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Summary

The publication *Crime and Punishment in Crime News* presents the results of a research task examining the representation of crime and punishment in the media conducted by the Institute of Criminology and Social Prevention in 2016 to 2019. The aim of the research was to analyse the role of the media in the process of defining crime as one of the risks in contemporary society and the part the media portrayal of crime plays in the process of legitimising appropriate ways to manage these risks. The study is divided into three parts: 1. the theoretical framework of basic criminological approaches to studying the media relevant to the topic of the media representation of crime and punishment; 2. a quantitative content analysis of the media representation of crime and punishment and 3. a qualitative analysis of the perception of this media representation by the media's audience.

Crime is a social phenomenon that attracts the attention of the general public. Not only is it the central theme of a numerous films, television series and detective novels in its fictional form, reports of actual crime make up a large part of the daily news, whether on television, in newspapers or on the internet. The majority of the general public gets information about crime from the mass media, and its impression of the form and extent of crime, as well as the ways in which it is punished, is thus primarily formed by these reports. Criminology has been dealing with the issue of how crime is portrayed in the media and its potential impact on public opinion and views for a long time. Studies show that media interest in crime has grown over time and further analyses point to a disproportion between media content and crime statistics. Violent crimes are significantly overstated in the coverage of crime compared to statistics, and media presentation of crime thus differs significantly from official police statistics, which include registered crime. Media discourse is determined by focusing on atypical crime. An offence considered "newsworthy" with the potential to become a media crime report is not the same as a common and characteristic offence in terms of overall crime. Yet media representation of crime is often referred to in connection with the fear of crime, for example, or the punitive mood of the public in various contexts.

Quantitative content analysis evaluated a corpus of 1,886 crime news obtained by multi-stage random sampling in 2000, 2001, 2015 and 2016 using constructed week samples of the main

news programmes on public television station *Česká televize* (Czech Television) and commercial stations *Nova* and *Prima*. Prima had the highest share of crime reports in our sample, which was mainly due to a special part of the main news programme called Crime News, which specifically deals with reports on crime.

One of the key characteristics of news coverage of crime is the frequent use of specific case reports. More than 80% of television news reports dealing with crime or security cover a specific criminal offence. Less than one fifth of reports discuss the given issue in a general context and do not explicitly mention any specific offence. This characteristic is also one of the main differentiating features of crime reports that largely effects the difference between crime reports on Czech Television and on commercial stations. While the share of reports on a specific criminal offence is 68% on Czech Television, this is significantly higher on the commercial stations at 80% on Nova and 92% on Prima. Of the monitored stations, Czech Television has the strongest tendency to examine crime and security issues in a general context, without including a specific case report.

A significant newsworthy factor is the currency of reports, with criminal offences most often reported immediately after their commission or detection (44%). The information value of the case decreases with time; only 29% of reports cover ongoing investigations, 9% cover court proceedings and only one tenth of reports deal with the culmination of a criminal case with a final or interim judgment. This characteristic was also reflected in the different profile of crime reports on individual television stations. The vast majority of reports on Prima (65%) are devoted to offences immediately or shortly after their commission or detection, which is given by the special format of part of the main news programme dealing directly with crime reports. In contrast, Nova focuses on the ongoing investigation of individual criminal cases (54%), which it covers to the smallest detail, actively seeking out and contacting witnesses and relatives of the actors involved, and often also reporting further details. Compared to the other television stations, Czech Television is characterised by a greater interest in more general contexts, cases in the past and looking outside specific current cases.

In terms of the type of crime, the largest share of crime reports in the unsorted data set dealt with violent crime. At the same time, crime reports on Czech Television once again clearly differed from reports on Nova and Prima. While commercial stations with a tendency to sensationalise news prefer violent crime in their content, crime reports on Czech Television

most often covered economic crime and cases that could be expected to have a wider social impact.

The most frequently represented crimes in the media include assaults, murders, traffic offences and fraud. Significant differences in crime reports on individual television stations were particularly evident in violent crimes. While less than 5% of crime reports on Czech Television dealt with murders, 13% deal with this on Prima and 14% on Nova. Compared to the other television stations, Prima is also more significantly involved in robberies and assaults. Less pronounced, but still statistically significant differences were found in fraud and tax offences. It is worth noting that these offences are the only crimes with a significantly higher share of coverage on Czech Television. Less serious crimes, which are represented on our list by theft or burglary, are reported significantly more often on Prima, which devotes the most time to reports on crime of all the television stations and also covers more trivial offences of less newsworthy value.

