

"Another case of Ruthless Robbery..." Violence, Crime and the Local Press in a provincial City of Greece

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Abstract

This paper's basic hypothesis is that the press, through the presentation of criminal incidents, transmits an evaluative knowledge determining this way, desirable objectives and propagating for canonistic types of behaviour. The daily knowledge as a constitutive element of the daily reality is a condition of interaction between the members of a society. In that sense, the local press that transmits this daily knowledge constitutes a dominant structuring factor of this reality.

The research which is based on content analysis of newspaper articles of the whole local press of Mytilene (the capital of the prefecture of Lesbos in Greece) published between January – March 2004 and additional interviews from journalists aims to illustrate the following:

- a. The concept of criminality is being constructed both qualitatively and quantitatively through local press and not vice versa.
- b. The local press evaluates negatively illegal behaviours, positively the austerisation of social control, while in most cases it cancels any relevance with the social frame of criminality.
- c. The local press with the dramatic narrations that uses it causes fear of victimisation.
- d. The journalists transmit evaluative knowledge in an attempt to cover the lack of knowledge of real criminological data.

On theory

When Durkheim (1960) claimed that crime constitutes an assault of the fundamental values of a society and originates collective emotional reactions or that it constitutes an attack to powerful sentiments of collective conscience and a mass reaction of disapproval expressed in punishment, he set a way of thinking most criminologists were going to follow. Traditional criminology claims that official (state) reaction to the crime expresses the reaction of disapproval of the members of the society. Informal social reaction suggests the existence of common values which in the case of a crime are jeopardized by the actions of certain individuals. In order for social cohesion to be kept such acts should be controlled.

But can we speak of community of values within the modern heterogeneous societies? We should distinguish between values as ideals from the process of evaluation (Lemert 1972),

which is the one that finally directs the action of an individual without obeying blindly and automatically in *a priori* orientations, (values). In that case what is considered as cause of penalization, that is to say the informal social reaction, can be seen as its outcome.

On the contrary, the role of the official social reaction creates and not simply identifies representations of violence and crime. This occurs through the definition of penal law and the action of the police. This definition is the outcome of the evaluation stemming from groups of people who have access to centres of decisions and try to protect their own behavioural models. On the one hand resistance to authority, disobedience in rules set by superiors are considered as violent and criminal behaviour. Getting somebody fired is on the other hand considered to be a legitimate form of action. In this sense, the concept of crime and violence can be seen as the formalisation of social conflict whereas legislation can be seen as the instrument of powerful social teams in their effort to protect and perpetuate their power at the expense of the powerless.

Nonetheless, if the process of the definition of an action as criminal is the formalisation of social conflict, why then the official social reaction is accepted by the majority of society? This is related to the mechanisms of ideological production through which the creation of consent as result of ideological manipulation of society is sought. The Media are part of these mechanisms of ideological production. In this sense, my research aims at illustrating that the local press – through the representation of criminal behaviour - constitutes a mechanism of ideological manipulation aiming at the challenge of consent on the official social control.

Media function as mechanism of production of ideological consent firstly, when the extent of knowledge that lay people have on penal law in is minimal, something which for Greece is proved by researches such as the one of Daskalakis (1983). Secondly, when the representation of crime constitutes a direct threat. In such cases society perceives the official social control as a protective structure. Crime however, is perceived as a direct threat, when a negative social identity dominates the discourse which in turn will result in the creation of the 'criminal' stereotype and attracts the collective animosity and the abomination of society. The stereotype of the 'criminal' does not only cause animosity towards the action but also the retrospective inversion of his entire social identity. The 'criminal' is not a person but a figure with only one characteristic. This characteristic often constitutes a construction which ends up explaining the crime (Mishel 1968) retrospectively. An important functional mission of the penal system is the production of stigma of the criminal stereotype. The ideological manipulation of Media is related to the distribution of this criminal stereotype. Impressive titles, intensely sentimental descriptions accentuate the animosity and the abomination that causes the criminal stereotype. Simultaneously however, Media create this criminal stereotype, by presenting only certain categories of criminals (burglaries, drug users), while they are particularly discreet in the white collar crimes. Thus in the collective representations of public opinion the former types of criminality take enormous dimensions while they cover only a small part of the registered criminality.

