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Media and violence

„Aetas semper aportat aliquid novi“

The media's focus on violence and the overrepresentation of violent media content in the news and other programmes contributes to creating a false image in the minds of people on the structure and dynamics of crime, which may then create and/or perpetuate fear or anxiety among viewers. As criminal information in the media is generally characterised by distortion and an overrepresentation of major and violent crimes, people everywhere are very afraid, often regardless of the actual level of criminal infection or criminal activities.

According to a survey conducted in 2005 in 18 member states of the European Union, the crime situation in Hungary is generally more favourable in comparison with other member states and especially in terms of violent crimes. Nonetheless, the same survey concluded that, despite the lower rate of criminal activities in Hungary, the sense of security of the Hungarian population was no better (nor worse) than the European average.¹ In addition to the means of mass information (radio, television, Internet, printed press), the media as a mediator also includes all means capable of recording and broadcasting information.

In the media world, newscasts are the primary source of information on crimes. Nowadays, the reports and programmes on criminal activities and the administration of justice are now presented in the same section that covers celebrity deaths and funerals, natural disasters and breaking news of world politics, i.e. mostly at the beginning of the news and with great emphasis. (Barabás, Gyurkó & Virág, 2006) Similar news reports are presented in greater detail in certain thematic television programmes, such as *Kékfény* (Blue Lamp) and the magazine programmes of other channels. The latter group often deals with the specific cases at the level of yellow journalism, lacking professional conduct and sufficient attention to factual representation. The same processes are seen on the Internet news market. Fictitious aggression is seen on TV, at the cinema or even in video games on a daily basis.

¹ EUICS report, The Burden of Crime in the EU. Research Report: A Comparative Analysis of the European Crime and Safety Survey (EU ICS), 2005. Quoted by Szilvia Gyurkó and György Virág (Gyurkó & Virág, 2009).

Research opinions on the impact of violent media content

Research is primarily conducted on the media's influence in generating aggression and encouraging aggressive actions. A number of approaches, including those of psychology and sociology, are employed to explain the effects triggered by the aggression seen in the media. (Korinek, 2010:325-326)

According to the *catharsis theory*, watching a story full of violent scenes actually reduces aggression, by acting like a safety valve to blow off the viewer's "aggression load". The *stimulation theory*, in contrast, states that viewing violent actions actually stimulates the viewer to copy the action, and even has negative impacts in the long run as part of the learning process. In a psychological experiment, children were shown a film where an adult beat up a puppet. In one version of the film the "killer" was rewarded but in the other version he was punished. After the show, the children were allowed to play with toys, and hidden among them was the puppet seen in the film. The children who watched the "rewarding" version enthusiastically beat up the puppet. The other group that viewed the version of the film that ended with a punishment for the aggression did not even touch the puppet. According to the *habitualisation theory*, viewing aggression "takes the edge off" of aggression for the viewer, who then becomes indifferent to violence. The *inhibition theory*, however, claims that aggression instead elicits fear in viewers. As seen above, the various schools of research have come to very different conclusions on the same issue.

These research methods approached the phenomenon only from a single aspect and, consequently, are unable to explain the effects.

Such research projects often focused on the most vulnerable age groups, i.e. children and juveniles. Nevertheless, none of these research projects was able to present clear results and significant direct links between the violence seen on TV and aggressive tendencies developing in young viewers, even though the trend began as early as the 1960s. (Frydman, 1999; quoted by Stachó & Molnár, 2003) A research study conducted in 1972 under the title "*A televízió és a felnővekvő nemzedék a televízió által közvetített erőszak hatása*" (Television and the Rising Generation: The Impact of Violence Broadcast by Television) reported that the sight of violence leads to aggression in some whereas in some other cases aggression leads to being attracted to the sight of violence. (Hall, 1999)

An experiment conducted in the late 1990s concluded that violent films increase viewers' aggression to the maximum if 1) the viewer is already frustrated, 2) the viewer identifies with an aggressor who is attractive to him or her, 3) aggressive scenes taken from real life increase aggression

more than fictitious, staged aggressive scenes, *except when the aggressive scenes generate anxiety instead of aggression in viewers*. Hence, very early on in examining aggression-generating effects, the question arises as to what extent the media can cause *fear/anxiety* by broadcasting news, entertainment programmes or even advertisements. (Bushman, 1995)