By comparing the structure of crime in media representation and in terms of police statistics, the most significant characteristic of crime reports is the overstatement of violent crime, which appears in media crime reports over four times more often than in crime registered by the police. Broken down by individual television stations, the overstatement of violent crime in crime reports on commercial television stations is even more evident, at more than five times actual numbers in the second monitored period on Nova, 4.5 times on Prima, but only two times on Czech Television. The tendency of media representation to cover serious violent crimes was shown to be even more pronounced if we look at the crime of murder, which is one of the most frequently portrayed crimes in the media, ranking second in our selection behind assault. According to police statistics, murder accounted for 0.07% of all crimes in both monitored time periods. However, media representation afforded it almost 12% of coverage, which is almost 170 times higher. Once again, there is a significant difference between Czech Television and commercial television stations, where murder is overstated in the structure of crime reports compared to police statistics more than 200 times on Nova, almost 190 times on Prima, but "only" 70 times on Czech Television.

In terms of the dynamics of discourse, it is clear that individual television stations differ more in a number of characteristics today than twenty years ago. A gradual profiling of crime reports on the monitored television stations is evident over time, with a "widening of the scissors" between serious and tabloid (sensationalist) crime reports.

Many authors draw attention to the fact that while the most serious crimes often occur among people who know each other well and often at home, the media stereotypically puts the risk of crime in the public space. If we focus on the environment in which crime is portrayed in the media, the outdoor public space (roads, streets), where half the cases portrayed by the media take place, clearly wins. This is followed by the indoor public space, namely, restaurants, pubs, shops or public transport (trains, trams, buses). One-fifth of represented offences then take place at home. The differentiation is clear based on the type of crime. Although the public space accounts for more than half the unsorted data set, i.e., both the indoor and outdoor public space, a higher share of violent and sex crimes are presented in the home environment. In both cases about one third.

An even more interesting differentiation in places with the risk of crime presented by the media is evident in the case of specific crimes. In case of assault and murder, namely the two most frequently portrayed violent crimes in the media, these are most often presented in the public space in today's media. Over 60% of murders and over 80% of assaults are situated in the public space, whether indoors or outdoors, in crime reports on Czech television stations. There is also evident differentiation between Czech Television and commercial television stations. Commercial stations, i.e., Nova and Prima, present the risk of crime in the private space of the home more often in their news coverage than Czech Television, which relates to Nova and Prima stronger profiling on crime that by its nature takes place in the home environment more often (violent crime), and the focus of Czech Television on the types of crime that take place in the public space (economic crime). In terms of the dynamics of the crime report genre, we see a clear shift of portrayed crime into the private space of the home in the monitored periods, with more than twice as many reports in the second period.

In less than 9% of crime reports, alcohol or drugs are mentioned as a factor of offending. Most often on the part of the offender, rarely on the side of the victim or both parties. The role of alcohol or drugs is mentioned more often in the case of murder, traffic offences, general threats and, not surprisingly, drug offences. On the victim's side, alcohol or drugs were reported statistically significantly more often in cases of rape, but this was in small numbers in the overall sample and therefore no clear conclusions can be drawn, only to point out the potential for a more detailed analysis of the media representation of rape. There may be a prejudice that the victim is partly to blame for his or her assault in public discourse, for example, due to the consumption of alcohol or drugs. It would certainly be worth researching the extent to which these prejudices find support in the media portrayal of rape.

Crime reports on individual television stations also differed in the composition of represented actors. Authentic victims and witnesses, together with police as experts appear more often on commercial stations. Czech Television offers comments by judges, public prosecutors and lawyers more often. The most frequent experts who appear in crime reports across all television stations in connection with the topic of crime are clearly police officers. They are present in more than one third of reports. Many foreign studies confirm that the dominant view in crime reports is the police perspective. Because one of the main newsworthy values is the currency of the report, crimes are most attractive to the media immediately or shortly after they are committed, and the work of the police is significant in these early stages. The police are therefore the main source of information for journalists, the dominant gatekeeper.

The risk of crime is unevenly distributed in the news and affects various groups of victims differently. Of the specific groups of crime, sex crime (rape, sexual abuse) is unsurprisingly associated with adolescents, respectively children, and women. Fraud and robberies are reported significantly more often in connection with seniors. Compared with police statistics, our media analysis showed that the risk of victimisation by serious crime, such as assault, murder or robbery, is overstated in terms of gender in the Czech media space for women, especially young and middle-aged women.

According to a number of studies, one of the most frequent contexts in which seniors are mentioned in the media is when they have been the victims of crime, usually violent or property crime. Some studies also hypothesise that the presentation of seniors as victims of crime and the distorted nature of this presentation by the media may incite their fear of crime or fear of its growing brutality. However, our media analysis showed that compared to police statistics, the risk of crime for seniors presented in crime reports for selected monitored crimes is not overstated, and on the contrary, the share of media representation of senior victims is often lower than police data. However, this does not change the fact that reports of crime as such can raise general concerns about victimisation across age groups.

Various characteristics of offenders are mentioned more often in the media space for certain types of crimes or specific offences. The offender's mental illness is mentioned more often in cases of rape and sexual abuse, but also in murder and culprits responsible for a fire or other accident. The offender's previous criminal career is often mentioned in theft, burglary and drug offences. Politicians, as a specific group, appear more often as potential perpetrators of an abuse of power by an official (formerly abuse of power by a public official) and

corruption. Foreign nationals are often associated with drug offences, terrorism, as well as burglary and sexual abuse.

