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from Media, crime and punishment in the digital age

When punishment is featured in news reporting of crime, the emphasis is almost always on prisons. Do media discussions of community sanctions change public views?

The media discourse around crime and punishment is emotionally charged, often focusing on sensationalised accounts of high-level criminality, such as murders, which necessarily promote the dominance of the prison as a form of punishment. Researchers have argued that this focus on very serious crime has hardened punitive attitudes in the public— though such attitudes are perhaps not as punitive as some politicians tend to assume they are.

Media reporting of community sanctions, on the other hand, has been much more limited. But research shows that there is a tendency to portray them as inferior to prison (Hayes 2013). In recent years, however, a number of scholars have begun to identify and analyse the rise of ‘mass supervision’ (McNeill et al 2010), a term which refers to the large number of offenders and others who are supervised within the community.

Does media engagement in the digital age challenge or extend mainstream media?

Sociologists do not always agree on the extent to which the media influence public attitudes. In the pre-digital age, there was a broad division around arguments over media dominance versus those of audience activity (where audiences were seen as much less easily manipulated). The advent of digital media, and in particular, social media, means that audiences no longer simply receive content; they also circulate and produce content, for example through posts on Facebook, tweets and blogs.

In digital media landscapes, therefore, the analysis of media 'content' is less straightforward. We need also to focus on the dynamic set of practices deployed by audiences. These processes involve how audiences select content to consume, their evaluation of the content, and decisions about how to respond to that content (Jenkins et al 2013). There are two dimensions of this which are particularly significant for this study:

- First, media engagement is socially and culturally embedded - users select, share, post and evaluate media because it says something about them, and the construction of their identity. A key aspect of this may be a desire to align with particular cultural, social and political groups.
- Second, this engagement can be seen as an ideological struggle between mainstream media corporations and individual or collective users. We no longer simply have to accept the views that are put forward by the mainstream media.

For theorists such as Henry Jenkins (Jenkins et al. 2013) the latter is a positive development, allowing the mainstream to be challenged in ways it simply couldn't be in the pre-digital age. But it cannot be assumed that users will always be progressive in their views. Mainstream content is as likely to be promoted by user engagement (for example by retweeting stories) as it is to be challenged.

The circulation of ideas through digital media often simply extends the reach of the mainstream media and these processes may increase media power – and reinforce particular attitudes rooted in and reinforced by mainstream ideologies.

The study: methodology and sample

The focus of our research into the media and attitudes to punishment for crime was not only on what audiences do but also their motivations. We used qualitative methods, in the form of focus groups. This allowed us to explore the way participants make meaning and develop interpretations from the range of influences that they are exposed to. We had three stages in our research, each with distinct aims (See Box 1)

Box 1 Methodology: The Three Stages

1. In the first stage, we examined existing knowledge and beliefs on community sanctions and where they come from and general thoughts on crime, and the role of punishment.
2. In the second stage, our aim was to explore audience engagement with media reporting on community sanctions. We did this by immersing our participants in a constructed news environment where we created print, web and online video content, expressing a range of perspectives. These variously supported or undermined community service as being positive in ways that were typical of existing coverage in the mainstream media. We included themes on community sanctions as a form of punishment, as beneficial to local communities, celebrity cases, experts discussing evidence, prisoners' attitudes to community sanctions, and their usefulness in dealing with cases of vulnerable women.
3. In the third stage, we explored whether this experience led to any potential challenge or a reinforcement of the attitudes expressed in the first stage.

Pre-existing attitudes and how they are formed

Initial discussions in our focus groups exposed the broad divisions about attitudes to punishment. Those who react to crime in a moral and emotive way tended to emphasise the need for retribution. Those who look at these issues from a more liberal standpoint, focused more on whether sanctions were effective and likely to lead to rehabilitation. Broad connections could also be made between these divisions and habits around media engagement. We identified two groups:

- **'Traditionalists'**, who watch broadcast news as scheduled and/or read a daily newspaper tended to be more punitive.
- **'Convergers'**, who used a wider range of media platforms including digital media which allowed more selective filtering of information, tended to be less punitive.

For both groups, however, the prison - either being seen as too soft, or as failing to rehabilitate - dominated their penal imaginations:

*I think when they get a sentence they should be doing exactly the years that they've gave them. See this; they're out in a couple of years for good behaviour and all that. And all this out, these outdoor prisons and everything, I don't agree with them either. **(Cleaner, female)***

*Rehabilitation is an ideal, but prison, from what I understand, it doesn't work in that way, so I can see the only deterrence. **(Web designer, male)***

Awareness of community sanctions across all groups was generally low, although some had observed them being carried out in their local areas and one participant had had direct experience:

*My son's done community service, and it was a deterrent to him, because he was out painting bus stops and everything in the dead of winter and everything else, do you remember? And he went like that 'Aw, to hell with this' and you're not getting paid for it or anything. So it kind of curtails.... [] It did work for him. **(Cleaner, female)***

Most, however, had not heard or read much about community sanctions in the media they routinely consumed; community sanctions tend to be used for lower level criminality and stories about it did not appear often in traditional or digital media environments.

For some, reporting of celebrities' experiences of community sanctions were the only connections made. For the *traditionalists*, attitudes to community sanctions were linked to their views on prisons because they regarded both types of sanction as being used in ways which were too lenient.

For the *convergers*, there was a tendency to take a position of neutrality in the face of a lack of

decisive information. The background to this was a widespread lack of trust in public figures, including politicians and journalists, and in the information environment more generally.