The basic function of forecasted violence and criminality from the Media perpetuates structures of power and through the cultivation of a picture of the world which prompts the citizens to consider power relations as assumed and connected with values (Gerbner 1972). The Media transmit as well as create knowledge. This knowledge is always evaluative in terms of determining the objectives which are desirable and should be sought. This happens most of the times immediately when knowledge is repeated and usually simply transmitted – information on certain facts, on actions and victims, without control as it is precisely given by the police bulletins that are published by the Press Office of Police Authorities.

It also indirectly happens when Media gather and interpret information on criminality, classify them in comprehensive units and evaluate individuals and behaviours. Thus they create knowledge but also influence the evaluation of society on the work of the institutions of official social control. This arises through direct reports ('congratulations to the police') or through the creation of fear and social biases. As a result public opinion evaluates positively the increase of severity of the mechanism of social control. In every case the representation of confrontation of criminality and violence concerns exclusively the repressive mechanisms (police, justice) and not the preventive ones (socio-political responsibility).

The paper's basic research hypothesis that concurs with the 'conflict theory' model of analysis of criminality, is that if a newspaper represents conflicting interests concerning the status quo then the quantitative and the qualitative representation of violence and crime will differ in relation to the other newspapers. The rest research hypotheses instrumentalise the above theoretical proposal that the representation of crime from the Media concerns the perpetuation of structures of power and are the following:

- a. The percentage of reports on criminal issues is big in relation the total of articles – reportage of each newspaper.
- b. The representation of criminality by the local press concerns crimes of the Common Penal Law, which however concern a minority of the total criminal behaviour, as it is recorded in the official statistics. There is no report on white collar crimes.
- c. The representation of criminality is focused on the way of the performance of action. There are no reports on the social motives and on the necessity of prevention. The only agent that is mentioned is repressive (police, justice system). Often the presentation will be copy pasted from the official bulletin of local Police Authority.
- d. When the report is not merely written information on the performance of action the news will be personified, full of intensity, sentimentality and dramatic narrations. The offender will be presented with negative characteristics and the victim as unlucky and helpless, the police as effective if the crime has been solved and ineffective in a way that fear of victimisation is spread while increase of severity of social control is presented as the only solution.
- e. The reporters are not aware of the qualitative and quantitative elements of the actual registered criminality. Their ignorance is substituted by biases and stereotypes, which they repeat in their reportages.

The survey and its results

The present is based on a three months research January - March 2004 on all the local newspapers published in the capital of the Prefecture of Lesbos. These are three weekly and four daily newspapers all with explicit ideological-political orientation. In the first stages of the research there has been a collection of the criminal reports and the quantitative comparison with the total of all the articles of each newspaper during these three months. At a second stage qualitative analysis of content is attempted in order to distinguish two things. On one hand, the type of crime reported and on the other hand all the evaluative characteristics that are used to describe the predator, the victim and the official social control in the narrations for the incident. Finally, interviews with 7 journalists who are in charge of the police reports have been carried out in order to record their knowledge on criminality and the criminal stereotypes that they hold.

A preliminary analysis of the results of the research reveals the following:

- a. As for the qualitative representation of criminality

Table 1

	W 1	W 2	W 3	D 1	D 2	D 3	D 4
Number of Newspapers	12	12	12	61	72 ¹	61	61
Percentages	7,3% 17/223	5,04% 14/278	1% 2/200	3,58% 48/1342	6,39% 92/1440	10,08% 123/1220	4,68% 128/2745

The first conclusion is that there exists a small difference between weekly and daily newspapers as far as the quantitative coverage of criminal incidents is concerned. If however we examine it more carefully we will conclude that this statistic difference disappears if newspaper W3 is removed from the comparison. W3 has a very small quantitative coverage of criminal incidents which is explained by the ideological orientation of this newspaper since it is the official newspaper of the Communist Party in the Prefecture. If we disprove the previous table and present the newspapers depending on their ideological orientation we will see that there exists a statistically important cross-correlation between ideological-political orientation of the newspaper and the quantitative coverage of criminality.

Table 2²

Newspapers

Left	-----W3-----	D1-----	W2-----	D4-----	-----D2-----	W1-----	D3----	Right
Percentages	1%	3,58%	5,04%	4,66%	6,39%	7,3%	10,08%	

b. The quantitative analysis in the type of crime that is presented per newspaper is presented in the following table.

