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## **No more happy endings?**

### **The media and popular concern about crime since the Second World War**

*Robert Reiner, Sonia Livingstone, and Jessica Allen*

#### **Introduction: mediaphobia and fear of crime**

Anxiety about media representations of crime has flourished for as long as the modern media of communication have existed. Mediaphobia is particularly prominent in various discourses about why crime rates and patterns have changed since the Second World War (although such respectable fears have a much longer ancestry, as shown in Pearson 1983). The most familiar of these discourses is that of moral decline and fall: the media are said to sensationalise deviance more and more, to glamorise offending, and to undermine moral authority and social controls of all kinds.<sup>1</sup>

Anxieties about the media have also figured prominently in liberal and radical discourses about crime and criminal justice changes, although with very different concerns and inflexions. A common theme is that media representations unduly accentuate fears of crime, hence bolstering public support for more authoritarian forms of criminal justice policy and practice.<sup>2</sup>

In the last two decades, fear of crime has increasingly become a prominent concern of policy-makers across the political spectrum. Mirroring the way that left realist criminology recaptured the issue of crime after its 'theft' by the Conservatives (Downes 1983), fear of crime has come to be perceived as an acute problem by the right as much as the left. At times it has been regarded as equally problematic as crime itself. In 1989, for example, a Home Office Working Party declared that fear of crime was an 'issue of social concern' that 'has to be taken seriously as ... crime prevention and reduction' (Home Office 1989: ii). Although the official policy emphasis has now shifted back to prioritising crime reduction, fear of crime remains a prominent concern. The media have consistently been seen by policy-makers as a major source of the problem, stimulating unrealistic and irrational fears by exaggerating and sensationalising the risks and seriousness of crime (Sparks 1992).

There is a large research literature on media representations of crime and their sources and possible consequences (recent reviews include Reiner 1997; Surette 1998). However, virtually all studies examine only one relatively brief period in time. Changes in representations may be looked at to some extent by comparing the results of research conducted in different periods. However, this is problematic as the data have been collected using differing definitions of variables and techniques of measurement. A few studies have provided data using consistent methods for different periods, but usually these have looked

only at a handful of isolated years (for example, Roshier (1973) analysed newspaper reports in 1938, 1955 and 1967; and Sumser (1996) compared television mystery shows in 1968/9, 1974/5 and 1985/6). The sole exceptions to the dearth of material systematically examining change over time are a pair of recent studies of the changing content of American television and cinema over the last half-century, which include some material on crime and law enforcement images (Lichter *et al.* 1994; Powers *et al.* 1996).

The research reported in this chapter was intended to plug this gap, by providing an account of changing content in the main British media concerning crime over the period since the Second World War, as well as looking at how audiences interpret these changes. The research gathered data from two specific sources:

- 1 a historical content analysis of how mass media representations of crime and criminal justice have changed since the Second World War, across a range of media in Britain;
- 2 Focus group discussions with samples of people of different generations, analysing their interpretations of media output and the issue of law and order as these have changed over their lifetimes.

The data collected cannot directly assess the extent to which changing media representations of crime as causally related to changing levels or patterns of crime or fear of crime. Even to the extent that there are parallels between developments in media images and the extent of crime or fear of crime as recorded in various ways, the causal interpretation of such correlations is problematic.

Certainly most content analyses suggest that media representations vastly exaggerate the extent and seriousness of crime and the success of the police and criminal justice system in combating crime. 'If all we knew is what we saw' (Pandiani 1978) it would be plausible to conclude that the media do fan fear of crime and support for tough policing and penalty as the answer. Many studies do indeed find associations between media consumption patterns and various measures of fear of crime (Howitt 1998: chapter 4).<sup>3</sup> Heavy viewing of TV crime fiction, for example, is linked with more fearful perceptions of crime and support for authoritarian solutions (Carlson 1985; Signorielli 1990: 96–102). Readers of newspapers which present violent crime stories more frequently and more sensationally express more fearfulness in response to survey questions (although not in behavioural manifestations such as not going out after dark), even controlling for age, gender and socio-economic status (Williams and Dickinson 1993).

The problem lies in deciding what causal relationship can be inferred from these associations. Do media crime stories cause fearfulness, or do more fearful people read or watch more? Given that the majority of stories, especially in the past, feature 'happy' endings with crime and conflict resolved neatly, perhaps they reassure rather than disturb viewers who are already fearful because of personal or vicarious experience of actual victimisation (Wakshlag *et al.* 1983; Zillman and Wakshlag 1987). Or do particular life experiences or social positions, such as living in high-crime areas, generate more risk, heightened anxiety *and* more media consumption? Our reviews of the voluminous existing

research literature on these issues led us to the conclusion that the most plausible model is a dialectical process of interaction between changing media representations and patterns of criminality, fear of crime and criminal justice policy and practice (Livingstone 1996: 31–2; Reiner 1997: 216–19; 224–5). There is a complex intertwining of different life positions and experiences with the reception of media texts, which quantitative content analyses can hardly penetrate, requiring interpretive approaches more sensitive to the subtleties of analysing meaning (Sparks 1992; Schlesinger *et al.* 1992).

