



Coverage of Crime by the Media – A Sociological Perspective

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I. INTRODUCTION

Media plays a very significant role in how any crime is perceived and speculations around the same are a consequence of it is reported. Much as it has a very beneficial role to play, media can sometimes construct our ideas about crime, criminals and even entire events related to the same, in a selective manner. Our skewed understanding of crime could have a lot more to do with the coverage of it, rather than the actual sequence or occurrence of the encounter or happening. This paper would locate the dynamics of the press and electronic media in their tone and tenor of coverage of crime and discuss whether news reportage indulges in speculation, vitiates intergroup conflicts, and sometimes punishes criminals on its own. What it problematizes is whether the media indulges in its own trial of alleged culprits or does it highlight gender, caste, ethnicity, and other socially sensitive issues in a responsible coverage. Is crime reportage, especially of the front page kinds, more concerned with the 'immediacy' factor besides giving a dramatic touch to happenings? It has been proven that the salience of an event, issue, or personality becomes a function of articulation. That is, any occurrence is made visible only after the Press or any other media take it up. The fact that the newsworthiness of an event was decided according to as many subjective factors as the objective is an important area of concern. It has been observed that the suppression or projection of news, the misinformation or vacuum of information, or even a surfeit of information becomes the case of people in the news working almost as partners in progress/decline along with those "making news" (Tuchman, 1978). One of the observations that my study on the Indian Press made was that; while it would suit the interest of politicians, officials, other violent propagators, even celebrities, etc to be making news by being in it, it would also serve the interests of all those who construct/present the news i.e. the editors correspondents, photographers, production and distribution managers etc. (Tandon, 1998).

II. SELECTIVE NARRATIVES

Notwithstanding the number of challenges that work against those who have a nose for news, the thrill of the by-line, constraints of time, lack of professionalism and general insensitivity to certain issues may blur the line between mistake and mischief in reportage. So what matters is the decision of the journalists; their decisions may vary in relation to the theme, ideas and ideology joined together into a framework of relationships that get reflected in a language that goes on to construct the social reality. Perhaps the greatest illusion of news is the idea that news is the business of purveying information only but to be palatable as well as marketable, information is quite often presented in a narrative which suits the interests of some people, throwing ethics, empathy, and even professional proprieties to the winds (Oliver and Gregory, 2020). The basic home truth of news media is that it is not just information that is shared but it has to be in the form of a story that could become voyeuristic more than factual if handled by immature or vicious minds. Given the cutthroat competition in the breaking news syndrome, storytelling becomes the focus than the actual occurrence of an event.

III. STEREOTYPES

Constructed stereotypes of communities, gender, and racial identities reinforce speculative and sensationalized representations of crime. Another issue of concern has pointed towards the kind of resistance that journalists put up against stereotyping. News, as we all know, carries the stories and images of our day and the kind of language in which it is presented reflects and expresses certain values. The way in which newspapers can shape the ideas and beliefs of their readers is in no way helped by the fact that a media representation of any reality is simply one version of the truth. Where every crime reporter or correspondent starts believing in him or herself being the Sherlock Holmes of any event being reported, value-neutrality or objectivity takes a back seat and catchy, salacious headings become the overpowering denominator. One needs to problematize the ideas as well as images that are perpetuated by today's newspapers and television channels. The latter is an important and dynamic source of communication.

Not only do they have an impact on a large scale, the effectiveness of visual images on some vulnerable viewers, especially youngsters is irreversible. Journalists need to keep in mind how the readers or viewers consume and then process the information and it is the responsibility of those who construct and convey the same. Often, to establish authenticity, crime reporters find authorities or written reports and documents to which they can attribute 'facts'. The attribution of a statement may be used as a

security cover which allows the reporter or TV journalist to get away with opinionated, sometimes salacious statements. This is usually done at the stage when the investigation is not complete or worse has just begun. In the process, facts are very often lost.