Table 3

	W 1	W2	W3	D1	D2	D3	D4	Total	Percentages
Drugs	41,1 % 7	14,3 % 2	-----	33,3 % 16	27,2 % 25	20,3% 25	21,9% 28	103	24,3%
Burglaries	29,4 % 5	7 % 1	1	20,8 % 10	15,2 % 14	12,2 % 15	14,1 % 18	64	15,2%
Driving Offences	11,8 % 2	7 % 1	-----	8,3 % 4	31,5 % 29	35,8 % 44	25 % 32	112	26,4%

¹ D1, D2, D4 are published everyday except Sunday while D3 is published seven days per week.

² Newspaper W3 supports the Communist Party
 Newspaper D1 supports Synaspismo (a leftist party)
 W 2, D 4 support PASOK (Socialist Party)
 W 1, D2, D3 support ND (conservative party)

Illegal Immigrants	5,9 % 1	14,3 % 2	1	12,5 % 6	7,6 % 7	8,9 % 11	7 % 9	37	8,7%
Other	11,8% 2	57,4 % 8	----	20,9 % 10	17	21,2 % 26	30,5 % 39	102	24%
White Collar Crimes	----	----	----	4,1 % 2	----	1,6 % 2	1,5 % 2	6	1,4%
Total	17	14	2	48	92	123	128	424	100,0%

A preliminary analysis of the above table³ leads to the conclusion that the representation of criminality from the local press concerns specific crimes. These are use and distribution of narcotics, burglary – robbery, driving offences, illegal migration. Minor offences (disposal of factitious currencies – CDs, piscatorial infringements) fall under the category “Other”. White collar crimes are presented in 3 of the newspapers with the total percentage of 1,4%. Actually it concerns reports of the same incident about the conviction of some persons in charge for the collapse of school building.

The qualitative analysis of the content of the reports of the local press on criminal incidents is more interesting. In detail, the reports under the categories "other" and "driving offences" are small in size and they constitute - as the journalists said – an exact copy of the bulletin given by the Police Authority of the Prefecture. The same is observed also to the majority of articles under the category “illegal immigrants”. Those however, add narrations and characterizations that present the illegal immigrants as victims and an evident concern for their future in Greece. The presentation of white collar crimes is also interesting. One of the newspapers (D4) presents such a crime in a completely neutral manner, another newspaper (D3) presents the same crime with the title "justice spoke" and another one (D1) with the title "finally justice". Rich in narration and evaluative characterizations are most reports on criminal incidents under the categories "narcotics" and "burglaries". "Ruthless burglars", "continuous burglaries", "burglaries continue this year", "young crooks terrorise the residents of Mytilene", "victim of ruthless robbers, an honest new farmer", "they do not respect nothing", "shame on them", are some of the many titles of the newspapers, in the first page of the subject of burglaries. In one of the burglaries which occupied the headlines of all the newspapers for two days we read: "another case of ruthless burglary... This strike rises up the number of burglaries in jewellery stores of our town in four within two years (number particularly preoccupying)... As therefore becomes obvious, police control is insufficient... Reasonable concern by shop owners who said that something should be done in order to protect their properties... Police Authorities should henceforth think of increasing patrols ...". As far as criminal incidents that involve narcotics are concerned, some of the titles are the following: "large quantity of narcotics", "narcotics in schools", "hash-use in its ups", "another young person lost by heroin"⁴. The paradox is that the subtitles present "the big success of the police or the harbour patrol" for which we learn that it is ranked first nationally regarding

³ The analysis of this table continues in order to discover if the differences between the newspapers are statistically reliable and where do they stem from.

⁴ The only death in 2004.

fighting crime whereas in the reports the concern of the citizens about narcotic circulation in the park “where mothers with their children play amongst drug-users many of whom appear to be ruthless”⁵(this phrase in bold), is underlined.

c. The biggest part of the interviews with the journalists was drawn according to a semi-structured questionnaire, the questions in which aimed at confirming or denies elements of the analysis of the content in the newspaper reports and to enlighten us about the way of collection of the information and writing of the reports. Part of the questionnaire was structured (answers with numbers of priority). The purpose of that questionnaire was the revelation of the extent of knowledge of actual criminality by journalists from the cross-correlation of answers with the official registered criminal data⁶.