It was our objective, however, to gather historical and interview data which could test the validity of particular elements of the competing discourses about the part the media have played in the changes in criminality and justice since the Second World War. These discourses all assume particular accounts of how media images have changed. For example, the conservative discourse of moral decline presumes that the media have become increasingly focused on crime, present offenders in more attractive ways and portray the criminal justice system less favourably. The widespread concern about fear of crime similarly assumes that the media are increasingly representing crime in ways that exaggerate its extent and seriousness. Historical content analysis is necessary to assess such claims.

The historical content analyses and the focus group discussions reported in this paper converge in suggesting a particular picture of the changing discourse about crime and criminal justice, both in the public arena constituted by the mass media and in everyday life and experience. In many ways this echoes Durkheim's theorisation of the 'modernisation' of sentiments about punishment (Durkheim 1973), originally published nearly a century ago. Criminality comes to be seen less as an offence against the sacred and absolute norms of a *conscience collective*, and more a matter of one individual harming another.<sup>4</sup> This process is reflected in a transformation of representations of the moral status of offenders, the criminal justice system, victims, punishment and fear of crime. Moral status is no longer automatically conferred by a role in the social order; it is subject to negotiation and constructed by particular narratives.

## **Research methods**

This study examined representations of crime and criminal justice in three mass media from 1945 to 1991, together with audience understandings of and relations to them. Clearly it could not examine all mass media, due to practical constraints of availability and resources. It focused on the two media which have been prominent throughout the twentieth century, cinema and newspapers, and the pre-eminent medium of the post-war period, television.

### ***The historical content analyses***

For each medium we examined sizeable random samples of narratives about crime. The *cinema* research combined a generic analysis of all films released in Britain since 1945 (which included an increasing proportion of US films over the period), and detailed quantitative and qualitative content analyses of box-office hits. The latter were chosen as approximating the most influential films of the period – or at any rate, those which were most widely viewed. For *television*, we

focused on fictional crime series. The ephemeral character of television news presents insuperable problems of non-availability for the study of long-term changes in content. The *press* study analysed representative samples of stories from *The Times*, the newspaper of record for most of the period, and a paper which contrasts with it in terms of both market (tabloid versus quality) and politics (left of centre versus right), *The Mirror* (previously the *Daily Mirror*). Although inevitably limited, this is a larger sampling across media and time than hitherto found in the criminological research literature.

The category 'crime' is, of course, subject to enormous definitional and conceptual debate and difficulties (Maguire *et al.* 1997: part I). For the purposes of this research a straightforward legal positivist definition was adopted: a crime in a media narrative was any act which appeared to violate English criminal law. Measuring crime is also a notoriously fraught enterprise (Reiner 1996; Maguire 1997). The guidelines for this research were again drawn from officially sanctioned procedures, the Home Office counting rules, to facilitate comparison of the representation of crime in the media and the official statistical picture.

Using these definitions and procedures, the historical content analysis considered:

- 1 how the quantity of crime stories in the media had changed since the Second World;
- 2 how the dimensions and structure of crime stories had changed, through detailed qualitative analysis of samples of narratives.

All quantitative data was analysed using SPSS.

The *film* study was based on two different samples. A random 10 per cent sample of all films released in Britain since 1945 was drawn from a source which also provided synopses of these (F. Maurice Speed's *Film Review*, which has been published annually since 1944). This sample was coded by genre to calculate the proportion of crime films (i.e. which had narratives centred on the commission and/or investigation of a crime). For non-crime films, the same sample was coded to see if they nonetheless had significant representations of crime in their plots (Allen *et al.* 1997). A smaller sample of 84 films was drawn randomly out of the 196 crime movies which had figured since 1945 among the top box-office hits in Britain. These were viewed and analysed in detail to assess qualitative changes. The major coding categories included: types, rates and violence of crimes; characteristics and attitudes of offenders, victims and criminal justice personnel; images of society and social relations; depictions of criminal justice; conceptions of authority and morality.

The *press* study also used two related samples. To assess the proportions of crime and criminal justice stories a random 10 per cent sample of all 'home news' stories since 1945 in *The Times* and *The Mirror* was coded. A more detailed qualitative analysis along the lines of the cinema study was conducted for a smaller random sample of stories. Ten days were selected randomly for both newspapers for every second year since 1945. In those issues all front-page stories, editorial or op-ed items and letters which concerned crime were analysed, as were the most prominent crime news stories on the home news pages.

The *television* study examined all the top twenty television programmes for every year since 1955 (when audience ratings first became available). These were coded according to genre to see the changing proportion which was focused on crime or criminal justice. The crime series were then subject to more detailed study to ascertain the changing representations of crime, criminals and law enforcers.

### ***Audience reception of crime media***

Historical study of how audiences interpret mass media representations of crime and criminal justice clearly raises profound methodological difficulties. While past media may have been archived, at least erratically, past audiences do not exist. The project combined methods from oral history with audience reception methods, using homogeneous focus groups to interpret specific media contents.

While most audience research focuses on gender and social class or on self-selected fan groups, the key dimension here was age. Audience age indexes two phenomena: position in the life course (e.g. young person, parent, elderly); and generation (e.g. 'post-war' generation, 'sixties' generation), popularly understood by the particular historical period through which people live.

