owned by the Asper family. This group controls a very significant proportion of the nation's newspapers – in fact their publications account for 35 per cent of the country's newspaper circulation (Pitts 2002: 3).

Why does any of this matter? One common argument is that the news industry is dominated not just by a small number of corporations but also by a narrow range of viewpoints. Proprietorial bias is often seen in simplistic terms – as a big bad media tycoon barking out a byline down the phone! Nonetheless, there is reason for concern. Take the fact that, on buying the *Wall Street Journal*, News Corporation was forced by the previous owners to sign a clause that said the new owners wouldn't interfere with the writing of the paper's editorial, such was the concern for journalists' autonomy (Scribner and Chapman 2010: 587). In most cases, though, proprietorial influence is expressed indirectly. In a book that explores journalistic practice in Canada, Hackett *et al.* (2000: 206–210) describe the often subtle processes of control and coercion in the newsroom, how these contribute to bias, and their relationship to the concentration of media ownership. The journalists and editors they interviewed found it difficult to maintain professional integrity: they were fully aware of who fires and hires, of the hiring and promotion of journalists (particularly editors) with certain sympathies, and pointed out that finding a job on a different newspaper is increasingly difficult when a small number of companies own a large number of titles. More than this, they found that critical reporting on certain matters – specifically those related to business – was frowned upon. For large conglomerations, some of which have stakes in commercial areas outside the news industry and all of which depend upon economic buoyancy, there is a tendency to protect the status quo, and this may manifest itself as a pro-business slant in reporting.

There are other problems related to the concentration of media ownership. For the corporation, the bottom line is all that really matters – achieving greater efficiency and saving money, come what may, tends, after all, to be central to the corporate logic. Certainly, both McChesney (1999) and Davies (2009) have pointed to the increased reliance on easy-to-access (and therefore cheap) news in the USA and UK – 'soft news', as McChesney describes it. Both see this as a consequence of the institutional constraints on news outlets: the fact that newspaper circulations are falling exponentially and that corporate bosses expect ever quicker and cheaper news production. McChesney (1999) argues that in this environment crime news, and stories about shootings in particular, have become increasingly popular – the related press releases are easy to come by and the police are treated as a highly reliable, single source. Could it be that this explains the trends identified by Reiner *et al.* (2003) and Marsh (1991) that we discussed in the introduction to this part of the book? Certainly, the commercial pressures on newspapers to produce salacious stories at speed and low cost are likely to improve the chances of violent crime making it into the headlines (see 'Are newspapers dying out?').

Are newspapers dying out?

It might be difficult to imagine, but your children could well see newspapers as a thing of the past! Declining revenues from advertising have had an impact, as has the rise of the Internet, and the increased prominence of free papers. All have contributed to a secular decline in circulation numbers over the past decade, particularly marked in the USA and UK. In 2007 the week-day circulation figure for US newspapers fell to 50.7 million — its lowest recorded level since 1945 (Meyer 2009: 1). In 2010 the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published a report on the future of the news industry worldwide and found a marked decline in paid-for newspaper titles as well as circulation numbers across member countries (OECD 2010: 22—26). In France, for example, from 1945 to 2004 national titles decreased from 26 to 10. Looking just at the last decade they found that the UK had seen an extraordinary 19 per cent decline in paid-for circulation numbers between 2002 and 2008. Australia's two top daily newspapers — the *Herald Sun* and *Daily Telegraph* — experienced declines in circulation of 2.8 per cent and 6.3 per cent respectively between 2001 and 2008. In the USA, decreases in circulation have been much more marked, with the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Washington Post* experiencing a 22 per cent and 18 per cent decline respectively between 2001 and 2008. Nonetheless, the picture wasn't entirely bleak: certain publications have increased their circulation, including *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal.* Newspapers that foreground news about celebrities and serve a specialist readership are still going strong — this alone tells us an awful lot about the future of the news industry.

Discussion Question: How might the decline in newspaper circulation affect the reporting of crime news?