The result appears in tables 4-7.

Table 4

	J1	J2	J3	J4	J5	J6	J7	Official data
Total of offences in the country	-----	-----	-----	-----	60.000	50.000	10.000	305-358.000
Percentage of felonies out of the total number of offence	50%	40%	20%	35%	45%	60%	-----	1,7 – 2,5%
Total of convictions	-----	-----	-----	-----	48.000	45.000	7.000	83-92.000

Table 5

Age of offender	13-17	18-20	21-24	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-49	60 above
Average of journalists	5	2	1	3	4	6	7	8
Average of official data	8	7	5	4	3	1	2	6

Table 6

⁵ Actually in a timespan of three months there was found at the park only a napkin in a bucket of litter with insignificant quantity of hash.

⁶ As it is registered in the Statistics of Justice that is published by the National Statistical Service, so far data up to 1996 are published. For better comparison I will use data of the four last years 1993-96.

Marital status	Single	Married No children	Married With children	Widowed/Divorced
Average of journalists	1	3	4	2
Average of official data	2	3	1	4

Table 7

Education	Illiterate	Elementary school	High-school graduate	University graduate
Average of journalists	1	2	3	4
Average of official data	4	1	2	3

A brief analysis of the above illustrates the ignorance of journalists about actual crimes and the existence of stereotypes about the offender. In more detail, while their estimates for the total amount of crimes are very small concerning the actual number (4 of them declared complete ignorance), they believe that a big part of the criminal incidents fall under the category of felonies (which in no case reflects actuality). As for the offender they believe that it is a young man from a troubled or no family at all (single-parent family or divorced family) and illiterate, while the majority of offenders as it has been recorded officially are married with children, of elementary education, between 35-44 years old.

In the second part of the structured questionnaire the journalists were asked to give numbers of priority in the categories of offences (14 categories) regions of performance of the offence (11 categories) categories of imposed sentence (11 categories). The following tables comparatively present the results for the 3 more important categories in each sector, for the journalists and the actual classification according to official data and the official classification of the 3 first categories and their evaluation from the journalists.

Table 8

Types of offences (14)	Theft	Robbery	Drugs	Driving offences	Infringement of market code	Infringement of construction code
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Average of journalists	1	2	3	7	10	11
Average of official data	5	10	7	1	2	3

Table 9

Place	Athens	Macedonia	Stereia Hellas	Peloponnesus	Aegean islands
Average of journalists	1	2	3	6	9
Average of official data	1	2	5	3	6

Table 10

Sentence	Fine	Imprisonment 1-3 months	Imprisonment less than a month	Imprisonment 3-6 months
Average of journalists	1	2	3	4
Average official data	7	1	2	3

From the above tables we can briefly say that as for the date about the place of performance of crime and the imposed sentence, the journalists are aware of the actual data even if they believe that mainly the offenders are punished with pecuniary sentence and that the region in which they live and work has low criminality, something which is differently registered in official data. Their big ignorance however, concerns the categories of crime that prevail in Greece. Their picture involves violent penal criminality (robberies - narcotic), whereas in Greece the biggest percent of offences concern civil infringements.

Discussion

The present paper follows the arguments offered by critical criminologists who claim that the role of the official mechanisms of social control can not only identify but also create violence and crime. The concept of crime constitutes the formalisation of social conflict, even though if ostensibly it is the result of a consensus process of negative evaluation and control of behaviours. The ostensible character of this process is a result of ideological manipulation of society, active role in which plays the press. This theoretical proposal was transubstantiated in research hypothesis from which this paper drew its research conclusions. Bearing in mind

the restrictions of time and space and the fact that it is a preliminary investigation, I believe that the answers that were given to the research hypotheses can constitute a pilot scheme for a bigger scale research. In other words both the extent of the reports of the press, and the qualitative elements that characterizes it (types of criminality – negative evaluation of offender – positive evaluation of police and justice) are elements of selective representation of the criminal phenomenon. The inexistent reference to the social reasons and the increase of police control as unique solution, are elements that enhance the criminal stereotype as it is registered in the local press. A criminal stereotype that is put forward by the journalists who write about crime, covering for their ignorance for the actual data of criminality. A stereotype that influences public opinion on crime and its confrontation, but mainly prompts citizens to be afraid and to consider power relations as given and connected with values.

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