

# Criminology Essay

Structural features

Communication features

**Critically evaluate the view that media representations of crime distort rather than reflect reality.**

Since its introduction, the media has always been an important source of communication. However, in the twenty-first century the expansion of mass media has meant that its impacts are now even more profound. The invention of new technologies has revolutionised communication and led to the emergence of a global village in which millions of people can now communicate in real time across international borders. The term “Media Saturation” is very apt at describing how the media today defines and dominates our lives (Barker, 1999). Undoubtedly, the media and its representations of crime are highly influential, and the public gains an immense amount of knowledge on crime from media representations. For example, a 2002 survey of Londoners found that 80% said their main source of information about policing was the news media (Greer; Reiner, 2012). This essay will predominantly focus on the newspaper and television as two main forms of communication on crime, and consider whether these forms of media distort or reflect the reality of crime and criminality. It will assess this issue by highlighting the disproportionate representations of certain crimes, the victimisation of certain groups and the idea of moral panics. Additionally, it will consider the extent to which media representations influence and distort perceptions of crime and associated threats. Finally, it will argue that while different media outlets may be more reliable in their representations of crime, the whole industry is capable of distortion and misrepresentation.

Arguably, media representations of crime can be said to distort reality because they disproportionately focus on certain crimes, such as violent or interpersonal crimes. A number of studies show that crimes of a violent nature feature disproportionately when compared to their occurrence in official crime statistics. For example, a historical study which looked at the Times and the Mirror between 1945 and 1991, revealed there was an upward trend in the number of reports featuring crimes of a violent nature in both newspapers (Reiner et al. 2003). Such studies have revealed that stories on crime and deviance have become the focus of news. However, when compared to statistics, such as those revealed in the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), it is clear that media representations of crime distort

Standard Essay Structure  
(see Ch. 1 ‘Getting started on your essay’)

Purpose Statement: The writer narrows their research to sharpen the focus of the essay.

Thesis Statement: A clear position presented

reality. Media outlets choose to focus on certain crimes, such as violent and interpersonal crimes, making the public believe that these crimes pose the greatest threat to them, when in reality other crimes are more prevalent. For example, the CSEW in the year ending June 2016, shows that over the longer term there have been significant reductions in the levels of violent crime (Flatley, 2016). Evidence shows that in 1995 incidents of violence were at a record high of 3,837, however by 2016 this had reduced to 1,292 (ibid). The previously cited historical study revealed that the proportion of crime stories being reported increased during this time, with homicide accounting for one-third of all crime stories reported during this time (Reiner et al. 2003). This is despite the fact that crimes of a violent nature were decreasing during this period and homicide is not the most common type of crime.

**This illustrates how media representations of crime distort reality because the media overrepresent certain types of crimes in contrast to official statistics.**

Further distortions can be made through the underrepresentation of more prevalent crimes, such as property crimes, despite the fact that these offences are the most common in our society. **For example, the CSEW in the year ending September 2014 showed that there were 1,578 incidents of burglary, compared to 1,312 incidents of violence (702 of which were more minor and without injury).** This reveals that in official statistics, incidences of violence occur less frequently than incidences of burglary, however this is not mirrored in media representations of crime. **Beckett (1977)** identifies this discrepancy and argues that there is a limited relationship between trends in crime news and trends in crime statistics. In addition, **Barrack (1994: 11) states 'the news media consistently underplay petty, nonviolent and white-collar offences while they overplay interpersonal, violent and sexual crimes'**. Moreover, arguably the role of the media itself may have a distorting effect on representations of crime. It could be argued that both television and newspaper media are more concerned with appealing to the mass market, attracting audiences, and selling copy. For example, 'By media we mean the channels, the mean or forums used for disseminating information, providing entertainment with time motto to create awareness among the masses.' (**Mehsood 2006 in Shabir et al. 2015**). Arguably the whole principle of providing entertainment and mass appeal are now intertwined with all forms of media, which demonstrates that media representations of crime will not reflect reality because the information shared is designed to sensationalise, and attract readers and viewers. Hence, the media is prone to exaggeration, which means that media representations of crime

Some interpretation and analysis of source

Statistical evidence used to support thesis

Range of sources used to build a critical response to the question

Quote integrated into the paragraph to maintain flow

cannot be considered to be accurate representations that reflect reality.