With all this doom and gloom about the future and value of the press, we are often apt to forget about the *potential* of news organisations, and specifically their role in safeguarding important freedoms and liberties. It's worth reminding ourselves that free and public-minded news groups are absolutely key to maintaining democracy. As Habermas (1991) notes, in his analysis of the rise of a public sphere in European societies, the press has played a key role in holding the political elite to account, urging greater transparency, and informing the public about what goes on within public courts and sessions of Parliament. Though we might take it for granted, the press's ability to inform us in this manner often involved very hard-fought battles. In his fascinating study of the freedom of the British press, Ben Wilson (2010) draws attention to two really important historical developments. First, in 1788, the

requirement that writers have their work officially vetted before publication was removed. Secondly, from 1787, news journalists were permitted to sit in on and report sessions in the House of Commons. Achieving the latter, as Foster points out, involved a very significant political struggle and contravening the former meant risking a prison sentence. How incredible it sounds, to modern ears, that the political elite could vet articles ahead of publication and carry on all debates in secret! Without legal protections journalists wouldn't be able to tell us about decisions made in Senate or Parliament concerning detention, sentencing, policies about punishment, and new criminal laws. In fact, the relationship between journalists and government institutions is symbiotic. Journalists hold the government to account, but they also rely heavily upon state agencies for information – this is particularly true of crime reporting. We examine this reliance in the next section.

Sourcing crime news

How do journalists find out about crime? Just as very few crimes are independently detected by the police, it is relatively – and increasingly – rare for news journalists to personally uncover a story. In fact there is evidence that newspaper journalists rarely write the news themselves; instead, much of it is cobbled together from other sources – but more on this below. For now let's just say that journalists rely heavily on press releases, wire copy (that is, articles from press agencies), inside tips from officials (particularly the police), and information they pick up from lay people (witnesses, family members, etc.). Television news is particularly unlikely to involve journalistic enterprise. Journalists who work in this sector are much less likely than newspaper reporters to carry out routine information-finding missions of key public buildings and officials – 'newsbeats' or simply 'beats', as they are referred to in the trade (Weaver and Wilhoit 1991: 69). Edward Jay Epstein (2000), in his classic book on network television news, *News from Nowhere*, explores how television news organisations source and produce the news, and concludes that they receive an awful lot of their leads from newspapers.

Newspapers tend still to use some form of the 'beat system', whereby certain journalists are given responsibility for picking up and covering news from the courthouse, parliament, police stations, mayor's office, etc. These are what Gans (1979) calls 'locational beats'. Some newsrooms operate a different type of beat system where journalists are responsible for specific topics (crime, celebrities, etc.). Lee Becker *et al.* (2000) studied the organisation of the newsroom for three newspapers distributed in the USA's South-East in order to assess the use of the beat system. Each of the newspapers had a range of locational beats organised to provide five main points of coverage: courts, crime,

education, government, and hospitals. Interestingly, 'an editor … termed the first four of these the basic beats of American newspapers' (p. 4) – and, we might add, crime and criminal justice account for two of these. This helps explain the popularity of crime as a news topic: it may be that crime dominates the news simply because journalists routinely scout criminal justice agencies for stories.

Some criminal justice sources are more useful and approachable than others. As the British journalist Martin Brunt puts it, 'success as a crime reporter still comes down to one thing, personal contacts', and he means, predominantly, *police* contacts (Brunt 2007: 38). The police are often particularly keen to provide press releases, statements, and inside information, and they are frequently journalists' main source of information for a criminal case. Over time the police have developed strategies and procedures for dealing with media interest: they are, for example, well used to holding press conferences and have staff whose specific job is to manage media relations. Steven Chermak has written widely on the relationship between the police and journalists in the USA. His research demonstrates that the police are by far the most frequently cited sources in crime stories in US newspapers (Chermak 1995; Chermak 1997). This, he reasons, is due to the symbiotic relationship between the media and police – the former need the latter for information, but, as the most visible representative of the criminal justice system, the police need to maintain a good standing in the public consciousness, and they do that via news outlets (Chermak and Weiss 2005: 502). Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the police are very media friendly, even providing dedicated working spaces for journalists and training new recruits in media communication. Mawby (2010) draws similar conclusions about the relationship between the police and news organisations in the UK, noting the increase in resources deployed by the former to manage their media image; this, combined with the financial difficulties faced by many news organisations and the drive to cut specialist reporters (including crime reporters) may lead, Mawby suggests, to an increasingly unequal relationship that benefits the police (see 'Journalists and the police – an over-friendly relationship?').

The closeness of the relationship between news organisations and the police has, quite understandably, provoked criticism. Hall *et al.* (2013: 71), in their famous study of the 1970s mugging moral panics in Britain, argue that, along with the Home Office and courts, the police control the media portrayal of crime – official crime control institutions are inevitably, they argue, the 'primary definers' of crime, setting up the parameters for subsequent media debate. Not everyone agrees with this view.

Schlesinger and Tumber (1994), for example, in a highly influential account of the media's treatment of crime, argue that the process whereby a