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Reception of Criminal Justice in Society: Role of Mass Media

In the contemporary world by transmitting symbolic content mass media mediates the normative constructs of the world, thus legitimizing the *status quo* or reflecting the “accepted” changes taking place in the social organization of the society and the power distribution field.

As the main source of information about crime and criminal justice, mass media significantly influences public knowledge, and thus, reception of the reality of crime. Through the disposition of “synoptic” power, it contributes to the shaping and framing of its content, which is influenced by the normative contours of the society, as well as the commercial media industry operating under the logic of the free market economy.

Thus, in order to understand the reception of crime and criminal justice in a society it is vital to analyze the origins of the crime knowledge and reveal its construction models and structure. In the framework of the research project “Reception of Criminal Justice in Society” funded by the European Social Fund under the Global Grant measure and administrated by the Research Council of Lithuania the interdisciplinary team of researchers from Vilnius University analyzes different types of social knowledge on criminal justice and the way it is reproduced in Lithuanian society.

The reception of crime reality is created and maintained by individual thoughts and actions. According to the social constructionism perspective, individuals shape reality in which existence they believe and are certain about, based on their personal experience and knowledge derived from social interaction. There are four main sources from which people obtain knowledge about crime and criminal justice: personal experience, significant others (family, peers, friends), other social groups and institutions (schools, church, governmental institutions) and the mass media. Combining directly experienced and symbolic realities individuals construct their realities of crime, which by their nature are intersubjective. However, it is important to take into account that individuals mostly learn and define the reality of crime based on images found

in the media. Thus, it is crucial to understand the nature of the information and images which individuals receive about crime and criminal justice through the mass media.

Mass media is one of the most important forms of public discourse in contemporary society. By trade, it constructs social meanings offering them to the public, which in its turn, considering or not the given constructs, construct their own social reality (McQuail 1996).

The main publicly declared function of the mass media is to inform people and to provide meaningful information on various aspects of public life. However, the means by which media operate in the contemporary world highlight their other important functions and influencers – political, economic, and cultural. Within this broader frame of market influenced indicators and the simplified nature of reporting in general, it is important to recognize that mass media has an inner ideology and significant external pressures, both of which impact the content of the mediated knowledge about crime reality as it does other areas of reporting.

Within this frame, it is no surprise that mass media provides a selective, pre-interpreted vision on crime. Mass media designates where one should have opinion and what one should think about, whilst simultaneously providing interpretative schemes for how to understand certain events or a set of events.

Obviously, it is impossible to represent and transmit the reality of crime in detail in a commercially viable mass media format. Thus, in mass media communication, images are simplified, and narrowed down to an essential message or “essence“. In practice this means that mass media presents crime in a (stereo) typed form (Dobryninas 2002).

Media thus creates stereotypes to define the crime, the criminals, the victims and the other actors in the scene. Each of these (stereo) types have pre-defined characteristics that help set public perception of the crime and how it should be addressed. On the basis of these stereotypes, individuals then construct their own conceptual reality of crime that influences their response to crime and to the specific criminal action at hand.

This implies that media constructed knowledge is based on "recipes". The public, for its part, automatically recognizes these recipes since they are pre-entrenched in their cognitive schemes for interpreting social events of this nature. This is because it is intrinsic for society to project and to have the public think within the frame of stereotyped plots. Such narratives reflect

cultural and societal mores, experience, values and cognitive structures. They have been internalized by socialization and embedded into the collective consciousness. Clearly, any such “recipe-based” knowledge over-simplifies an assessment of the causation of crime, and leads to the treating of crime related problems not as social phenomena, but rather, as random violent acts to which punishment becomes the logical response. In this manner, crime is misinterpreted and its most appropriate policy response obfuscated.

In actuality, media-managed crime reporting through set stereotypical images and concepts, offer simplified explanations of complex social problems and their solutions. They also impact public perception and opinion about the reality and causal factors of crime and the resulting response which the criminal justice system should take in terms of punishment. In this case, describing the crime as “evil” and the offender as a “villain” helps ensure that social rehabilitation is rejected and harsher punishment is advocated.

In short, when the media-based narrative is oversimplified such that other explanations of social causality for an action are not considered, predefined and often harsher punishment becomes a logical social response. The decision of who would take the role of a “hero” and who should be the “villain” is actually also ideological. It reflects certain societal values as well as the predominant positions of competing social powers. However, this division of mankind into “good” and “evil” is dangerous, because by assigning certain individuals or their groups to a “villain” status (i.e., “evil”), it becomes possible to justify doing them harm. Moreover, and within this frame, if the institutionalized “pain-causing” means are considered by social groups who are compelled by their belief in the certain criminal myth to be inadequate, often “lynching” either actual or metaphorical becomes a “justified” alternative.

It’s also important to note that much in crime news is implied. This not only reflects the previous knowledge of the reader about crime problems (which strongly reflects prior media influence), but also the reading and interpretation of the newly provided information in a given format. The resulting “decoding” reflects both the predisposition of the media and the reader’s social orientation strongly influenced as it is by external factors beyond his or her control.

Of course, human perception, behavior and response are complex phenomena and generally the result of various factors. Thus, the impact of the media, while no doubt pre-determinative, should not be overestimated. Mass media construct social meanings offering them to the public, which in its turn, considering or not the given constructs, construct their own social reality. The overall impact, however, is certainly significant.