When comparing media-represented characteristics with available police data, the most significant disparity is in recidivism by offenders. There is a significantly higher percentage of recidivist offenders in police statistics than in the criminal past of offenders explicitly mentioned in the media. This is evidently an important category in police reporting, but it does not have a significant newsworthy value in crime reports. There is also a higher percentage of juvenile or child offenders in police statistics compared to media representation. The reason may be the low newsworthy value of less serious offences on the one hand, and the increased legal protection of adolescent and juvenile offenders when disclosing information in the media on the other.

Police statistics show the share of foreign nationals involved in crime is 7%; the nationality of offenders is mentioned in 5% of cases in media crime reports. A comparison of these figures could lead us to reject the hypothesis of the xenophobic tendencies of the media, for whom the offender's foreign nationality could be an attractive newsworthy value. However, on a more detailed differentiation according to specific crimes, it is evident that foreign nationals are identified as the perpetrators of sexual abuse, burglary and drug offences significantly more often in crime reports. Thus, foreign nationals are labelled as the bearers of significant criminal risk in specific cases in the Czech media space.

Differences in the structure of represented actors were also shown in crime reports on the monitored television stations. Victims and witnesses appeared on the scene more often on commercial stations than on Czech Television, as well as experts "in the field", i.e., police officers. Czech Television offered comments by judges, public prosecutors and lawyers more often.

The most frequently imposed punishment is in fact a suspended sentence. However, of the crime reports that mentioned punishment, 91% mention unconditional imprisonment. It can be said that punishment in the media space almost exclusively takes the form of long-term imprisonment. The share of reported unconditional sentences is five times higher compared to the sentences actually imposed in the given time periods. The structure of unconditional sentences based on their duration is also overstated in the strictest categories many times over in media representation. The form of punishment presented in the media is thus more punitive in all respects than the punishments actually imposed. This undoubtedly relates to the fact that

the media report on serious offences, which are subject to stricter punishments, but also the fact that the media report the strictest sentence faced by the offender.

An analysis of the media audience confirmed the premise that the majority of the public obtains information about crime mainly from the media. This is news on the internet, social networks and television news programmes most often. Media behaviour and sources of information on crime largely depend on age. The specific position of television coverage of crime was also confirmed. Television news is perceived as ubiquitous, pointing out its non-selective impact in contrast to, for example, news on the internet, where we click on a news item based on the headline and read it or not. In this respect, the impact of ubiquitous and non-selective television news can be much more intense compared to media where we choose what content we are interested in. The results of our study suggest a markedly ambivalent connection to crime reports by the media audience, from the declared avoidance of negative reports on one hand, to the attractiveness of the topic of crime on the other.

Greater awareness of criminal sanctions and knowledge of alternative punishments was demonstrated by older participants in discussions. At the same time, however, it is clear that the importance of the cognitive component cannot be overestimated. In the media space, the story is more attractive and stronger than the facts, even in the case of crime reports. Research confirms that a specific story has a more significant impact on the opinions and views of the message recipients. For example, the public is more open and compassionate in evaluating and accepting alternative punishments in response to individual stories.

Regardless of age, gender or education, participants often presented punitive attitudes and declared their support for harsher punishments, especially for violent crimes. In connection with these views, they often mentioned their own fear of crime. At the same time, they argued not only with their personal experience of crime, but also with experience of crime mediated by the media, i.e., high profile criminal cases covered by the media. There is evident support for alternative punishments and identification with the principles on which it is based for less serious, especially unintentional crimes. However, alternative punishments are only supported by respondents for less serious crimes and provided this is not a recidivist offender. The views presented by focus group participants correspond to the results of a representative public opinion poll on the use of probation, and our findings may further the interpretation of views on punishment among the general public.

The analysis of crime reports and their audience showed that the voice on punishment and criminal sanctions in the Czech media and in public debate calling for an approach to punishment that we've called "rehabilitative" for analytical purposes and which emphasises the resocialisation, corrective and rehabilitative function of punishment is very weak. Yet, it is clear that the principles on which it is based are not foreign to the general public and largely depend on the situation and context in which it is represented and publicly discussed in the media.

The results of the analysis of the media audience support the assumption that a deeper analysis of public views on crime and punishment, as well as an analysis of the feeling of security and fear of crime, must also take into account the representation of crime and punishment in the media. During discussions, respondents used media content at all levels of their arguments, which provided them with experience not only of crime, but also with the form of its punishment, as well as cases where measures to regulate crime have failed. The media thus has a significant formative function in this area and to a large extent has an impact on how people perceive the extent, structure and form of crime and punishment, and how they legitimise their views.

Translated by: Presto