Selected examples of images and texts were used to stimulate focus group discussion of each media period and to encourage general discussion about crime, social change, notions of authority and responsibility. Four age-groups (approximately 20, 40, 60 and 80 years old) discussed these media which, depending on the group's age, involved discussing media from before they were born, from when they were in their mid-teens, mid-thirties, mid-fifties or mid-seventies.

Following a pilot group, 16 focus groups (4 age x 2 gender x 2 social class) were recruited from seven locations in the south-east of England (urban, suburban and rural) by a professional market research agency. Ninety-six people were interviewed in all. The interviews were audio-taped, fully transcribed and analysed using NUDIST. The analysis was based on the major issues identified by the analyses of crime representations.

### **Changing patterns of media crime since 1945**

The pattern and characteristics of media representations of crime have changed in many ways since the Second World War. This section will consider these trends, and their possible significance for popular fears about crime.

#### ***The frequency of crime narratives in the media***

Crime narratives and representations are, and always have been, a prominent part of the content of all mass media. The proportion of content devoted to crime is highly sensitive to the differing definitions used in particular studies. It also varies between different outlets, according to medium and market (Reiner 1997: 194–9). There may also be change over time, although until now it has only been possible to examine this by comparing separate studies conducted in different periods. This is unsatisfactory because they use varying definitions and methods. The present research attempts to assess the long-term trends in crime content

since the Second World War. For the cinema and newspapers it measured the proportion of all narratives which were primarily crime stories,<sup>5</sup> and those which had significant crime content even if not primarily focused on crime. While the absence of change in the quantity of crime represented would not falsify any claims about possible relationships between trends in media content and developments in crime and criminal justice, a significant increase or decrease would be of considerable interest in examining the validity of the different discourses about the media/crime link.

In the random sample of cinema films there did not appear to be any significant pattern of change in the extent of representation of crime. There is no clear trend for the proportion of crime films to either rise or fall, although there are many sharp fluctuations in individual years around this basic steady state (Allen *et al.* 1997, 1998). Crime has been a significant concern of the cinema throughout the post-war period (and probably before that as well). In most years around 20 per cent of all films released are crime films.

The results of the analysis of a random sample of newspaper stories between 1945 and 1991 suggest a more complex picture. By the end of the period the proportion of stories about crime had increased considerably. This was true of both *The Times* and *The Mirror* although the rise was more marked in the former. In the *Daily Mirror* the average proportion of stories which were centrally about crime in the years 1945–51 was 9 per cent, while in *The Times* it was 7 per cent. By 1985–91 this had risen to 21 per cent for both papers (the drawing level of the two papers suggests the general process of tabloidisation of *The Times*). The proportion of stories about the criminal justice system or policy (as distinct from specific crimes) also rose in both papers: from an average of 2 per cent in the *Daily Mirror* between 1945 and 1951 to 6 per cent between 1985 and 1991, and from 3 per cent to 9 per cent in the same periods in *The Times* (this echoes Downes and Morgan's 1997 analysis of the politicisation of law and order policy over the same period). While newspapers' concern with crime and criminal justice appears distinctly higher in the last period of our study than in the first, the years in between show a marked pattern of cyclical fluctuation around this overall rising trend.

Changes in the extent of fear of crime (or indeed in recorded crime rates) cannot be attributed to a sheer quantitative increase in crime content in the cinema – this has not occurred. There has, however, been an increase in crime content in newspaper stories. Although this is nowhere near as marked or as continuous as the rise in recorded crime over the same period, it may be a factor in increasing concern about crime, as well as a reflection of it. Changes in the way that crime narratives are constructed are of more interest than their sheer quantity, and the next sections indicate the key changes in representations of crime, criminal justice, offenders, victims, and authority more generally.

### ***Media crime rates and patterns***

The analysis of cinema films distinguished between three categories of crime in terms of their function within the narrative: principal, consequential and contextual crimes. Adapting Hitchcock's terminology for the object which is pursued in a story, we call the crime which provides the principal focus or motive for a story the McGuffin. Consequential crimes are those which are

necessary adjuncts of the McGuffin, either before or after (for example, in order to escape capture). Contextual crimes are those which are represented in the narrative but are not related to the McGuffin (for example, the bank robbery Clint Eastwood encounters while munching a hamburger in *Dirty Harry*).

Throughout the period 1945–91, the single most frequent McGuffin crime is homicide, but to a slightly diminishing extent: in 50 per cent of crime films between 1945 and 1964; 35 per cent for 1965–79; 45 per cent 1980–91. There is a marked tendency for McGuffins which are property crimes (e.g. bank robbery) to decline: 32 per cent of films 1945–64; 20 per cent 1965–79; only 5 per cent 1980–91. Sex-related McGuffins such as rape or prostitution have become more frequent: 3 per cent 1945–64; 10 per cent 1965–79; 15 per cent 1980–91. Drugs have shown a curvilinear pattern: 2 per cent 1945–64; 10 per cent 1965–79; 5 per cent 1980–91. There has also been an increase in assault as the McGuffin: none between 1945 and 1964; 5 per cent 1965–79; 10 per cent 1980–91. In short, murder remains the most common crime stimulating a narrative, but to a slightly diminishing extent. Property crimes have plummeted (unlike the picture given by official statistics or crime surveys), while other violent, sexual and drug-related offences have become more common McGuffins.

