

# The media and violent crime

Ian Marsh

Media sources often focus on stories about violent crime. But does media coverage of such crime change our behaviour?

## Key concepts

media representations of crime, copycat syndrome, causal link, violent masculinities

## Signposts

There is much debate regarding whether violence reported or shown in the media increases the likelihood that some people will be stimulated to perform similar violent acts. Ian Marsh takes us through the arguments, and offers some examples of so-called 'copycat' crimes. Was there a link, causal or otherwise, between the media representation and the subsequent acts?

The author concludes that focusing the blame on the media often serves to draw attention away from other, arguably more relevant, social issues such as poverty, access to firearms and violent masculinities. This article will be useful to students taking the Media and Crime and deviance options.

It is clear that the media, and particularly the visual media, play an ever-larger part in our lives. A report from the 'Childwise' market researcher published in 2015 showed that 5- to 16-year-olds had on average 6.5 hours of 'screen time' a day — that is, watching TV, playing on games consoles, or using a mobile phone, computer or tablet. Teenage boys had the highest usage, with an average of 8 hours a day, while for 5- to 10-year-olds it was 4.5 hours.

Although there has been a decline in the number of TV sets per household, from 2.03 sets per UK household in 2003 to 1.83 sets in 2012, the growth of online viewing has seen an increase in the amount of television watched (according to a TeleScope report cited on BBC news online). The report found that viewers in the UK watched an average of just over 4 hours of television a day, a figure that is up from an average of 3 hours and 36 minutes in 2006.

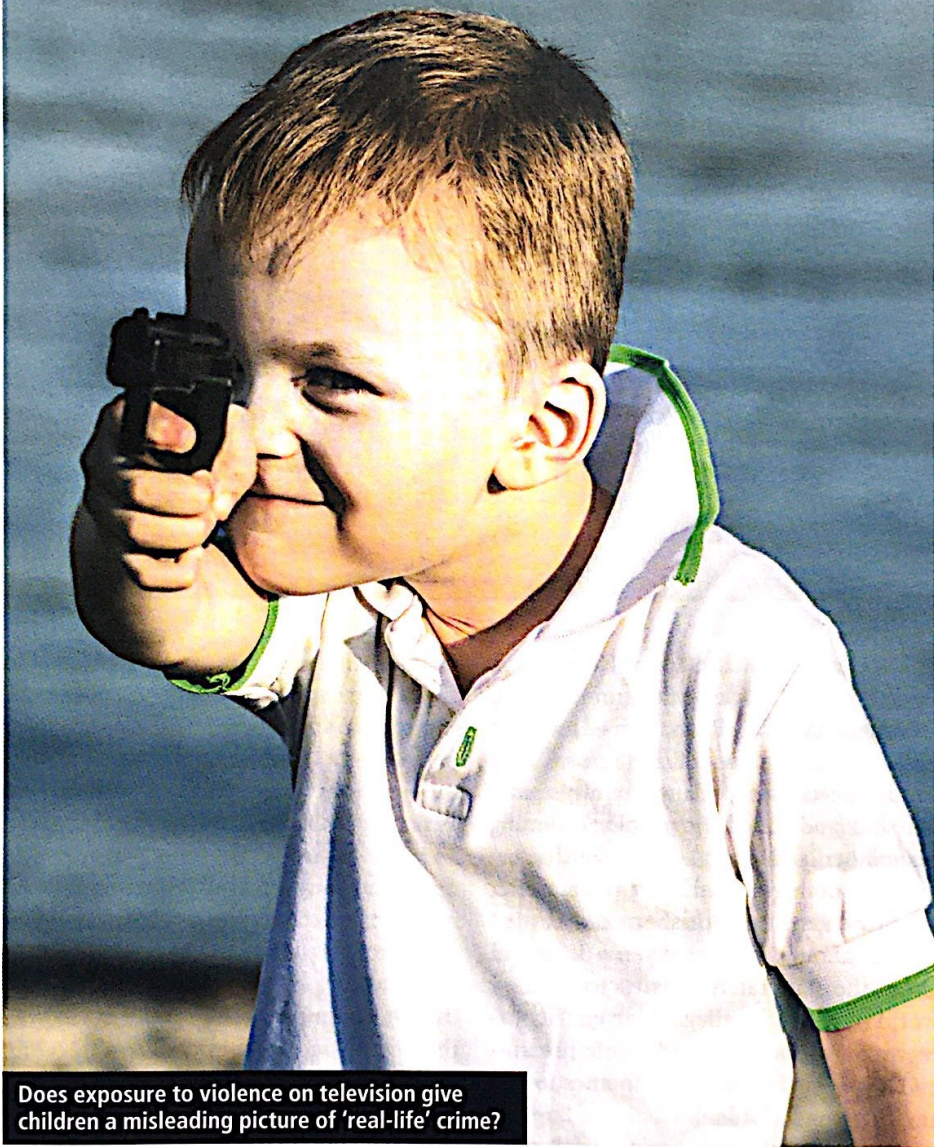
With the spread of new media, and particularly social media, it becomes even more difficult to track the extent of media usage. However with around 2 billion people connected to the internet worldwide, YouTube generating 92 billion page views per month and with Wikipedia hosting 17 million articles, the influence and extent of new media is clearly enormous.

