

Mass Media, True Crime Narratives, and the Shaping of Violent Social Cognition

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Abstract. With the development of mass media, both how crime information is spread and what effects it has on society have gradually become subjects of communication research. In terms of the development of mass media, this paper examines how narratives about violent crime have been constructed in different periods and explores possible correlations among media reports, communication structures and crime imitation. The first part of this paper will be to review the development of media, and in conjunction with mass society theory, propaganda theory and social responsibility theory, examine the role that media play in spreading violent information. Next, it will explore how the development of the Internet and short-video platforms has altered the mode of spread for true crime culture, such as changes in algorithm recommendations, decentralization of communication and community participatory culture. Taking the culture of the True Crime Community (TCC) as an example, it studies how true crime stories are spread in the online world and what kind of imitation they may lead to. Therefore, the study concludes that mass media are used to influence people's ideas about crime, and at present, balancing the spread of information with the ethical responsibilities of the media in the digital age is still a problem that needs to be solved.

Keywords: Mass Media, True Crime, Violent Cognition, Media Influence, Copycat Crime.

1. Introduction

This paper will focus on the development of mass media and its effect on social criminal behaviour and cognition. In the 1830s, with the appearance of the "penny press", the *New York Sun* was one such symbol of modern mass media. Since then, news communication has gradually spread to more people in society and met the information demands of ordinary people. Now, mass media have gradually begun to carry and spread information and shape the public's view of society.

With the arrival of the 21st century and the development of Internet technology and various new forms of public communication, modern media have shown a stronger initiative in agenda-setting and now play an indispensable role in guiding people's information consumption and expression. At the same time, with the rapid development of both self-media and commercial media, different forms of media cover crime news in various ways, and during spread, there may be an increase in exaggeration and distortion. It is also near the same time as the event, so there is no opportunity to address the spread of incorrect information promptly. Violent films, news reports and true crime stories have been widely discussed in the mass media.

This study can help people better understand the influence of the media environment on people's violent behaviour and socialisation. In the spread of violent information by mass media, there is a risk of affecting people's understanding of crime and, in some cases, giving rise to imitative behaviour. Therefore, this paper will focus on examining how changes in media forms affect people's perceptions of crime and communication, whether the understanding of criminal behaviour and social cognition has changed with the development of the media, and what reasons drive such changes.

According to the above circumstances, this paper will use the method of literature review to study the development of media and crime spread and social effects. The advantage of this way is that it can investigate the characteristics of the spread of crime information and people's response under various media environments in depth to uncover how media and crime cognition are connected. Finally, this study aims to clarify how changes in the form of media affect the spread of crime and

people's views on crime. Based on the above, this paper will briefly introduce related theories, empirical studies and cases to explore how media communication affects the behaviour of society.

2. Dissemination Mechanism of Mass Media and Crime Imitation

Generally speaking, the media refer to the media systems operated by professional communicators and institutions with the goal of spreading information to the public at large. The main types of mass media are books, newspapers, magazines, radio and television, the Internet, etc. Therefore, mass communication refers to the way that sources of information use a medium to communicate with a large number of dispersed people and spread this information.

Crime is a social phenomenon, so it does not happen in a vacuum; some kinds of criminal behaviour are learned and imitated. Crime imitation generally occurs in two ways: First, it is the learning of criminal motives, internal reasons, and values; Second, it is the imitation of specific criminal methods and means. When the media reports on crimes in detail, the related information will spread rapidly among the public and may inadvertently teach people how to commit such crimes. Therefore, the mass media is not only an important way to spread crime information but also, to some extent, participates in building the social dissemination path of crime and crime imitation.

3. Mass Media and the Spread of Violent Crime

Mass society theory believes that the media in modern society have damaged the old social order. Jealousy, dissatisfaction and fear of "the masses" are present in the theoretical discussion. Due to repeated exposure to attractive material such as violence, terror and pornography in the media, the public is easily led by the "temptation" of the media. This theory holds that the public lacks individuality, is gradually separated from the moral and ethical values provided by work and religion, is politically indifferent, and prefers lowbrow culture.

In the 1930s, propaganda theory was developed and also focuses on how the media affect large groups of people. Based on the behavioural "stimulus-response" model, a so-called "magic bullet theory" has arisen; it is believed that media messages can directly and quickly motivate the public to form associations between certain concepts and strong emotions. With the development of visual media, such as television and movies, more people have been exposed to this. Violence was initially spread by word-of-mouth and gradually began to appear in all sorts of media. It is relatively low that the public will directly experience crime, so now the main way they learn about crime risk is through indirect channels. The Media have moved closer to the people and thus to violence. Vivid scenes in films and television shows can make people think alike about life; this is referred to as the "priming effect" in communication studies, and when people encounter similar situations in real life to what they have seen in the media, they may be more likely to behave in the same way. Therefore, the media may indirectly promote violent behaviour among young people through imitation.