The extent of violence depicted in the presentation of the McGuffin has increased considerably. The proportion of films in which it was associated with significant pain rose from 2 per cent between 1945 and 1964, to 20 per cent from 1965 to 1979, and 40 per cent from 1980 to 1991. This has consequences for the typical representation of offenders, victims, police and the criminal justice system.

The representation of consequential crimes has changed even more markedly. Between 1945 and 1964 14 per cent of films depicted no consequential crimes, 43 per cent showed one, and 43 per cent featured multiple consequential crimes. After that there are hardly any films without consequential crimes, and over 80 per cent feature multiple offences of this kind. The extent of violence depicted in these crimes has also multiplied considerably. Whereas between 1945 and 1964 74 per cent of films had consequential crimes involving little or no violence, and only 5 per cent featured significant levels of violence, by 1980–91 these proportions had changed to 16 per cent and 47 per cent respectively.

The representation of contextual crimes is perhaps the most striking change. These crimes are especially significant because a proliferation of contextual crimes connotes a society pervaded by crime, unrelated to the central narrative. Between 1945 and 1964 32 per cent of films had no contextual offending at all, 9 per cent showed just one contextual crime, and 59 per cent had multiple crimes of this type. By 1980–91 only 15 per cent of films showed no contextual crimes, and 80 per cent featured multiple offences unrelated to the central narrative. An increasing proportion of contextual offences are violent and/or sex and drug-related, and a diminishing proportion are property offences (as with the McGuffin crimes). The extent of violence portrayed in these offences has increased. In 1945–64 90 per cent had no or only minor violence; by 1980–91 these proportions had changed to 29 per cent and 65 per cent respectively.

Overall, then, the findings show that although murder has always been the most common McGuffin crime in films, there is over the period since 1945 a diminishing proportion featuring property crime, and an increase in the



representation of violent crimes of all kinds. The extent of violence inflicted in these offences has sharply increased. The large rise in the depiction of consequential and especially contextual offences conveys a picture of a society much more threatened by all-pervasive violent crime.

The sample of newspaper stories shows a rather similar pattern of change. Murder (including attempts) is the most common single offence type throughout the period, although to a slightly increasing extent: it accounted for 20 per cent of all newspaper crime stories between 1945 and 1964; and 28 per cent in both the later periods analysed, 1965–79; and 1980–91. In newspaper stories the most rapidly increasing single type of crime reported was terrorist offences: 0.7 per cent of stories in 1945–64; 5.3 per cent in 1965–79; 8.8 per cent in 1980–91. Overall there was a clear shift from stories featuring property crimes (such as burglary and car theft) to offences against the person, including homicide, assault and sexual offences. The proportion of stories reporting property offences went down from 20 per cent in 1945–64 to 12 per cent in 1965–79 and 8 per cent between 1980 and 1991. Offences against the person stories rose from 33 per cent between 1945 and 1964 to 44 per cent in 1965–79 and 46 per cent in 1980–91. This means that a standard finding of research on crime and the media – that the media over-report violent and sexual offences disproportionately – requires some qualification. Although violent offence stories are the most common category throughout the post-war period, the extent of the imbalance has increased markedly. Stories purely about property offences were once fairly common but have virtually disappeared, while almost half of all crime-related stories are now about violence and/or sex.

The changes in media crime patterns are congruent with increasing public anxiety about crime. This is not only because of the even greater emphasis on serious violent crime, but also because of the increasing representation of this as essentially random, implied by the growth of contextual and consequential offences represented in stories. There is clear research evidence suggesting that when risks of victimisation are represented as random and meaningless they are particularly fear-provoking (Box *et al.* 1988: 342).

### ***Criminal justice***

The representation of the criminal justice system and its agents has changed substantially. One of the most interesting aspects is the pattern as distinct from the substance of change. As seen above, the pattern of change for most aspects of the representation of crime is unilinear. For example, the proportion of news stories concerning crime increases continuously; there is an increasing emphasis on violent crime against the person rather than property crime; and crime is represented ever more often as a ubiquitous threat, not a one-off event. On other dimensions there is an absence of change: the proportion of cinema films centrally concerned with crime, or the dominance of murder as the most frequently represented crime in either news or fiction. However, on most dimensions the representation of criminal justice alters in a curvilinear pattern. Variables are at their highest or lowest in the middle years (1964–79) of our period. The implications of this will be considered in our final conclusions below.