IV. BREAKING NEWS

Ethics in journalism clearly outline that unjustified rumours and surmises should not be set forth as facts. Ironically, the trend towards establishing rather emotional and brazenly vulgar effects seems to have become the forte of many crime reporters. When information travels through various sources, the possibility of speculation rises and these distortions can easily make an innocent person or group look guilty or on the other hand a criminal look almost like a hero. My contention is that constructed representations of crime further reinforce the stereotypes people hold about others. The complicated relationship between media images, social control mechanisms and public opinion has to be taken into account before terrorizing the readers or viewers first thing in the morning by front-paging or telecasting graphic details of grisly acts. The idea is not to take a stance on the guilt or innocence in crimes but the shared social constructions generated as a consequence of the work culture of newsrooms and organizations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). One does not intend to take any position on the publication or telecasting of news about crime, per se. It is the manner or narrative and frequency as well as spacing of such events which are of concern. Speculations in crime reportage have become such a forte that for many of those who are in the field of journalism, the only thing that matters is the publishing of a first report, or be the channel that is adept at 'breaking news', in as sensational a manner as is possible.

V. BIAS AND FABRICATIONS

"Jimmy is eight years old and a third-generation heroin addict, a precocious little boy with sandy hair velvety brown eyes, and needle marks freckling the baby-smooth skin of his thin brown arms...he has been an addict since the age of 5". In this article, there is a vivid account in which the conclusion is that the needle slides into the boy's soft skin like a straw pushed into the centre of a freshly baked cake. The story not only grabbed a lot of attention but the writer was also awarded the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her authentic and poignant portrayal of the menace of drug abuse amongst such young and vulnerable people (Cooke, 1980). However, after some time, an investigation revealed that the story had been concocted, and according to Cooke's resignation letter, "Jimmy's world was, in essence, a fabrication. I never encountered or interviewed an 8-year-old heroin addict. The 28 September 1980 article in the Washington Post was a serious misrepresentation, which I deeply regret". In news coverage, fabrications can be such an attraction that some in the profession of making news do fall prey to the same. Exaggerating or completely falsifying becomes an overarching driving force in the world of cut throat competition to attract readership, viewership or plain followers, as is currently the case in social media (Goldstein, 1985).

As has been mentioned by Malavika Kaul in her article 'Gender Bias in Crime Reporting' sexual assault, rape and molestation are treated as 'hot' stories and there is an appalling amount of indifference with which they are treated and presented (Ghosh, 2001). The main concern of the editor or chief reporter is not so much about the victim getting justice or booking the culprits. Instead, the focus is on giving insignificant yet graphic details. She also talks about class bias that works against some victims as many poor women who are killed either by their husbands or by others belonging to higher castes are invisibilized either due to the prevailing power play or due to the stigma attached to rape. It has been seen that the police do not even crosscheck the facts and they could sometimes even rationalize the killing by buying the fake story of the husband which is that the woman had a paramour or was trying to run away with her love interest. In some such cases, it was seen that the woman had in fact objected to her husband assaulting their daughter and the protest had led to that woman herself being killed. Crime reportage has sometimes shown rape victims as having been women of 'loose' character. Some have even gone on to show the victim as being a nymphomaniac. All this speculation over the sex dimension becomes the overarching dimension of coverage of crimes against women and 'no paper is ever apologetic. The press accuses police, politicians, and bureaucrats of insensitivity but we are usually the guilty ones. Crime reportage can often be cruel and insensitive. This is the biggest crime of our times' (Ghosh, 2001).

There is also gender bias which has been seen in the coverage of crimes related to raids on prostitutes where women are generally photographed and paraded or even sometimes shown as being huddled in police stations or into police vans. On the other hand, men who are found in the company of these prostitutes or those who are the providers or agents, popularly known as pimps, are rarely mentioned or shown. Another gender bias that surfaces are when a man and a woman are found dead in a car or in an apartment, it is generally speculated that the boy must have killed the girl before killing himself and suspicion is generally floated around that the girl may have spawned off the sexual advances of the boy (Ghosh, 2001). This not only tarnishes the image of the man or woman who is being written about but the entire family comes within the radar of suspicion, doubt as well as gossip mongering amongst their networks involving neighbourhoods, extended family members plus jobs or educational peers. One needs to have a sensitized approach to handling coverage of crime where even though it is time-bound and happens to be about the marketability of news item or paper one should not indulge in what is known as a media trial.