However, a few extreme pieces of information alone are not enough to have widespread and profound social effects. Propaganda is usually disseminated over a long time and is continuous.

Under the Hutchins Commission's system of social responsibility theory, most of the main US media gradually obtained institutional legitimacy. Previously, the two opposed views of radical libertarian theory and the theory of expert control held that the public was rational and intelligent, so little media regulation was needed; or, according to the latter, the government agency or committee in charge of the media should strictly supervise them. Social responsibility theory is the continuation and improvement of radical libertarianism, so freedom of the press should be exercised responsibly.

The foundation of the theory of social responsibility is that people are not always fully rational; therefore, the media has the obligation to set up professional standards in order to fulfill its social responsibility. Media should not spread material that may incite violence or social disorder and do not target minorities. It is relatively advanced in that it also focuses on the responsibilities of media organizations and audiences.

Social responsibility theory often does not consider the profit motive and competition of the industry in practice and has been too optimistic about media accountability and individual self-discipline. In light of changes in the norms of social responsibility and the rise of television as the primary source of news in the United States after the 1960s, the three major American television networks (NBC, CBS and ABC) gradually formed a national news narrative system. Violent crime events were repeatedly presented and shown live to the whole country. The cases were first handled by the local police but later listed in the nationwide list of terror cases [1].

At this time, reports on serial crimes gradually took the form of "continuous updates" in news. At the same time, criminologists and law enforcement had also begun using the idea of a "serial killer" in the 1970s. Media quickly used the term to briefly describe all the cases. Media narratives have also started to focus on the psychological profile, reasons for crime, and personality defects of criminals, thus forming a new type of news narrative [2].

CNN was established in 1980 and began the period of 24-hour news. *America's Most Wanted* began to air, and at the same time, crime-related magazines and true crime books such as *True Detective* and *People* were released. Together, these media have made real crimes into popular culture and presented them in a lively way.

According to research, homicide is less than 1 per cent of all crime in many places, yet it often receives significant attention in the media [1]. For instance, in the *Chicago Tribune*, homicide reports made up 26 per cent of all crime news; in New Orleans newspapers, it was about 12 per cent, and on television news, as high as 50 per cent. According to a study of the 26 US city newspapers, homicide reporting accounts for around 30% of all crime coverage [2]. In this media environment, the 1970s to the early 1980s (around 1970-1985) has been referred to as the "golden age of serial killers" by some scholars.

4. Dissemination of Violent Information in the New Media Environment

Media Forms have changed a lot in the 21st century. New media has changed the old forms of spread by the traditional media. As a result, the structure is now many-to-many, and there have been numerous channels for the communication of sources and recipients of information. The New Media Environment has changed the way people consume information; for example, short-video platforms and algorithms are now very popular.

Public encounters violent content. Many media researchers believe that this has reduced the emotional response of people to violent content slightly.

On the platform TikTok, people's consumption is frequent and changes quickly. Violent information is no longer concentrated in the traditional way of news; instead, it is interspersed with entertainment, lifestyle and humour. Desensitisation has gradually become one of the reasons. Many violent images and stories may dampen emotions, so the violent incidents will be perceived as disjointed information instead of whole stories. In the past, when people were watching TV shows and movies, the main plot lines would be developed gradually; Now, with short videos, audiences have become accustomed to fast-paced consumption and may lose interest quickly.

Many violent and criminal short videos are presented for entertainment, with suspense narration and "true-crime explanations", and often have background music. These ways are derived from the narrative techniques of films and have begun to look like entertainment programs. When violence is presented in an entertaining way, people are likely to watch it as a story and thus feel no strong emotions or moral repulsion[3].

Participation in the culture of social media has brought the general public closer to violent events. The public are also producers of content. Through comments, remixes and memes, etc., people can join particular online communities easily. Due to the culture, serious incidents are turned into online memes or secondary videos and thus lose their original meaning. Given the above, a typical online subculture centered on true crime, the True Crime Community (TCC), was formed and developed.

5. TCC Culture Formed by Media Development

Generally speaking, TCC refers to online interest communities for true crime stories, and the content is based on documentaries, podcasts, short videos, forum discussions, etc. This culture is based on the tradition of true crime stories, but it has developed into a cross-platform community culture in the Internet era.

According to media studies, young people are highly active consumers of algorithms, and juvenile crime in China has shown a downward trend in recent years. According to the data released by the Supreme People's Court, in 2021-2023, there were 73,178 juvenile crime cases, and juvenile offenders made up 2-2.5% of all criminal convictions during that time. Due to this reason, young people may join true crime groups through different paths [4].