Media representations of crime may also distort reality as a result of the victimisation of certain groups or demographics. One area where this is prevalent is the in representations of black and ethnic minority (BME) groups. **Greer (2007)** talks about 'institutional media prejudice' and Barack (1994:10) suggests that ethnic minorities are 'under-represented in the good news' but suggests that the media is always ready to portray BME groups in a negative context in the 'bad news'. The media's victimisation of BME groups was also highlighted in Hall et al's (1978) *Policing the Crisis* study, which demonstrated how the media caused a moral panic over mugging and predominantly blamed it on black youths. Further studies by Davies et al. (2007:10) show that throughout history media discourses have demonised the black youth, making them out to be the 'criminal other'. The immense volume of scholarly opinion on the media's victimisation of BME groups demonstrates that the media cannot be said to reflect reality because the media tends to overstate the risk posed by BME groups. A study by Cushion et al. (2011), found that young men/boys made up 41.9% of crime stories, while black young men/boys made up 66.9% of crime stories (Cushion et al. 2011). The same study also found that black young men/boys were also discriminated against in 5.2% of news items and were reported as controlling gangs/violence/weapons in 4% of news items, whilst these categories did not even appear in the top ten 'subject matter of coverage' for young men/boys (ibid). Therefore, although black young men and boys do commit crime, the evidence **strongly** suggests the media is prone to exaggeration, and overstate the risks posed by BME groups.

The victimisation of young people as another demographic also illustrates how media representations of crime distort reality. For example, Stan Cohen's work (1972) illustrates how the media were able to characterise youths as delinquents, by creating a moral panic around the mods and rockers in the 1960s. In more recent studies, scholars such as Wayne et al. (2008:8) have argued that since the period of Thatcherism 'media representations of young people arguably become less and less restricted to sub-cultures of youth and increasingly prevalent across the category of youth itself'. This has led to young people becoming a great source of anxiety for society, which may be primarily caused by the media's portrayal of them. For example, research found that 'more than half of the stories

about teenage boys in national and regional newspapers in the past year were about crime' (Garner, 2009). The same research also revealed that words such as 'yobs', 'thugs' and 'feral' were commonly used to describe them (ibid). This is important in showing that media representations of crime distort reality because moral panic theory states that media portrayals influence societies' views on certain groups and their criminality (Okoronkwo, 2008). Therefore, over-representing youth crime in the media is distorting the reality of criminal activity and making the public believe that young people are more of a threat than they really are.

Many studies have illustrated how media representations create false fear and heightened anxiety in society. This fear is displaced because it is based on media's representations of crime, which do not match official statistics. For example, Gerbner's cultivation thesis (1970, 1995) illustrates how exposure to the media leaves viewers with a distorted belief about violence and levels of violence in our society. Arguably the very description "moral panics" further illustrates that media representations in general and media representations of crime distort reality. The original definition of moral panic as first coined by Stan Cohen (1972:44) demonstrates this; "A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media". Therefore, the media's creation of moral panics only serves to illustrate how

their representations of crime distort reality because what they report in the news, both in newspapers and on the television, does not reflect real crime statistics and so is not based on true events or reality.

However, both the newspaper and television's ability to reflect reality is limited due to the fact that all forms of media are constructions which are subjective to individual consumers. Although media representations of crime are important, peoples' perceptions are also important, and reality is a very subjective term which can be interpreted differently by different people. As Sparks (1992:2) suggests, 'all texts are polysemic', meaning they may be interpreted differently by different readers, and arguably the same is true for all forms of media. Therefore, media representations of crime are subjective and whether the representations reflect or distort reality may be dependent upon the consumer. Audiences are not passive and therefore each individual will come to their own conclusion about what they read in the newspaper and what they see on the television.

McQuail (2013 in Birkbeck, 2014:4) highlights that the 'construction of meaning' is dependent upon certain criteria such as "cultural background, personal history, level of comprehension, and the context of the reception". Therefore, it becomes obvious that there are many different factors which can impact upon how a person perceives a certain event, or something which the media relays to them, making it difficult to establish if something reflects or distorts reality.