## Violent media

Bearing these sorts of statistics in mind, and given the amount of crime and violence covered by the media, it is likely that more people see more criminal and violent behaviour on the screen than ever before. Although fraught with difficulties of definition and measurement, it has been widely accepted as fact that by the time the average American child finishes elementary school he or she will have 'seen' the outcome of some 8,000 murders and by the age of 18 will have seen around 200,000



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Does exposure to violence on television give children a misleading picture of 'real-life' crime?

acts of violence on television (this figure has been quoted in a number of sources, including the *New Scientist* 2007).

This scale and type of media coverage raises a number of issues. Why is crime such a popular form of entertainment and news? After all, although most people might have broken laws or rules from time to time, few plan to become full-time criminals. Is the media coverage of crime helpful or harmful? Does it increase people's worries about crime?

Such questions highlight the importance of studying the relationship between the mass media and crime. One aspect of this

relationship which has excited academic debate concerns the extent to which the portrayal of violence and crime in the media encourages or even causes such behaviour in 'real life'. One element of this debate is known as the 'copycat syndrome'.

### Copycat crime

One of the key issues that early research into media effects focused on was the extent to which the media directly impacts on the population who 'receive' it. One view sees audiences as essentially passive recipients. In terms of the media and crime, the focus of this interest and research has

been on whether, and to what degree, there is a direct causal link between the media portrayal of violence and the promotion of violent behaviour.

There are great difficulties in proving that the media works in this way as a causal factor. For instance, with regard to so-called 'copycat' crimes, there are problems with proving or not (in a legal context) that a particular media portrayal (in a film, game, website, etc.) 'caused' a particular criminal act.

Despite these difficulties, such assumptions about the media's power to influence criminal behaviour are still prevalent. Indeed, it is often the media publications themselves that express awareness of their power to influence people and to bring pressure on governments and other forms of authority.

