

THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON CRIME PREVENTION*

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This paper aims to show the influence of the mass media on adoption of the messages about crime which media send to consumers. It has been established that the media have an important role in the process of the development of personality and it can either be positive or negative. The positive influence of media is undeniable in all societies. The contemporary society has a wide spectrum of types of communication to which consumers react. Multiple researches show that the influence of reporting on violence, crime and other social deviations is twofold: they can be a warning or prevention, but can stimulate adoption of the negative types of behaviour. While running after profit, the media often use sensationalism and present biased impressions of events such as hard crimes and therefore create an impression of the acute danger and insecurity in the society. The prevalent emphasising of hard crimes with detailed descriptions of events and images tends to stimulate imagination and phantasies of a number of consumers. Reporting on crimes can in the long run lead to acceptance of violence and aggression in real life.

KEYWORDS: media / crime / crime prevention / communication / consumers / informal learning / aggressive behaviour

INTRODUCTION

The media have big power in the modern society and some authors (Pratt, Leighlei, Surette) even suggest that they can be described as the "fourth branch of government"¹. Mass media are the reality of today's civilisation with the clear intention to create and interpret this reality which is why they are firmly positioned within the system of the informal education, especially in the system of the informal learning². They have been

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¹http://www.crime-prevention.intl.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/The_Media__Crime_Prevention_and_Urban_Safety_ANG.pdf

²informal learning – the concept refers to learning from everyday life and it is a combination of real life and

created so as to inform and entertain the mass audiences and this continues to be their primary function. Considering the versatile definitions of the concept of communication and types of messages that are stemming from these definitions, there are four main functions of communication: information, entertainment, education and persuasion³. These are not the only functions of communication, but they are the most prominent ones and they refer to the mass media communication. Through these functions the mass media are influencing people and this influence can be either positive or negative. With the development of telecommunications and emerging of fast, wireless connections and mobile technologies, the media and its content has become ubiquitous and therefore inevitably affecting people's lives. Adequate, timely and usable information has become the basis of successful policies, security assessments, economic forecasts, business management and even creation and planning of fashion trends and everyday lifestyle.⁴

The mass media are a part of reality but in such a way that they are in fact producing the reality by giving their own interpretations of the real. And it is precisely this tendency that has positioned them in the system of informal education and learning. The media are continually and methodically influencing people's opinions and creating patterns of behaviour which is why it is legitimate to ask how powerful and how dangerous they are in the context of education. Judging by the results of scientific researches, it can be said that they do have impact on education given that the popular media are often called "the informal public teacher".⁵ Considering the fact that the media have a significant influence on creating opinions and patterns of behaviour, the media can be dangerous for education which is why a critical approach towards messages they are delivering is necessary. The system of mass media communication is the basis for articulating the entire social reality as it is the foundation for shaping, constructing and reconstructing educational and cultural contexts. The mass media are realising its powers through informing, entertaining, inspiring and educating⁶.

The influence of the media can be measured through its role in stimulation of imagination. They can in fact inspire individuals to imitate the negative patterns of behaviour and identify with notorious criminals and this can cause the media to slip into the dangerous zone and become an educational or a security risk. In their pursuit for sensationalism, the media often stimulate consumers to adopt the negative pattern of behaviour and therefore condone socially unacceptable behaviour. By using their powers, the media can transgress and cross the border of professionalism simply by reporting. This often leads to jeopardising the right to privacy or presumption of innocence. By publishing reports on crime, the media often resort to sensationalism in order to attract attention of readers and viewers.⁷

But what the media really are today? The traditional media are at the same time businesses, public services and political institutions. They are extremely complex which is

education; it is considered as a life-long process within which each individual creates opinions, values, skills and knowledge from everyday experiences and educational influences from his or her surroundings. The term refers to the common expression "the school of life".

³Janičijević, J. (2000). *Komunikacija i kultura*. Novi Sad, str.24.

⁴Turow, J. (2009). *Media today: An introduction to mass communication*, 3rd. ed. London, UK: Routledge.

⁵Stack, M. & Kelly, D.M. (2006). Popular Media, Education and Resistance. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29(1), 5-26.

⁶Alibabić, Š. (2002). Vaspitna/obrazovna i kulturna funkcija medija. *Obrazovanje odraslih*, 2, 61-73.