Perhaps what is more concerning, is the percentage of people that consider 'fictional crime news' and 'fictional media representations' to be a reliable source of information and therefore perceive these sources of information as reality. For example, the earlier cited 2002 survey of Londoners also found that 29% of people thought that 'media fiction' was a crucial source of information on the police (Greer; Reiner, 2012). The disproportionate focus on violence is even more marked in media fiction, which would leave viewers with an even more distorted perception of crime. Reiner et al's study (2000, 2001) also revealed that murder was the primary crime in major crime films since the Second World War. In fictional television series or films the portrayals of violence have become increasingly graphic. If viewers perceive these events as a valid source of information on crime and criminal behaviour, then media representations of crime may well distort the true picture of crime in the UK. Perhaps therefore the proliferation of so called 'fake news' takes viewers and readers even further from the truth that we see in official crime statistics, and leaves them with an even more distorted perception.

**While the media can shift and distort perceptions of crime and create false fears, it could also be argued that some media sources do attempt to reflect and accurately represent reality, as much as possible.** This view can be considered by looking at certain newspaper and television channels such as *The Guardian* and the BBC. Many newspapers known as 'broadsheet newspapers' are considered to be more neutral in their representations of crime, and many would consider these papers to be much more reliable than 'tabloid newspapers'. **For example,** in a study conducted regarding the 'trustworthiness' of news sources, tabloids such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror* were amongst those considered to be the least reliable, scoring 3.7 and 4.1 respectively, whereas broadsheet newspapers such as the *The Guardian* and *The Times* were considered to be more reliable, both scoring 5.9 (Turvill, 2014). Indeed, some argue that their coverage of crime is more balanced, rational, and measured. **However,** such 'broadsheet newspapers' may still have the ability to change

Qualification of previous argument to increase the depth of analysis and evaluation (See Ch. 10 'Critical thinking and analysis skills')

Use of example demonstrates understanding and strengthens arguments

'However' indicates counter-argument and response to the previous qualification

perceptions, which suggests they too are capable of distorting perceptions of the reality of crime and criminal behaviour. For example, the CSEW in 2013/2014 found that *The Guardian* changed the perceptions of readers, with 34% saying crime had gone up in the country as a whole. Other so called reliable newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* were also believed by their readers to influence perceptions of crime rates with scores of 43% and 51% respectively (Office for National Statistics, 2015). Although these ratings are considerably lower than tabloid newspapers, such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*, with 70% and 73% respectively (ibid), clearly broadsheet newspapers may still present biased reporting which in turn can change perceptions of crime. The same can be said of television when looking at news sources such as the BBC. In the previously cited study, the BBC was rated to be the most reliable news source, scoring 7.4 (Turvill, 2014). However, as with any news source, even the BBC is subject to bias, and in a competitive media environment is likely to put more focus on stories that will maintain the attention of the public. Therefore, although some news sources are considered generally to be more reliable and impartial than others, there remains a question mark as to their reliability in their representations of reality of crime trends and crime rates, and they are also a powerful influencing factor on public perceptions.

This essay has shown that the media in all forms tends to distort rather than reflect reality when it comes to crime trends and crime rates. There is a wealth of evidence supporting this view. There is a particular bias in relation to the over-representations of violent crime, which do not reflect the reality of falling rates and lower threats, along with under-representation of property crime, which has been consistently rising over the last decade. This may be because violent crime is more sensationalist and 'news worthy', and the media is driven by commercial motivations. Furthermore, this skewed representation is also true when looking at the persistent victimisation of certain demographics, such as BME groups and youths, which again leaves readers and viewers with a distorted perception of reality in which people believe that these groups pose a greater threat to society than official statistics suggest.

This distortion appears to have been inflated further by the rise of 'fake news' in the media and its pervasive superimposition on the truth and reality. It is also the case that even media outlets that may be considered more reliable such as broadsheet newspapers and the BBC may also play the same ratings game, and present a biased and sensationalist view of crime that does not reflect reality. Thus, overall, the media in all forms is an

Standard Essay Conclusion  
(see Ch. 1 'Getting started  
on your essay')

extremely powerful influencing force, and they should therefore consider the potential harm that they do to society and the well-being of its citizens when they mis-represent reality and create false fears and anxieties.

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APA Referencing System  
(see Ch. 8 'Referencing  
with accuracy')

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## **Diana and Tom's Comments**

**This essay is a thorough and well- researched response to the assignment question. The writer uses sources, and in particular statistical evidence, effectively to build convincing evidence-based arguments. The writer has demonstrated insight and knowledge of the topic, and used real-world examples to strengthen arguments. It could be improved by more detailed analysis of key points.**