Styles of reporting

Our research found that the *traditionalists* in our sample tended to be drawn to known press titles and traditional TV formats, and to 'opt-out' of reports from unfamiliar sources. *Convergers* tended to be drawn to stories on the basis of reporting style, headlines and pre-established perceptions about the appeal of different sources. *Traditionalists* were also more interested in engaging with the details of the crime and motivations, which allowed them to position themselves morally and emotionally. Again the sense of community sanctions as an 'escape from jail' was clear:

Cleaner, female 1: So she got away with that then?

Cleaner, female 2: No, she got a community service.

Cleaner, female 1: Community service! How long did she...she got 160 (days) community payback for stealing the money, £23,000 of jewellery off her pal?

A newspaper article¹ which provided evidence that many offenders found a short prison sentence was a lesser punishment than community sanctions, only served to confirm existing perceptions of the prison:

It was the fact that the young lads were actually saying they'd prefer to be in prison than doing community service, because they find it better in prison: a better life than having to actually work outside. And you think, well, in that case prisons are too soft for them.

(Cleaner, female)

A dominant theme for both groups - though particularly for *traditionalists* - was an 'us and them' narrative which attracted them to stories about how comfortable prisons were. They contrasted this with their own law-abiding behaviour which was seen to be unrewarded. For those with the most punitive views, rights were a luxury offenders did not deserve.

A key factor for the *convergers*, in terms of reporting style, was the prioritisation of values such as accuracy and balanced reporting. This led them to 'opt out' of the 'sensationalist' reporting of the tabloid press. Some showed strong awareness of what they perceived to be emotional manipulation, aimed at serving the political agendas of particular sources, such as newspapers.

But this could also work to reduce sympathy for those in vulnerable groups. So, a TV report about a vulnerable young woman sent to prison for stealing, who later committed suicide, opened up discussions about the usefulness of community sanctions:

I tend to go negative on that, like if I know that all my strings are being pulled. I know that they're looking for a response from me...Absolutely, what happened to this woman was appalling... But even when you're crying you're aware of the fact that this isn't a real emotion... You're trying too hard to manipulate people. (Student, female)

However, this rejection of sensationalist reporting could also be seen as a way of practising 'taste' in a way discussed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu thought that exercising good taste often involved distancing yourself from the 'vulgar' attitudes of lower classes in order to emphasise more 'refined' tastes.

I get the impression that newspapers very much cater to their readership, and you're aware that how things are reported is going to reflect the type of people they expect to be reading it, as much as a fair representation of the story they are trying to convey. So that kind of colours my impression, and I mean that doesn't stop me reading the Daily Mail if it's sitting next to me on the train and no one's near it. And no one sees me. (Student, male)

In cases such as this, *convergers* confirmed their own cultural preferences and cemented their belonging to particular social groupings.

Attitudinal change in a created media environment

So how did exposure to our created media sources on community sanctions affect attitudes? A key finding is that even when exposed to relatively unfamiliar material on community sanctions, reactions were still strongly shaped by dominant discourses on the prison as the main form of punishment.

For the *traditionalists*, negative attitudes towards offenders and perceptions of the prison as inadequate were very established, and reports reinforcing those positions were generally accepted. Narratives challenging them tended to be dismissed, or re-interpreted. The power of media representations is demonstrated by this exchange with the participant whose son had served a community sanction with positive outcomes:

***Cleaner, female 2:** Now, reading some of that, I don't think it (community service) works... long term.*

***Moderator:** You don't think it works long term?*

***Cleaner, female 2:** No, no. It's only worked for [son's name], but as I say that was a menial thing that was a kind of fine.*

However, while media representations operating in isolation from the wider environment lack influencing power, the research indicated that they do at least open up space for re-evaluation which, over time and with reinforcement, may potentially shift attitudes:

*I think the lack knowledge of it, one would just kind of assume that community service is quite benign compared to other forms of punishment, but that's purely through lack of knowledge. **(Janitor, male)***

*Well, I'm actually thinking that community service is kind of obviously tougher than I thought: the embarrassment and different things as well. But I mean I just assumed that anybody that committed a crime and was offered community service to jail time would definitely go for community service. But I think I'm totally wrong there **(Cleaner, female)***

The *convergers* similarly did not show a shift in attitudes – reports which did not fit their preconceptions were largely dismissed on the basis of their inadequacy in providing evidence-based, balanced arguments. Furthermore, our research findings emphasised the increasing importance of what theorist William Merrin (2014) describes as ‘me-dia’ – the reorientation of some people towards a media environment constructed through likes, posts and endorsements in social media from friends and family. This further reinforced existing views.

Moreover, social media may still have mainstream content as its lifeblood, since much of what is posted and commented on comes from the mainstream. However, amongst *convergers*, being exposed to content about community sanctions did at least open up space for debate - particularly if the ideas came from sources they saw as credible in their own media environments.

Conclusion

This study suggests that it is very difficult for messages challenging dominant discourses to break through attitudes which reflect those put forward in the mainstream media. A more positive outlook on community sanctions as an alternative to prison is only likely to be fostered if messages are sustained and repeated over time.

Ideas about punishment (and indeed other aspects of crime) tend to be sustained by agreement within social groups, and any attempt to penetrate or promote an alternative message needs to acknowledge the importance of a sense of identity and belonging in shaping reaction to the media. This is particularly so amongst groups who make a lot of use of social media.

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ⁱ Travis, A. (2011, June) 'Short jail sentence preferable to community service, say prisoners', *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/jun/08/prisoners-prefer-jail-sentence-to-community-service>

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