It is also clear that describing particular social problems as criminal problems which threaten traditional values and the social fabric, performs an eminently political function. This political dimension is particularly relevant in terms of the “crime knowledge nature”. In a certain sense, the state is at the heart of this knowledge, because the main object of its control – crimes – is defined by criminal law. In the politically organized society, social control, together with the construction of crime reality, becomes a political act (Quinney 2004; 304).

The interest groups that have power legitimize their presence by constructing the reality which is being accepted and believed by society. The mass media space in this sense becomes an arena of struggle between different interest groups who seek to use it for this purpose and as part of their power legitimizing field. The definition of prevalent social reality is defined by specific individuals and groups within a socio-political power construct. Thus, and in this case, the social construction of crime is inherently a political act, characterized by social and cognitive control which legitimizes the “truth regimes” and silences “unwanted” discourse.

Often behind the excessive escalation of a certain crime or criminal justice issue in the media, lies the protection and projection of a certain political view. These may include a political view that the danger can be eliminated only by allocating more resources, incorporating more criminal justice personnel, increasing their power in solving the problem or implementing the internal reorganization of criminal justice institutions which may benefit certain interest groups.

Moreover, crime reality and knowledge in the public discourse are generally legitimized as a professional discourse. They are subsequently captured and contorted by actors in the legal, political and, subsequently, journalistic fields. Political actors may make use of “sensational”, “popular” criminal problems to strengthen their political capital and to maintain electorate support. Relatedly therefore, behind the excessive escalation of a social problem in the media, often one finds an intention to protect or justify a certain policy and its corresponding solution

set. In this context, crime narratives and so-called crime and justice conceptual frames are used to legitimate certain political strategies.

Moral panic outbreaks are perhaps the most indicative of this phenomenon given that power elite can use such events to distract public attention from more systematic societal challenges. In this manner, the moral panic coupled with the culturally shared narratives which are used to give meaning to it, can help to preserve the *status quo* of those who are in power. It does so by placing the source of a particular problem on generally “unpopular” social elements who become “scapegoats” for problems, which are actually more systemic in nature but which those in power are unwilling or unable to address.

Thus, the understanding of the crime knowledge construction in the public discourse requires the critical evaluation of all the previously mentioned factors and influencers. It is highly important to ask, who is its producer, what are their motives, what groups are they targeting, what behavioural response are they promoting and why and what are the consequences of this approach on the social problem itself from which the crime actually springs. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the origins of the crime knowledge and reveal its construction models and structure.

Methodology and research methods:

The research’s methodological scheme is based on phenomenological sociology which considers the meaning and importance of signs and symbols for interpreting social reality and for structuring social knowledge.

The empirical research combines the application of quantitative and qualitative content analysis and secondary data analysis methods. This triangulation technique enables one to obtain a holistic perspective on the subject matter, revealing the content, structure, meaning and context of the media crime discourse, and its interrelation with other social discourses in the construction of crime and criminal justice knowledge and their perception in society.

In this instance, the research is based upon the media coverage of criminal justice issues over a period of 16 months (and its impact on criminal justice institutions and the changes in public attitudes towards them...as a result of a media-constructed moral panic).

Quantitative content analysis:

The quantitative media content analysis includes the analysis of:

- Five most popular Lithuanian internet news media;
- printed media (national, regional, city newspapers)
- television news and info-shows on criminal justice issues on the three Lithuanian main broadcast channels.

Key words: crime, police, prosecutor, court, prison

This data set would allow the analysis of the intensity and dynamics of the crime news coverage, the semantic field in which the news was presented, and different other quantitative and quality categories.

The texts of the articles would be analysed using the computer-assisted text analysis software “Hamlet II 3.0”. As, qualitative and quantitative analysis are integral parts of Hamlet's“ design, the search of key words in the text files and counting their joint frequencies within the sentences, make it possible to distinguish the strongest words clusters and analyse the semantic structure of the discourse.

Television programme analysis will be used to illustrate that media is an arena where power can be concentrated and exercised. In this instance, it reflects the monopolization of the crime problem by certain interest groups.

Qualitative content analysis:

The qualitative content analysis of the media texts would be conducted by applying:

- V. Propp’s structure of narratives and how social actors operate in this structure; and
- critical discourse analysis to understanding media messages.

V. Propp’s narrative functions would be conceptualized by the actions of the character in the story and their consequences for the story. V. Propp distinguished a maximum of 31 functions which could be organized into 7 main stages: preparation, complication, transference, struggle, return, and recognition (Lacey 2000; 47).

The analysis of the narrative functions would be based on V. Propp's model of seven "spheres of action": villain, donor, helper, princess (and father), dispatcher, hero (seeker or victim), and false hero (Lacey 2000; 51). This analysis facilitates a better understanding of the narrative grammar of the media crime discourse.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) would be used for the assessment of a certain sample of publications (which would receive the greatest attention from readers during the research period. Popularity in this instance was determined by the number of comments left on an individual articles). The analysis would incorporate core CDA analytical categories used in the discourse-historical approach (DHA), developed by R. Wodak and her colleagues from Vienna University, which include the nomination (discursive construction of social actors), predication (discursive qualification of social actors), and perspectivization (positioning speaker's or writer's point of view and expressing involvement or distance) strategies. The strategies are understood as "<...> a more or less intentional plan of practices (including discursive practices) adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal" (Reisigl, Wodak 2010; 94). The analysis also involved the analytical categories proposed by T. van Dijk in his socio-cognitive approach towards news as a discourse (van Dijk 2009), together with the some elements of socio-semantic approach on the representation of social actors elaborated by T. Van Leeuwen (van Leeuwen 1996).

The Head of the Project

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