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THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRIME AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

AUTHORED BY - NISHANT BARDOSHIYA

1. Potential Consequences of Sensationalism and Bias in Media Coverage of Crime

In the main, sensationalism and bias in media reporting on crime can significantly interfere with people's understanding and knowledge of crime, including the rate, trends, and types of crime. When the communication media set their main agendas as breaking and alarming news, it is outcomes that convey a distorted imagery that gives wrong impression that crime levels are elevated than actual figures. The unending stream of such reports leads to development of fear, so people can get the sense of insecurity even in such a safe place as their home. From this perspective, the public becomes more sensitive to dangers, which in turn affects their behaviours and attitudes, regarding the criminal justice, demanding a strict law enforcement and supporting related policies, even if there is actually no high level of crime in the society.

The final effect that is associated with the use of sensationalized and biased media coverage is the ability to provoke the development of moral panics. This is especially the case when some crimes are highlighted as being much more heinous or as requiring much more attention than others when in actuality these are simply not the case. This can cause readers to over react to issues that are being presented to them or that they are perceiving as an issue and the same goes for policies makers who may come up with solutions that are perceived to be appropriate and are in most cases extreme measures. Such reactions can range from passing of severe measures such as laws to increase surveillance and even the funding of security agencies to counter a situation that could have been over-emphasized by the media.

Another aspect that can be singled out is that the media helps maintain stereotypical perceptions as well as the prejudices themselves, especially in relation to the representation of minorities. Whenever the broadcasts cover some race or ethnic group linked to criminal actions, society remains stereotyped that members of this race or group are naturally inclined towards crime. This

not only rekindles existing prejudices, but also shapes the opinions of citizens of the country and contributes to racism and discrimination in the field of law enforcement and justice. Checks such as these lead to the marginalization of such groups, hence, rendering them vulnerable to police arrest and harsher sentencing when brought to trial.

2. Media's Effect on the Fairness of Trials

The influence of mass media in criminal trials can be critical in determining the fairness of trials especially for those cases that attract the public's attention. The amount of emphasis provided to such instances can cause the formation of public perception way before the trial stage, something that is nigh difficult to disregard. The media has the ability to prejudice potential jurors by what they have come across and in so doing deny the defendant a fair trial. This actually creates a form of influence from the media on the legal professionals such as the judges and the attorneys advising that they have to follow the sentiments of the people without necessarily following the legal procedures and evidence produced in the court.

The use of pre-trial publicity also plays a major role in the prejudicing of a case hence fairness of the trial. Even the basic information concerning the committed crime, the suspect or the defendant, and alleged proofs may create people's prejudice and potential jurors. Such assumptions can negatively influence the principle of the benefit of the doubt which is a foundation of any legal system. Once a certain story is set in the media it is very difficult to persuade the jurors to ignore this information and make judgments based purely on the evidence that is given during the trial.

An example is the phenomenon of 'trial by media,' which shows how publicity can take the place of a trial. This is the case because through reporting, commenting, and speculating, the media in some way tries to act as a prosecuting body in a trial and when the verdict is out, the public will have already found the culprit guilty. This media influence can influence jurors when they feel compelled to make their decisions based on the media discourse in order to conform with the community's trend thus fearing rejection or criticism. The fairness of trial process is therefore adversely affected because the decision is anchored on other things apart from the merits of the case.

Sensational cases make it to the media and usually, there is much focus on every stage of the trial. Such an environment can transform the trial into a show, which is rather unbecoming and influences the behavior of players. It becomes a show in which, lawyers may be performing to the

cameras instead of professionally presenting their legal opinions, and judges as well feel forced to make decisions that will be perceived positively by the public and members of the media present. The courtroom should be filled with seriousness and justice where matters are supposed to be handled seriously, but the media turn the place into a theatre.

The same is also valid with concerning the coverage of various media outlets as it affects public opinion in general regarding the criminal justice system. If, for example, trials of prominent personalities are greatly aired, then the public can develop prejudiced on its chances of fairness or the efficiency of the system from these cases only. This means that negative assessment of the legal process lowers people's confidence in the legal system while celebration or focus on certain victories creates wrong perceptions. The media therefore has the duty of portraying to the society how justice and the law looks like.

Through these cases, the media plays the role of disseminating information that can sometimes be wrong to the public and entail the balancing of the fairness of trials. The error commitment through reporting or commentary makes it possible for wrong impressions to be developed which will take a lot of effort to dismiss, even with efforts being made by the court. Once a piece of information has become a part of the public's collective awareness, it can become a daunting task to guarantee that both the jurors and the general public get to appreciate the true nature of the facts involved in the case. Their erosion tends to affect the whole overarching fairness of the trial as well as the entire legal system's credibility.

3. Criminalization of Certain Groups

Many a time, the media helps in the process of criminalizing given groups in the society, thereby furthering on given stereotyping biases to a level that is used in a selective and underrating way to given population. This implies that once the media uses images that identify certain racial, ethnic or socio-economic groups are more likely to be criminals, then it is strengthening existing community prejudices. Such portrayals make the public develop such beliefs, and duly translate it to how the police and the courts handle the said groups in a discriminated manner.

This makes the media subconsciously convey that everyone from that background is criminal, especially when minority criminals are involved or the crime is violent and sensational. This so-called crusade tends to leave out the root causes of criminal activities including, unemployment, illiteracy, and social injustices. Instead, it merely offers a clear cut picture of the world where

criminality is automatically assumed to be innate to those groups and thus reinvents conventional stereotypes.

Media opinions influenced by the public also extend towards policies and legislation and new legislation is made affecting the community in some way. Such portrayal creates a perception in the minds of the public, politicians and policymakers that in order to 'control' these 'erring' people the laws have to be made rigorous, surveillance has to be beefed up and such other measures must be initiated which invariably target the communities shown negatively in the media. These policies contribute to continued criminalization of persons with mental health conditions; they also maintain the systemic barriers inherent in the criminal justice system.

Depictions of particular groups in the media also intensively affect the psychological state of the individuals in those groups in a negative way. The latter was deprived of an opportunity to view the community positively, or at least, perceive it as not criminal, which preconditioned negative attitudes toward himself. It can impact such spheres as education, working experience, and people's psychological condition. It becomes very difficult for people in these groups to abide by the legal standards owing to the societal belief that they are criminals by nature, thus, they continue to lag behind in terms of employment opportunities, education and other social aspects.

4. Public Support for Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice Reform

There is a com. logical relationship between media portrayals and public opinion on police and criminal justice systems since the portrayal influences the perception of the community towards such systems. When the media painted a positive outlook of the law enforcement agencies, this type of media portrayal further helps in boosting the confidence and support the people have for police officers as they are seen as guardians and benefactors of the society. Nevertheless, when the media covers the cases of police misconduct, brutality, or corruption, people's trust is unlikely to remain high and will push for change and justice.

Conclusion

The media wields considerable power in shaping public perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system. Sensationalism and bias can distort reality, influence the fairness of trials, criminalize certain groups, and sway public opinion regarding law enforcement and criminal justice policies. It's crucial for media outlets to strive for balanced and accurate reporting to mitigate these potential negative consequences.