One central finding of the cinema research is the increasing prevalence of criminal justice agents as heroes, or at any rate the central protagonists, of

narratives. This too is subject to something of a U-shaped pattern. The key aspect is the rise (and partial fall) of police heroes. The police are the protagonists of only 9 per cent of films between 1945 and 1964, but 50 per cent of those between 1965 and 1979, and 40 per cent of those between 1980 and 1991. Other criminal justice agents (DAs, customs agents, etc.) were the protagonists of 7 per cent, 5 per cent and 10 per cent of films in these periods, respectively. Lawyers were the protagonists in 9 per cent of films in the first period, none in the second and 5 per cent in the third. Private eye heroes featured in 20 per cent of films from 1964–79, but none in the earlier or later periods. There was a continuous decline in amateur investigator heroes: 36 per cent in 1945–64; 5 per cent in 1965–79; none 1980–91. Victim-related protagonists increased, but in a curvilinear pattern: 13 per cent in 1945–64; none 1965–79; 25 per cent 1980–91. Overall there is a clear decline of amateur sleuths in favour of criminal justice professionals, especially the police, and an increase in victim or victim-related heroes. The police predominance is especially marked in the middle period, although it remains substantial.<sup>6</sup> The prevalence of police protagonists is congruent with the previously noted move to representing crime as an ever-present, ubiquitous threat, not a one-off disturbance in a generally ordered existence. Crime becomes a routine business for bureaucratically organised professionals, not amateurs and first-timers.

Overall, the representation of police protagonists has become less positive over time, although there is a clear curvilinear pattern. Critical and negative images are most common in the period 1964–79, although they are more frequent in 1980–91 than 1945–64. This applies both to the success and the integrity of the police protagonists.

The police and criminal justice system are portrayed as less successful over time. Throughout the period the overwhelming majority of movie crimes are cleared up. However, there is a marked change in how this is achieved. In the period 1945–64 the most common method of clear-up was that the offender was brought to justice (39 per cent), but this has become very infrequent (15 per cent 1965–79, 10 per cent 1980–91). The most frequent method of clear-up becomes the killing of the offender – in 35 per cent of films 1965–91.

The police come to be represented more frequently as vigilantes than as enforcers of the law. In 89 per cent of films 1945–64, the police remain within the parameters of due process of law in their methods, but they break these in 80 per cent of films between 1965 and 1979 and 67 per cent from 1980 to 1991. The police are also shown as more likely to use force (both reasonable and excessive force). Between 1945 and 1964, the police protagonists are not shown using force in 54 per cent of films, and in 40 per cent the force used is reasonable and proportionate (e.g. minimal self-defence). Only in 3 per cent of films were they shown using excessive force. But this is shown in 44 per cent of films from 1965 to 1979 and 25 per cent from 1980 to 1991.

The police protagonists are represented as entirely honest in personal terms in 89 per cent of films 1945–64; but in only 67 per cent between 1965 and 1979, and 77 per cent 1980–91. In no films in the early period are cops shown as seriously corrupt ('meat-eaters', in the parlance of the Knapp Commission Report on police corruption in New York), but they are seriously corrupt in 13 per cent of films 1965–79 and 15 per cent 1980–91. They are shown as engaged in petty corruption ('grass-eaters' in the Knapp Commission's terms) in 11 per

cent of 1945–64 films, 20 per cent between 1965 and 1979, and 8 per cent between 1980 and 1991. They are also represented as more personally deviant (in terms of such matters as excessive drinking, swearing and extra-marital sexual activity).

The criminal justice system is also portrayed as increasingly divided internally. Conflict with police organisations features in only 15 per cent of films 1945–64, but 79 per cent from 1965 to 1979, and 56 per cent 1980–91. Conflict between criminal justice organisations, e.g. the police and prosecutors or the courts, also becomes more frequent. It is represented in only 20 per cent of films 1945–64, but 70 per cent from 1965 to 1991. Police officers themselves become more internally divided: conflict between buddies occurs in only 9 per cent of films 1945–64, but over 50 per cent thereafter. Police protagonists are portrayed as stressed in 23 per cent of films in the earlier period, but well over half after 1965.

Similar trends can be found in newspaper representations of criminal justice. The increasing proportion of stories about criminal justice which has already been referred to is an indication of the increasingly politicised and controversial character of criminal justice issues. News stories in which the police are mentioned critically have increased (6 per cent 1945–64, 10 per cent 1965–79, 17 per cent 1980–91). Stories with approving or even neutral accounts of the police have declined. Approving stories were just over 11 per cent from 1945 to 1979, but only 6 per cent from 1980 to 1991. Neutral mentions declined from 13 per cent to 11 per cent and then 8 per cent through the three periods (the police were not mentioned at all in about 69 per cent of crime news stories in all three periods).

The police and criminal justice system are represented in news stories as less successful in dealing with crime, especially in the middle period. Between 1945 and 1964, 23 per cent of news stories feature crimes which are not cleared up, but this rises to 37 per cent from 1965 to 1979, although there is a slight decline thereafter to 31 per cent. Crime is explicitly represented as out of control in a growing minority of news stories: 3 per cent 1945–64, 6 per cent 1965–79, but 13 per cent 1980–91.

As with the changing representation of crime, the portrayal of the police as less successful, less honest and beset by conflicts and internal problems is congruent with increasing anxiety about crime. Not only is the problem itself represented in more frightening terms, but the safety blanket is seen as becoming threadbare.

### ***Criminals***

Unlike the representation of crime, criminal justice and (as we shall see) victims, there are few significant trends in the portrait of the personal characteristics of offenders. Throughout the period they are predominantly middle-aged or older (though there is a slight tendency to portray young offenders more frequently), white (although the proportion of ethnic minority offenders is increasing slightly in both fiction and news stories) and male. This all confirms earlier studies. One way our findings challenge the orthodoxy is that we find that only a minority of stories feature middle- or upper-class offenders, and this does not change significantly over time.