According to other research, aggressive people react more aggressively to aggression seen in films while less aggressive persons react less aggressively. In other words, character traits fundamentally determine people's reactions to aggression. (Bushman, 1995)

In a 1997 study reporting on an experiment conducted with 1042 individuals, Grimm concluded that aggressive content causes aggression or anxiety depending on fundamental character traits. (Grimm, 1996:215)

In addition to psychological approaches, social theory research studying the topic in sociological terms is also important. In the course of his studies, American sociologist Gerbner defined the concept of "hardcore" viewers, for whom television is the primary source of stimulus and thus see the world as a more negative and aggressive place than those watching less television. These media consumers have distorted ideas about the world, the structure of society and current issues. (Gerbner, 2000)

The debate on interpreting aggression on TV still continues. According to Gerbner and the cultivation school, watching TV, in and of itself, increases people's sense of being threatened. Hall et al., however, emphasise that "rational" fear, justifiable by everyday experience, must be separated by the "irrational" fear attributed to the media. (Császi, 2003:59)

One last concept in media aggression research worth mentioning is the theory of *moral panic* developed by Stanley Cohen in the 1970s. The term has a negative connotation, referring to the unsuspecting naivety with which most people relate to the representation of some deviant phenomenon in the media. (Cohen, 1972:80, quoted by Császi, 2003:15)

According to Cohen's theory, we talk about moral panic if a group or a phenomenon linked to a specific group is perceived by the members of society as a threat to the idealised order and accepted set of values of society. The notions developed in the course of the moral panic integrate into society's belief system and offer a simplistic explanation to the creation of non-professional concepts on social order. This notion is therefore also based on the sense of fear generated by the news/violence. According to Cohen, those in power tend to take advantage of moral panics because they can easily divert public attention from deeper and harder-to-manage issues and they are inclined to concentrate on the threat caused by deviant behaviour, which can be managed at lower cost than taking control of the

environmental and technical risks. (Stachó & Molnár, 2003) As an example to illustrate the contradictory nature of moral panics, American media researcher *Henry Jenkins* argues that a significant group of politicians and parents in the U.S. challenge gun licensing regulations less than the media broadcasting of violence: the primary target of such attacks is not the law related to gun control but rather the violence presented in the media. (Jenkins, 2000, 13)

The relationship of the media and justice

In the system of criminal information services, the justice system is the primary source of the news and the media is the mediator of such information to the public. The unique feature of this relationship is that the elements of the justice system not only supply the information but they also appear in the news. The informant, therefore, informs upon itself. The news source and the mediator depend on each other and share some of their interests: those involved in the justice process would like to inform the public and the medium would like to obtain and broadcast the information. However, there is also a conflict of interest between the two. As the member of the justice system is not simply an information source but also a party involved in the news, they are also interested in what light and shape the news is presented and with what a selection of stories. The medium, on the other hand, is a participant in the race for news and is only interested in priority and exclusive information gathering.

The relationship between the bodies dispensing justice and the mass media is thus quite complex. The authorities, for instance, often cannot convey relevant information that would ensure the success of the ongoing investigation. The information provided by other bodies dispensing justice is also filtered (not all criminal cases may be disclosed and not all news releases may contain the same amount of information). They must also take the suspect's privacy rights into consideration. At the same time, the authority conducting the investigation (the police) has also requested protection for its own members. This also may present a limitation on information on crimes.

Media investigations indicate that crime news offers patterns different both from reality and from criminal statistics. The media, therefore, does not present reality but only a version of it, as the bodies feeding information to the public must present a distorted image. Frequent but seemingly irrelevant news is not published in the press, and so the public has relatively

little information about cases of minor significance whereas they learn about every single major crime from the press prepared in sensational style. Fear related to serious crimes is further reinforced by the fact that these cases are followed throughout the legal proceedings by the press. In other words, the case is presented multiple times during the proceedings: when the case is discovered, when the police investigation begins, when the trial of first instance commences or closes, etc. These repeated presentations of the case result in people reliving the details of a gruesome case, which also increases public anxiety. The news production processes and the structural characteristics of news production in the news organisation form one group of the factors shaping media reality. These have a significant influence on the notions of crime, criminals and penal justice conveyed to the general public. (Barabás, Gyurkó & Virág, 2006) *The other group of influencing factors is the assumptions of journalists and media experts about the audience, their needs, taste, interests, preferences, etc.* (Jewkes, 2004:37)