First, there is interest reinforcement by algorithmic recommendation. Short-video platforms are constantly feeding users more and more of the same kind of content based on viewing behaviour. For instance, after a user watches a true crime show, they will be shown other similar works that interest them more. Suspenseful stories have always interested young people. As a type of media, true crime stories are often given a typical suspense structure similar to detective novels and suspense films and are therefore very popular among young people.

Theoretically, sensation seekers will seek stimuli that can increase the amount of catecholamines in the brain. Violent films cause a rush of adrenaline and other hormones. A small amount of monoamine oxidase (MAO) is responsible for breaking down central catecholamines and is related to sensation-seeking traits. Gonadal hormones may oppose the effect of MAO; high testosterone is found in some sensation seekers. Low MAO levels increase the amount of catecholamines and may lead to disinhibition or hypomania. Research has shown that the application of online media can promote aggression in all cultures, and regardless of social norms, audiences participate in discussions and content dissemination to form communities and spread information [5].

Research on TCC and copycat crime does not generally claim that TCC directly causes crime. However, real crime cases and the idolisation of perpetrators, as well as online community discussions, can also motivate some people to act in this way. Freedman (1984), Comstock & Strasburger (1990, 1993), Wood (1991), Wiegman and Kuttschreuter (1992), Viemero and Paajanen (1992) and Haejung and Comstock (1994) have shown that exposure to violent programmes/films is positively correlated with aggression in both laboratory experiments and in actual life in recent years.[5]

Media tend to focus on the offenders more than the victims. Selective display will grab the attention of young people and lead them to imitate the area of TCC. In 2003, Huesmann was later shown to have found that children aged 6-10 exposed to more TV violence had a higher risk of being arrested at age 15. Exposure to violent X-rated material increased the likelihood of subsequent sexual aggression, but not non-violent X-rated material; thus, it is likely that violence is the cause of the risk, not pornography [6].

The 1999 Columbine High School massacre is a typical case to study in the field of modern copycat crime culture. Shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold quickly became the subject of international media attention. In the early days of the Internet, forums and websites were a place for users to gather and share data from cases, analyze the psychology of perpetrators, and engage in discussions or even admiration; this was later known as "Columbine fandom" or "Columbiners", and subsequently, shooters such as Seung-Hui Cho in the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting referenced Columbine and placed themselves in a similar story[7,8].

Adam Lanza's computer contained a large amount of historical mass shooting data from the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and it was discovered that such materials are available to the public online.

One problem in media studies is the "copycat effect", and many people are inspired to commit crimes after repeatedly seeing descriptions of criminals and details about their lives in the news; this may be seen as normal behaviour or be emotionally gratifying. However, most studies have found that this effect is mainly concentrated in a small number of people with psychological problems or

violent tendencies. Most people do not directly commit crimes because of true crime. However, given the wide dissemination of short videos and online information nowadays, people should not ignore them either. The research results are often not well understood or are misunderstood by the public, policymakers and some other scholars. Media violence reporting is blamed as the single cause of tragedies, and some do not believe there is any behavioural impact; both are unsupported by evidence. Recent meta-analyses of violent video games have found that some methods are not appropriate; that is to say, they lack good outcome indicators and fail to address the effects of prior media violence [9]. Due to the limitations in methodology, exposure to violent media is still considered one of the reasons for aggression in young people [10].

Therefore, many media have reduced the exposure of the names and faces of the accused in their reports on crimes, focusing more on the victims and reducing procedural details. Therefore, the "no notoriety" rule is to restrict the publicity of the people involved in crimes.

6. Conclusion

In short, most studies have concluded that the media is used to spread information about crime and violent events to the public. Since the start of television in the 20th century, crime reports have been shown in a dramatic manner and updated continuously; therefore, serial killers and other kinds of violent crimes have gradually received more attention from the public.

With the development of digital media, other forms of media have also been changed and thus affected how violence is spread. With the change in the form of communication, short-video platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems and participatory social media culture have moved away from the previous one-way model of communication and promoted multi-directional interaction. Therefore, the violent scenes are often shown haphazardly and for amusement, thus reducing people's sense of emotion. At the same time, online communities of true crime have also appeared and turned the stories of true crime into a form of cultural consumption.

Although there is no direct cause-and-effect relationship between true crime content and copycat crimes, under certain media conditions, repeated exposure to crime news, offender symbols, etc., on the Internet may provide behaviour models or ideas for imitators. Therefore, balancing the spread of information, the public's right to know and the ethical responsibilities of media in the context of digital media and cultural communication is still a problem that needs to be addressed in communication and media studies.

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