



CRIME STORY 2016

Jun 10, 2016 14:16 BST

EXPERT COMMENT: Crime Story 2016

Ahead of Crime Story 2016 taking place at Northumbria University, Newcastle, tomorrow 11 June, Professor Mike Rowe explores the media's fascination with crime.

The media is – and always has been – obsessed with crime stories. Whether a highbrow broadsheet or a populist tabloid, our newspapers devote more space to crime reporting than to most other forms of news, sport, current affairs, or human interest stories. Journalists and editors work to the principle ‘if it bleeds ... it leads’, indicating that gruesome content is likely to promote stories up the news agenda. Other factors that shape the newsworthiness of a crime include the characteristics of the victim, any peculiar or unusual

features of the incident, the extent to which it might be part of a series or sequence of crimes, and links it might have to wider social concerns already established in the media. Gang-related offending, for example, might not be especially serious relative to other offending but often meets many of these criteria, and so is more likely to be reported than, for example, white collar fraud.

The reasons why crime features so heavily in media coverage are many and varied. In practical terms crime stories are often easy to cover, relative to other issues. Police make appeals for witnesses, 'tip off' journalists (sometimes in ethically problematic ways), court hearings are easy to access and scheduled long in advance. Equally, readers and viewers are avid consumers of crime reports. Perhaps because they provide vicarious pleasure: an insight into experiences and aspects of life unfamiliar to many of us. That crime (especially murder) features so strongly in popular culture, and has done so throughout much of human history, suggests that we are in some way fascinated by such behaviour even while finding it morally repellent.

The impact of the media's obsession with crime is difficult to discern. In particular cases, of course, the media can encourage witnesses and victims to come forward. Recent historical sexual abuse cases have demonstrated this. The media can, as in the case of Raoul Moat in Northumberland in 2010, be used by police to communicate with the public and to try and provide reassurance. In more general terms the impact is less clear. On the positive side, it might be that the media coverage of violent crime, especially murder, reflects social norms that continue to find such actions reprehensible. It is a good thing that these events tend to be reported heavily: it would reflect badly on wider society were such crimes so commonplace and unremarkable that they passed by unreported. Furthermore, covering crimes such as domestic violence or sexual abuse might help other survivors by eroding stigma and stereotypes about such offences.

Less positively, disproportionate media focus on crime, especially violent offences, might raise fear and anxiety to levels that outstrip real risk. Particularly high-profile offences reported by the media are usually rare, objectively we are unlikely to become victims of these offences, and yet the types of harm and danger that might prove more of a threat to us go relatively under-reported. White-collar, corporate crimes, crimes against the environment, health and safety violations, and so on, remain relatively under-reported in the media considering the impact they have on the public. Media coverage can sustain stereotypes of victims and offenders that also have

negative implications for the wider social groups that are misrepresented (young people, for example) and can also misdirect attention from more significant sources of danger.

What remains much more difficult to identify is the impact of social media as 'citizen journalists' create their own coverage of crime. As in other respects, the changing media landscape will have implications for crime reporting, it seems unlikely, though, that the obsession with crime stories will diminish.

Crime Story 2016 – a unique crime writing festival giving readers and writers a unique insight into crime thanks to expert guests – takes place at Northumbria University, Newcastle tomorrow, 9 June. The full programme and tickets are now available at www.crimestory.co.uk

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