VI. SPECTACLE

Hunt has demonstrated how media-generated spectacles lead to manipulation of facts; but the newspapers and channels, become sites through which people negotiate complex experiences. In the famous O.J Simpson case, the privileges of the celebrity defendant and the menace of minority criminal came to dominate accounts of the trial, not because of their aesthetic value or "truth", but because they best served the interests of the prevailing status quo (Hunt, 1999). Coward had also argued in his work about the way in which newspaper images portray Native Americans (commonly referred to as "Indians") as inferior, besides being different. They not only perpetuate stereotypical images of Indians but also as the "other" standing in the way of economic growth and national expansion (Coward, 1999). Chambliss showed that the constant panic over crime has been manufactured by the media, law enforcement bureaucracies, and the private prison industry. It shows how the definition of criminal behaviour systematically singles out the inner-city African Americans (Chambliss, 2018).

As was said in a famous speech delivered by DS Broder who won the highly acclaimed Pulitzer Prize, in Washington in 1973, ‘the newspaper that drops on your doorstep is a partial, hasty, incomplete inevitably somewhat flawed and inaccurate rendering of the things we have heard about in the past 24 hours, distorted, despite her best efforts to eliminate gross bias, by the very process of compression that makes it possible for you to lift it from the doorstep and read it in about an hour. If we labelled the product accurately, then we could immediately add: but it is the best we could do under the circumstances and we will be back tomorrow with the corrected and updated version’ (Kindred, 2010).

What we need to understand is that by the time the corrected version may arrive or is published it might be too late for the families who have already been affected by such speculative coverage and reportage. Those who are written about do not follow the newspaper in the attic or dustbin but have their entire lives to live ahead. Often it has been seen that to establish authenticity, crime reporters may even quote from authorities or some documents to which they generally attribute their so-called facts. Many times, this is done at a stage when the investigation is either incomplete or worst till may has just begun. This attribution by a simple word like ‘alleged’ may be used as a security cover and may even give leverage to the reporter to get away with opinionated and sometimes salacious statements. In this process very often actual facts are lost. This is not only done to sensationalize a case it is also done with perfect knowledge of having compromised on ethics and any sense of professional standards in journalism. Ethics in journalism clearly state that unjustified rumours and surmises should not be presented as facts. Paradoxically, the attraction of portraying emotional and crassly vulgar effects has become the aspiration as well as the forte of some crime reporters. To cite an example, in 1990 two nuns were brutally murdered in Mumbai. Some of the reportage cantered on the much talked about chastity or celibacy of the victims and even the reputation of the institution that they came from. One reporter even wrote that those who were the murdered nuns were used to sexual intercourse. One of them was even portrayed as being affected by venereal disease, casting aspersions on her character. Another daily went further in making a vulgar representation of the murders by carrying a headline which ran as, ‘Sex, Nuns and Venereal disease’. The story was attributed to post mortem reports despite the Press Council’s guidelines that there should be no violation of journalistic ethics especially those involving rapes or molestation of women and names and photographs of women should not be published. Many reporters try to get away with a whole lot more than is professionally or even ethically acceptable (Press Council of India, 1992).

VII. CONCLUSION

One must remember that the dead can never defend themselves and what persists after a crime report has ended is the media-generated ignominy faced by the family whose dead child could be branded a murderer or an assaulter and the surviving child might have to live with the stigma of being a so-called convict’s brother or sister. Without even having gone through a trial, the gossip industry flourishes. When crimes like these are reported in the manner they are no one seems to bother about the surviving members who not only have to pick up the threads of their shattered lives but also get on with the heavy and painful task of fielding insensitive queries. It has been seen that events are more likely to figure in the news if they are of a dramatic, sudden and violent character. The more the events are true to reality the less newsworthy they become. Speculations can easily make an innocent person look like a villain. What happens when family and friends start looking at the individual with suspicion because he or she is a killer’s son, a ‘fast’ girl’s father, or a philanderer’s wife?

A breakdown of a system or its rules entails that everyone acts responsibly and maturely, especially those who are entrusted with the task of disseminating information (Lupton, 1999). Many research findings have shown that viewing media violence or reading too much about it encourages aggression, desensitization, and pessimism, especially amongst vulnerable youngsters. Sometimes, media could provide consciously or inadvertently, the ideas or instructions that encourage anti-social behaviour. Crimes that are committed become media spectacles besides being sites for people to manipulate facts on. When journalistic writing veers around an abysmal lack of perspective, empathy and sensitivity, it is bound to have irreversible effects.

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