⁷A research at the University of Quebec show that 95% of respondents are using the media as the main source of information on crime and all related issues.

why they are causing so many problems. Just like all other companies, the media ought to have social responsibility which is mirrored in the necessity of the strict respect of ethical standards of journalism. Today there is no social responsibility of the media as it was conceived by the Hutchins Commission in 1947, according to which journalists have the moral obligation to consider the needs of society. One of the owners of the Wall Street Journal has recently stated that the newspapers are private businesses which owe nothing to their readers as they don't give them any power. The consequence of this is that the press media do not have a public role. Milton Friedman has sent a similar message when he said that the only responsibility of a company is to maximise the profit. It seems however that such ideas are challenged by theories which are insisting on social responsibility of the companies and individuals in the field of media as well as in other fields⁸.

MASS MEDIA AND CRIME: PREVENTION OR INCENTIVE

The question of the relationship between the mass media and crime has been addressed lately by the so called cultural criminology which uses interdisciplinary methods derived from criminology, sociology and criminalistics. The foundation for this branch of science can be found in the works of Cohen, Cohen & Young, Hall and others. These authors had contributed to understanding of the role of the mass media in construing the notions of criminality and deviance, as well as better understanding about generating new forms of social and legal control.⁹

The traditional mass media can have a positive role in the given context. This positive role of the mass media is their ability to affect public perception of crime as a harmful social phenomenon. They can also gather information about crime, affect the efficiency of the prosecution of criminal cases and have a control role in the investigative activities of the police and monitor the work of the institutions that are fighting against crime. The mass media can also emphasize programs which are educating the public about crime prevention and techniques which can prevent it as well as promote the policy of "discouraging" individuals to engage in criminal activities. Another positive role of the mass media is that they can participate in protecting victims and affect prevention of victimization. The role of mass media in crime prevention is also their capability of being a source of information about causes and current trends of criminal activities and their ability to inform the public on actions which are being conducted by the public institutions with the aim of preventing crime and other social deviations. The media can also help improve the state of crime and violence in the society, especially by protecting the vulnerable groups such as women and children. Reporting on violence against women has led to the increased public awareness about domestic violence and improving policies on protecting women from it, and it has also widened the scope of social services aimed at female victims of domestic violence. Reporting on rapes and child sexual abuse also have a positive effect because they contribute to raising awareness about these problems and stimulate public institutions to take measures and improve prevention of these social deviations. The media can also have a significant influence on cultural standards about child sexual abuse and incest in order to help victims to face the problem and, with expert medical help relieve the traumas and prevent stigmatisation. A significant number of governments, independent agencies and

⁸Bošković, M., & Alibabić, Š. & Budimir-Ninković, G. (2012) *Obrazovni i bezbedonosni rizici masmedijskog plasiranja šokantnih informacija, Andragoške studije*, Beograd, str. 127-142.

⁹Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, London: Macgibbon & Kee, London, 1972/1980;

the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime are starting campaigns through media companies in order to spread the awareness about the risks of consuming and distributing drugs with the aim to prevent drug addiction. By publicly announcing information on crime and social deviations, the media has an educative role and informs the public on a number of important issues. They are therefore encouraging critical thinking at least in a part of the population and promoting responsibility of the institutions, independent agencies, non-governmental institutions and governments. The role of the media in crime prevention is also visible when it comes to improving the surveillance or monitoring the police system. The media can also investigate into and emphasise the cases of abuse and corruption or report on the efficacy of the judiciary and share information about discrimination of certain individuals or social groups. Finally, the traditional mass media are playing an important role in encouraging responsibility of all the social actors.

In the professional community, there is constantly a dilemma: to what extent can the media influence "production of violence". Direct influence has still not been established, but there are assumptions which are suggesting to causal relations. Violence in the media such as the action or horror movies splattered with blood are not necessarily the only triggers for inciting criminal activities. Many reality shows and television programs which are promoting prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction, adultery and immorality and television programs which are dominated by vulgarity, banality and profanity often have high ratings and attract large audiences. These television programs can have a negative effect on children and adolescents. The actors of such television programs which sometimes include starlets and prostitutes often get a lot of publicity followed by significant profit. Young girls who still do not have developed critical opinions and a system of values are unconsciously taking such public figures as idols even though they are showing anti-social behaviour and are often related to certain forms of crime.¹⁰ The analysis of the effect of the mass media to criminal behaviour with elements of violence shows that the perpetrators were consuming the information published by the mass media. Empirical findings about the influence of media to aggressive and criminal behaviour are based on theoretical grounds. According to the cognitive understanding approach, which is represented by Berkowitz, motives for aggression and ideas represented in movies can activate violent and aggressive thoughts which can then reproduce and multiply. Once one such thought is prompted, other thoughts connected to it will be activated as well. Immediately after watching an aggressive movie, the viewer is „predisposed" to react aggressively because his network of memories which includes violence is re-activated¹¹. However, Bandura thinks that violent scenes broadcasted by media can cause aggressive thoughts and aggressive behaviour only with individuals who have such personality structures that are predisposed to have these types of emotions and actions. This author suggests that such contents shown on television can not only incite violence but also "teach" an individual to use new skills and methods for conducting violence¹². The majority of studies have revealed that the groups exposed to media content which includes violence had shown a higher stage of aggression than the control groups. Berkowitz and Donnerstein had conducted a laboratory research which provided evidence for this, and the