Criminals are overwhelmingly portrayed unsympathetically throughout the period, in both fiction and news. There is little change, and what there is suggests an increasingly unfavourable image of offenders. For example, they are shown using excessive or sadistic force in an increasing proportion of films (80 per cent between 1980 and 1991 as compared to 50 per cent 1945–64). They are portrayed as committing crimes only under pressure in a decreasing minority of films (30 per cent 1945–64; around 15 per cent thereafter). Increasingly they are represented as purely evil and enjoying their offending (from around 60 per cent 1945–64 to 85 per cent 1980–91). Films in which some sympathy is shown for offenders have declined over time: 40 per cent 1945–64; 20 per cent 1965–79; 15 per cent 1980–91).

This predominantly (and slightly increasingly) unfavourable portrayal of offenders goes against the claim that crime has been stimulated by more attractive media representations. However, crime is represented as increasingly rewarding. In 91 per cent of films between 1945 and 1964, 'crime does not pay' for the central offenders, but after 1965 this is true in only 80 per cent of the stories – although this still suggests an overwhelming message about the folly of offending (especially in the light of the low and diminishing clear-up rates found in official statistics).

### ***Victims***

Probably the most clear-cut and significant changes we have found are in the representation of victims. In essence, victims have moved from having a shadowy and purely functional role in crime narratives to an increasingly pivotal position, their suffering increasingly constituting the subject position or the *raison d'être* of the story (mirroring the 'discovery' of, and increasing concern about, victims in criminal justice systems around the world; cf. Rock 1990; Zedner 1997). In the film sample, no concern is evinced for the plight of the victim in 45 per cent of cases 1945–64; 35 per cent 1965–79; but only 11 per cent 1980–91. Victimisation is shown as having traumatic consequences in 74 per cent of films between 1980 and 1991, 40 per cent 1965–79, and only 25 per cent 1945–64 (similar trends are evident in the depicted consequences for the victim's family or friends). Victims are increasingly often represented as the protagonists of films, i.e. as the principal subject position. They are protagonists in 56 per cent of the films where they are presented as characters at all (as opposed to corpses or case-files) between 1980–91, but only 26 per cent 1965–79, and 16 per cent 1945–64.<sup>7</sup> News stories also increasingly present the plight of victims in sympathetic or concerned terms, in 11 per cent of stories 1945–64, 18 per cent 1965–79 and 24 per cent 1980–91.

The presentation of victims as the sympathetic yet traumatised centre of gravity of crime narratives is likely to enhance public concerns. Crime ceases to be portrayed primarily as an offence against legal codes and more as a serious risk confronting individuals with whom the narrative invites the audience to identify, and for whom there is no happy ending.

### **Audience perceptions of media representations of crime** ***The popularity of crime media***

In the interviews, people varied in which type of crime fiction they enjoyed, but most liked fiction involving an intellectual puzzle. Young women are particularly keen on media which are realistic and offer them information (about the nature, consequences and prevention of crime). Men preferred action plots, with fast pace, special effects and humour. Most people were ambivalent about press crime reporting, wanting to know but not to be voyeuristic. Older people recalled past media largely in terms of notorious events, prominent drama series and television and film stars, and little was recalled of specific narratives. Young people showed little interest in past media and much enthusiasm for contemporary media.

### ***Perceptions of past crime media***

Despite age and other differences, respondents were remarkably consensual in their characterisation of the post-war period. This consensus tells us a story of change in which crime representations (and society generally) shift from the 'pre-sixties' days, of little, mild crime where difficult issues were largely hidden, crime was largely non-violent and police were your friends, to the 'post-sixties' present where crime is much more prevalent, media images are more explicit and upsetting, violence has increased and police are themselves more distant and more violent.

This shift is interpreted, again consensually, as a transition in morality. An era when good and bad were clearly distinguished and authority structures were respected (a culture of discipline) has been replaced by one in which the boundary between good and bad has blurred, criminals are sympathetic and authorities are corrupt (a culture of disrespect and desubordination).

However, the generations differed markedly in their relation to this perceived overall shift. Older people tell a story of decline – the do-gooders in the 1960s upset the proper social order. Media representations are now too much 'in your face', voyeuristic and disrespectful of authority. Young people, on the other hand, tend to see this as a story of progress. They are optimistic, because they welcome the media championing civil rights in areas like gender, sexuality and ethnicity and the greater legitimation accorded to alternative viewpoints, and are glad that controversial issues are no longer hidden. They approve of the idea that morality should be decided by context, and respect must be earned, not given automatically to those in certain social roles.

Life course also mattered. What is most striking is that people are almost universally positive about the media they encountered during their youth (and into their mid-thirties), irrespective of whether this was, in fact, media from the 1950s, the 1970s or the 1990s. With the exception of the youngest group, people were far more tolerant of the media from before they were born than they were of media from later in their adulthood. The importance of life course suggests that the media of one's youth sets the interpretive framework, the expectations for subsequent experiences of media.