Selection and simplification are thus necessary and inevitable, therefore their existence and operation, in and of itself, cannot be demanded to be accounted for by the media. Key, however, are the aspects, principles and methods of selection and the place, extent and method of simplification. To the public, the one and only world that exists is the one presented by the media. Most people have no personal experience of crime, or even if they do, it is insignificant in terms of criminal activities on the whole and in no way "representative". To them, therefore, the selected and simplified image conveyed by the media is the "real world". The average citizen, without any professional or other connection to crime, does not know what crime and the administration of criminal justice are actually like. They only know the media's image of the world and they consider that to be the real world. (Barabás, Gyurkó & Virág, 2006)

Conclusion

The media content presenting violence hardly ever make the same impact on all viewers. The key difference is the one between the fictitious crime story, the thriller for entertainment purposes, and the police reports describing the real-life situation for information purposes. From the aspect of the acceptance of violence and the characteristics of the above two genres, the thriller for entertainment purposes does not mean such a threat and does not cause such unresolved tension in viewers as the information on real-life crimes. One may say that the viewer has a different relationship

with a thriller that they know is fictitious than with the police report on violence committed in their neighbourhood. (Császi, 2003:19) This assumption may be based on the well-known sociological role of proximity, according to which people take the thrillers set in their own country more seriously than those in more distant parts of the world. (Sparks, 1992, quoted by Császi, 2003:95-96)

Based on the various research theories, it is still unclear as to what extent aggression broadcast by the media affects citizens' aggressive predisposition, or whether it generates or increases aggression. Some theories, especially the initial ones conducted under laboratory circumstances, use a rather simplistic approach. In real life, it is hardly the case that minors or adults with immature or abnormal personalities commit aggressive acts similar to those broadcast by the media or due to the presentation of acts of violence.

As such, we may not necessarily experience the direct impact that assumes a virtually direct and immediate change in mass communication. One such, now classic, example is a radio drama by *Orson Welles* entitled *The War of the Worlds*, in 1938, when listeners believed the radio drama was an actual newscast and ran out to the streets to seek cover from the attack by an alien civilization.

Looking at the media aggression or fear-inducing effects in the victimization (and offending) process, the results are not quite clear. Even though the bulk of the studies, contrary to the "all-powerful media," describe the relationship between symbolic communication and the human responsive behaviour in a much more complex model than the initial, direct stimulus and response assumptions, public opinion is still inclined to see the power of the media as a direct, unilateral, cause and effect link. (Kósa, 2004; Kósa, 2006) *In each case, the media produces effects through the personality filter, although it may definitely shape one's personality, especially during childhood or adolescence, and perhaps may even be influenced by other factors.* These factors may include the *viewer's age* (children are more vulnerable whereas older people are more naive and tend to worry too much), *gender, current mental status* (e.g. depression, excitement, disappointment, etc.), *literacy and social status*. In connection with the fact of the bigger part of young offenders (and victims) at the violent crime, we have to see, that one of the target audiences for violent media contents is those of the younger generation living in poor social conditions and without any future prospects, who then embrace this media presentation to use violence as an easy way of resolving their conflicts. (Korinek, 1999)

Similarly important factors are the *socialisation environment to which the individual is connected and in which they experience the specific news, film or event* (family, school, religious, national, etc. community). These circumstances

can definitely influence how the viewer reacts to the violence broadcast by the media.

We must understand, however, that mass media are not the only one but definitely one of the most decisive means of shaping the public's image on crime and criminals. As such, it is clear that the images conveyed, and "bad" news with negative content in particular, play a role in shaping fear and everyday anxiety. Even though no moderation or self-limitation may be expected from the media, the bodies of the justice system, having recognised this situation, conduct targeted communication (and do not "leak" information) and focus on correct communication in presenting and explaining individual crimes, as well as on the analysis of preventive options to reduce fear among the public.

A fundamental change in preventing the spread of violent crimes and people becoming victims, as well as reducing fear, requires a long-term and coordinated development and implementation of social strategies (social, criminal, penal, media, etc. policies). These strategies will only produce effects in the long run and thus require a mature political thinking that can be satisfied with solid results produced later rather than spectacular and quick successes. This, however, goes beyond the scope of criminology.

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