¹⁰Bjelajac, Ž.(2015) Mediji,supkultura i kriminalitet u savremenom društvu,Kultura polisa, god. XII, br. 27, Novi Sad,str. 121-134.

¹¹Berkowitz, L. (1984). Some effects of thought on anti- and pro-social influences of media effects, *Psychol. Bull.* 95, 410.

¹²Bandura, A. (1973). *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall

measured level of aggression suggested that there was an intention to hurt another person.¹³

In the process of gathering and sharing information about crime, the content created and broadcasted by media can have a negative influence on the perception of the scope and heaviness of crime, efficiency of preventing crime and the level of security citizens are enjoying. In their hunt for profit and sensationalism, the media are often publishing and broadcasting about monstrous crimes with detailed descriptions and explicit images which has an undeniable effect on the consciousness of individuals and shaping their personalities as well as a huge influence on their behaviour in the future. Informing consumers about social deviations and social pathologies is increasingly becoming dominant in the traditional print and broadcast media, as well as in the electronic media. Black chronicles are often appearing on cover pages of the print and electronic media with lots of details and images depicting serious crimes. Information presented in this manner according to a rule causes reaction of the consumers, especially the young ones who are more sensitive to such news.

The researches that are dealing with behaviour of subjects after they have been exposed to the content which contains violence and crime are showing different results. While some studies had shown that there is an influence of the "violent program" to the future aggressive behaviour, other studies had shown that there are no significant differences on the level of aggression between the groups. The fact that seeing violence in media causes aggressive behaviour of children and adolescents has been shown in three different researches conducted in the USA. These researches had shown that children and adolescents who had been exposed to violent media content have more aggressive behaviour than those who were exposed to the content which does not include violence. For example, research conducted by the psychologists from the Iowa State University had shown that even the video games which do not show blood but involve hurting can cause that children react more aggressively. Researchers had established that graphic video games are making children more aggressive and that neither children nor students are immune to violence in the media. Moreover, some researches about the influence of violence in media on young people show that children had high levels of aggressiveness.¹⁴

A research conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health show connection between frequent consuming of television programs that contain violence and children's behaviour: children are increasingly becoming less sensitive to pain of others while showing higher levels of fear which suggests higher probability that they become violent and aggressive in the future. These children perceive violence as a normal reaction to stress, namely, as an acceptable means for resolving conflicts. Researchers from this institute are of the opinion that media content that promotes violence also promotes toys based on violence and protected by a program which encourages children to mimic and repeat the behaviour which they have seen in the media, especially television programs and movies. They claim that children who watch content that conveys violent ways of resolving conflicts are more likely to act violently in real life.

On the other hand, research conducted by Marina Krčmar, had shown that violence in television programs are not necessarily affecting children in a negative way. She has established that the children who had been watching such programs are not behaving

¹³Felson, R. B. (1996). Mass Media Effects on Violent Behavior. *Annual review of Sociology*, 22, 103 - 128.