### ***Positioning the audience in relation to crime***

Respondents continually 'commute' (Liebes and Katz 1995) between a concrete concern with crime in the media and crime in everyday life. They also commute

between a concern with the concrete, such as who commits what kinds of crimes, and the moral (what does this say about the moral and social order?). This suggests that everyday perceptions of crime in society provide a salient context within which media crime is interpreted; conversely, media crime triggers thoughts and feelings which are central to daily life.

Audiences seem more powerfully positioned in relation to crime media according to their perceived positioning in relation to the reality of crime and criminal justice. Particularly in our early period, crime media typically offers audiences the subject position of 'criminal justice protagonist', the criminal becomes 'other' and the victim is virtually invisible. However, real world crime offers three subject positions: police/law enforcer, criminal and victim; and our different groups perceived the media through the lens of these positions.

Those aged 80 perceived media throughout the period not only through the lens of their youth (the culture of respect) but also through the lens of their present-day perceived vulnerability, as potential victims of crime. The loss of a culture of respect weakens their identification with authorities. While both the media and everyday experience tell older people that they are muggable, our youngest groups felt they were continually portrayed as 'dangerous youth', potential perpetrators of crime. Thus they welcome a civil rights focus and the questioning of police authority.

Recalling that each generation is most positive about the media of their youth, we suggest that young people are positive about present-day media because they, like it, are ambivalent about police heroes, seeing themselves as often positioned as suspected criminals in daily life. Their desire is to understand both sides through the media, to question both authority and the 'criminal mind'.

### ***Gender and generation***

This picture is cross-cut by gender. Unlike the men, young women are aware of their potential victim status, particularly their vulnerability to male violence, and so welcomed coverage of such crimes. The oldest women shared their generation's pessimism, yet also expressed some approval of the destruction of the 'fairy tales' of their youth – the glamorous images of femininity and masculinity which some perceived to have trapped and distracted them.

The youngest women, on the other hand, shared their male peers' scepticism about the criminal justice system, and so turned not to a reliance on authorities but to themselves. Their orientation to media centred on how media provided information and opportunities to think through situations offering self-protection through realism. It was mainly when police heroes are female or feminised (as in *The Silence of the Lambs* or *Cagney and Lacey*) that younger women showed some approval or identification with the criminal justice system.

Neither younger nor older men in our groups would accept views of themselves as potential victims. Rather, the older men accepted the proffered identification with the protagonist, typically a law enforcement hero. Younger men were particularly interested in forms of crime media in which the criminal was as much a focus as the law enforcers and in which the moral boundaries between the two were ambiguous or unresolved.

### **Conclusion: insubordination and insecurity, shifting media images of crime**

The data presented so far suggests some complex processes of change in media representations of crime since the Second World War, and in audience interpretations of them. Some key variables in our analysis exhibit no pattern of change (for example, the proportion of films which are centrally about crime). Others show a marked degree of change throughout the period: the graphic representation of violence, for instance. Yet others show a curvilinear pattern of development: most aspects of the representation of the legitimacy, integrity, and effectiveness of criminal justice follow this pattern.

These results suggest a rough periodisation in terms of three ideal-type patterns of representation of crime. The first post-war decade is a period of consensus and social harmony in representations of criminal justice (and, more debatably, general social and political debate; cf. Marquand 1996). Crime stories – news as well as fiction – present an image of society as based largely on shared values and a clear yet accepted hierarchy of status and authority. Crime was as defined by Durkheim: it united all healthy consciences to condemn and extirpate it. Criminals were normally brought to justice: crime did not pay. The forces of law always got their man. The criminal justice system was almost invariably represented as righteous, dedicated and efficient.

During the mid-1960s the dominant mode of representation of crime and justice shifts discernibly. The values and integrity of authority increasingly come to be questioned. Doubts about the justice and effectiveness of criminal justice proliferate. Increasing prominence is given to conflict: between ethnic groups, men and women, social classes, even within the criminal justice system itself. While street cops feature increasingly as protagonists, they are more frequently morally tarnished, if not outright corrupt. However, the increasing criticism of the social order and criminal justice is from a standpoint of reform, the advocacy of preferable alternatives.

Since the late 1970s another shift is discernible, the advent of what could be called a post-critical era. Stories are increasingly bifurcated between counter-critical ones, which seek to return as far as possible to the values of consensus, and those which represent a hopelessly disordered beyond-good-and-evil world, characterised by a Hobbesian war of all against all. It is this division of narratives which accounts for the curvilinear pattern of many variables: there is some attempt to restore the values of the past, challenged by those which portray the exacerbation of the conflicts of the middle period.

Underneath the shifts in the mode of representation of concrete aspects of crime and justice, however, can be discerned a more fundamental shift in discourse, encompassing both media representations and popular discussion (as captured in our focus groups). This is a demystification of authority and law, a change in the conceptualisation of criminal justice from sacred to secular.

The marked changes in the representation of victims are the clearest emblem of this. Crime moves from being something which must be opposed and controlled *ipso facto* because the law defines it thus, to a contested category. It may be wrong, but this is a pragmatic issue, turning on the harm which may be done to individual victims, not from the authority of the law itself. The moral status of characters in a story (news or fiction) is no longer ascribed by their formal legal role. It has to be established from scratch in each narrative, depending upon the demonstration of serious suffering caused to the victims

who are in the subject position of the narrative. Increasingly these may be the legally defined offenders, who may be represented as victimized by a criminal injustice system.