¹⁴ Felson, R. B. (1996). Mass Media Effects on Violent Behavior. *Annual review of Sociology*, 22

violently. Some children have heritable tendencies towards violent behaviour and they can be accentuated by watching violence on television. "Television violence" addicts can confuse the television experience with real life, especially over a long period of time. The desire to accept violence in real life and seeing aggression as a norm after watching crime-related content is connected with the theory of meaning in which the new reality created by the media normalises violence and turns it into acceptable behaviour. Like many others, Krčmar stresses out that violence seen in a television program or in a movie does not affect every child in the same way, but he thinks that spending a lot of time watching TV instead of engaging in other activities such as socialising with peers certainly does have a negative effect on every child.¹⁵

The effect of mass media to public opinion regarding perception of the presence of crime in the society is undeniable. The way in which media are representing crime is often exaggerated and has a dosage of sensationalism and information are often based on emotions rather than facts and the emphasis is on the negative perception of crime within the community. And because of this artificially created perception of presence of crime in a community, the public feels insecure in fear of possible consequences. There is often a difference between perception of the scope of crime and the real scope of crime. According to media reports on juvenile crime in Serbia, it seems that it is increasing over the years and yet the statistics show a tendency of constant decline of violence and lowering the number of crimes. Exaggerated sensational reporting on juvenile delinquency is creating a false impression in the public. On the other hand, the media often neglect certain types of crime which are not "interesting" to the consumers, and these are "white-collar" crimes, ecology crimes, cybercrimes and other criminal offences. And because the media are constantly over-emphasising presence of crime in the society, intolerance towards the perpetrators increases which led to the increase of repressive punishing.

CONCLUSION

The media are a part of our civilisation's reality, but they have a clear intention to interpret and re-create the reality itself. This is why they are firmly positioned in the system of the informal learning. Influence of mass media on public opinion regarding perception of crime in the society is undeniable. The specific way in which the media are presenting crime is often exaggerated and even has a hint of sensationalism and therefore gives information which are often grounded on emotions rather than cold facts. Negative images of crimes are the focus of the media and the public increasingly relies on the information presented by the media. People are more and more alienated as they communicate less while consuming the information offered by the media. And the media, guided solely by commercial interest, neglect the traditional values and rules of journalism and take over the leading role in reshaping the public opinion.

Sensationalistic reporting on crime leads to increased viewership and readership which is followed by desired ratings and profits, but one of the consequences is a false image about the nature and scope of crimes. All this leads to disturbance of citizens and causing fear of crime. Social scientists who are studying crime are united in their opinion that emphasising crime in the media led to the increase of crime in the society. Many studies are

¹⁵ Skakavac, Z.& Simić, T.(2008) Uticaj sredstava masovne komunikacije na kriminalitet maloletnika; *Tematski zbornik: "Maloljetnička delinkvencija kao oblik društveno neprihvatljivog ponašanja"*, Banja Luka.

supporting the hypothesis that the repetition and the omnipresence of crime in mass media actually "feeds the crime".

Mass media, however, have a significant role in crime prevention. This is conveyed in the fact that they can be a source of information on causes and trends of crime, informing the public on actions conducted by governmental and non-governmental institutions which have the aim to prevent crime and social deviations. The role of the media in crime prevention is also the one that involves monitoring the police system, emphasising cases of abuse and corruption, and reporting on efficacy of judiciary and discrimination of individuals and groups, etc. Finally, the media are playing active role in encouraging responsibility and raising awareness on dangers and bad influences of crime.

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UTICAJ MEDIJA NA PREVENCIJU KRIMINALITETA

Ovaj rad ima za cilj da prikaže uticaj mas medija na usvajanje poruka o kriminalu, koje mediji šalju konzumentima. Poznato je da mediji imaju važnu ulogu u procesu formiranje ličnosti, bilo u pozitivnom ili negativnom pravcu. Pozitivan uticaj medija nije sporan i on je veoma značajan u svakom društvu. Savremeno društvo karakteriše širok spektar raznih vrsta izvora komunikacija na koje konzumenti reaguju. Više istraživanja pokazuju da saopštavanje medija o nasilju, kriminalu ili drugim socijalnim devijacijama imaju dvojaki uticaj-upozoravajući i preventivni, ali i daju stimulans za usvajanje negativnih oblika ponašanja. U trci za profitom, ne retko, mediji na senzacionalistički način obaveštavaju javnost o teškim zločinima čime u javnosti stvaraju percepciju o izraženoj društvenoj opasnosti i nesigurnosti. Predominantno naglašavanje teških oblika kriminaliteta, sa detaljnim opisom događaja i sa slikama, kod jednog broja konzumenata stimuliše maštovitost i fantazije i identifikaciju sa negativnim pojedincima. Medijske informacije o kriminalu, tokom dužeg vremena, mogu dovesti do prihvatanja nasilja i agresije u stvarnom životu kao životne norme.

KLJUČNE REČI: mediji / kriminalitet / prevencija / konzumenti / komunikacija / informalno učenje / agresivno ponašanje