Although the majority of narratives continue to work ultimately to justify the criminal justice viewpoint, this has to be achieved by demonstrating particular harm inflicted by crime on identifiable individual victims. In this sense, the media continue both to reproduce order and to function as sources of social control, while also reflecting the increasing individualism of a less deferential and more desubordinate culture.

This shift in media and popular narratives is isomorphic with changing features of criminal justice policy which have been identified by several influential interpretations. At a concrete level, the increasing attention given to victims by the criminal justice system (and criminologists) has achieved the status of cliché (Rock 1990; Zedner 1997), and is clearly paralleled in media narratives and popular 'crime talk' (Sasson 1995). More fundamentally, the increasing secularisation and individualism of media narratives about crime echoes the increasingly pragmatic and actuarial character of much of contemporary criminal justice policy (Feeley and Simon 1994). This is increasingly directed at finely calculated, highly practical tactics to prevent or reduce individual criminal victimisation by 'criminologies of everyday life' (Garland 1996). Like other dangers, in the 'risk society' crime becomes a matter for systematic 'scientific' assessment and management by experts (who are nonetheless viewed with increasing scepticism and suspicion), not a morality play (Sparks 1997: 424–6).

This is punctuated only by occasional media feeding frenzies, in which moral panics are sparked by spectacular crimes that perform the Durkheimian function of defining what moral boundaries do remain, around which 'healthy consciences' can regroup. However, these are usually prompted by the victimisation of a quintessentially vulnerable and sympathetic individual (like the Liverpool toddler Jamie Bulger), not by the violation of generalised moral codes or values. Both the front-stage spectacles of the exceptionally shocking crime and the back-stage everyday routines of actuarial risk calculation and control testify to an increasingly individualistic and demystified discourse about crime.

## Notes

1 A recent example is Norman Dennis' assertion that

In the 1960s the expanding media of television, and the recovering but culturally metamorphosed medium of film, were disseminating diluted but pervasive versions of the counter-cultural message. Within a few years, and almost across the board, the anti-law anti-hero, whether passive or active, replaced the model family and the heroic upholder of personal virtue and of community values in the cinema and television drama. (Dennis 1997: 25)

In Britain, the most celebrated example of this position is Mary Whitehouse's long-running campaign about the supposedly subversive effects of media permissiveness (see Newburn 1992: chapter 2 for a detailed account and critique; for an American example see Medved 1992).



- 2 The influential 'Cultural Indicators' Project developed by George Gerbner and his associates since the 1960s has monitored changes in media representations of violence, seeing these as a potential threat to democratic political institutions because of the public support for authoritarian control measures which they cultivate (e.g. Gerbner 1970, 1995; Signorielli 1990: 102). The power of the mass media to create moral panics and folk devils, and hence legitimise more repressive forms of policing and criminal justice, was a staple of radical criminology especially in the 1970s (e.g. Young 1971; Cohen 1972; Cohen and Young 1973; Hall *et al.* 1978; Hall 1979).
- 3 'Fear of crime' is a notoriously complex concept, which requires unpacking into such varying dimensions as perceptions of the risk of personal victimisation of different kinds, personal feelings of vulnerability to such victimisation and its impact, views about the prevalence of crime and the seriousness of its impact on others ranging from intimate associates and local areas to the wider society, and behavioural consequences of fear such as avoidance and prevention tactics (Box *et al.* 1988; Hale 1996; Zedner 1997: 586–93). There is also a subtle interaction between 'fear of crime' and more general and often amorphous senses of personal and social vulnerability and anxiety of a broader kind (Taylor 1995; Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Loader *et al.* 1998). Some of these dimensions are clearly much harder to capture and measure, and different studies use different indices of 'fear of crime', so that their results are incommensurable.
- 4 As Durkheim puts it, 'crime is reduced more and more to offences against persons alone, while religious forms of criminality decline' (Durkheim 1973: 303).
- 5 We defined a 'crime story' as one where (1) the central focus of the narrative was the commission and/or investigation of a crime, and/or (2) the principal protagonist was either an offender or a professional working in the criminal justice system.
- 6 The rise of police protagonists is structurally related to the representation of crime as more all-pervasive, and hence requiring a bureaucratic organisation of professionals to contend with it. The police are also subject to a process of normalisation. In demographic terms, the police are shown as becoming more like the population at large. Whatever the reality, in films the old saw about police officers becoming younger is borne out. Not only are the police heroes becoming younger, they are becoming less middle-class, and there is an increasing representation of women and ethnic minority officers, although the overwhelming majority remain male WASPS.
- 7 The demographic characteristics of victims suggested by films is not unlike that implied by victim surveys, contrary to some previous research findings. Thus they are predominantly male and young, and although usually white, the proportion of ethnic minority victims is rising sharply. Newspaper stories are less in line with the survey evidence than fictional stories. Thus female and male victims roughly equal each other, and older victims are over-represented. The proportion of white victims in news stories is actually increasing.

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