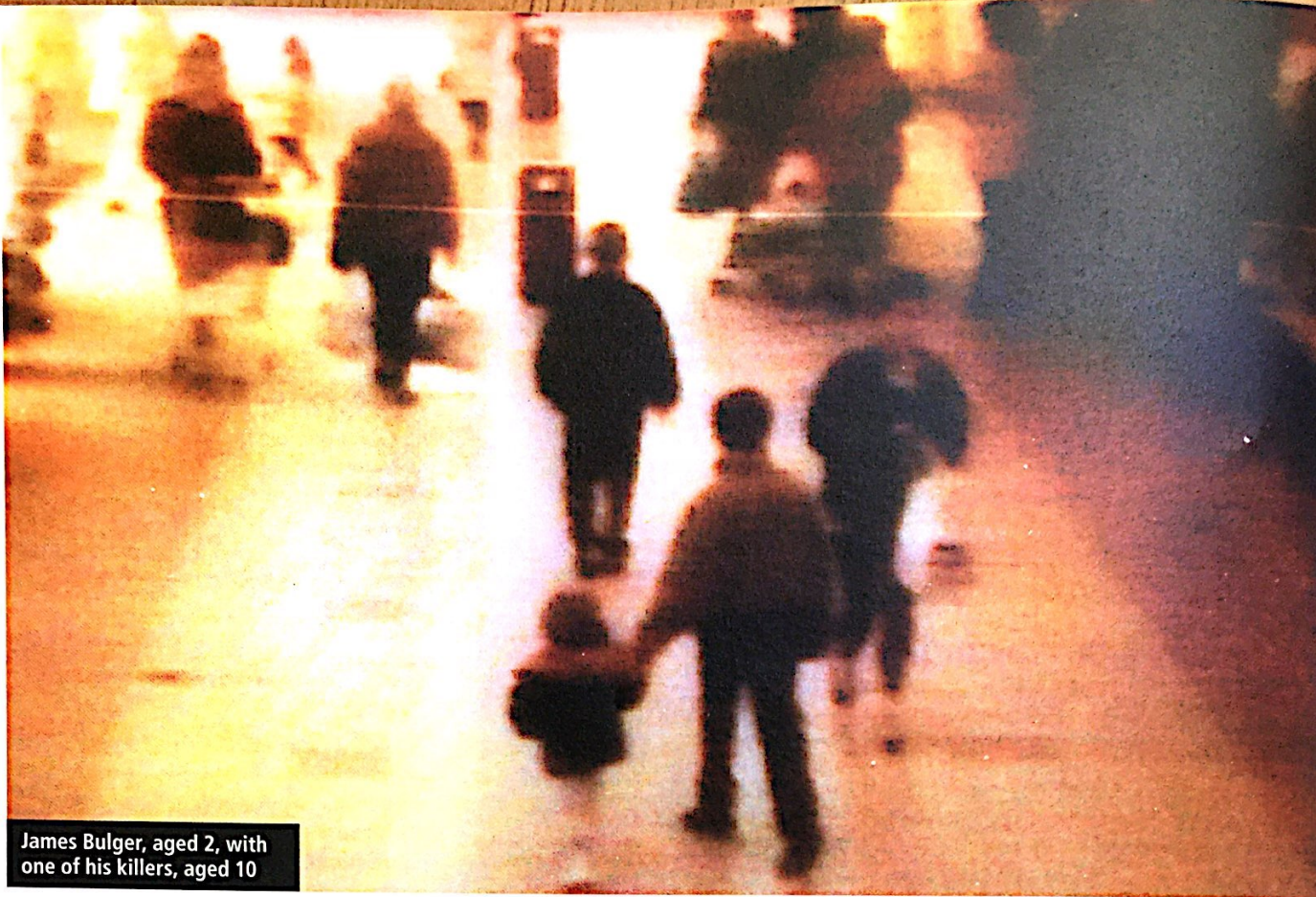
It is hardly likely that so many media sources would be able to finance themselves from advertising revenue if those paying to advertise did not believe in the power of the media. The case is made by Jewkes (2015) when she points out that the classifying of videos and films in terms of their suitability for viewing, and the introduction of software to help parents monitor their children's use of the internet, are further illustrations of the assumption that the media are indeed a major influence on human behaviour.

### James Bulger

Concern about the relationship between media violence and criminal behaviour hits the headlines when serious and high-profile crimes suggest that such a link really exists. This was most graphically illustrated by the murder of 2-year-old James Bulger in 1993. In November of that year, two 10-year-old boys from Merseyside, who had been captured on CCTV walking away from a shopping mall with James, were found guilty of his murder.

The 'horror' video *Child's Play 3* had been rented by the father of one of the boys shortly before the murder and there were some similarities between scenes in the video and the killing of James. There





James Bulger, aged 2, with one of his killers, aged 10

was no evidence that the two young boys involved ever saw the video. However, the judge stated at the trial that: 'I suspect that exposure to violent video film may in part be an explanation.' This view was echoed in newspaper editorials at the time. For example:

6 The uncanny resemblance between the film *Child's Play 3* and the murder must be of concern. A link between the film and the crime would not prove that the former caused the latter. Yet it seems quite possible that exposure to images of brutality could turn an already disturbed child towards violence. 9  
(*Independent*, 26 November 1993)

### The Hungerford massacre

There have been numerous other examples of the alleged 'copycat' crime phenomenon, both before and since that case. In 2004, for example, a BBC documentary reconstructed a crime which, it was argued, had left an indelible mark on the nation: the Hungerford massacre of 1987. This case raised once again the issue of so-called copycat killings.

**ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE MEDIA'S POWER TO INFLUENCE CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR REMAIN PREVALENT**

On 19 August 1987, in Hungerford, Berkshire a 27-year-old unemployed labourer, Michael Ryan, armed with a Kalashnikov rifle and a Beretta pistol, took to the streets, firing at anyone in his path. He shot and killed 16 people, including his mother, and wounded 15 others before fatally shooting himself. In the days after the massacre, the British media carried stories about Michael Ryan's life and about the elaborately constructed fantasy world in which he allegedly lived. He was reported to be 'obsessed' with firearms and he owned magazines about survival and firearms.

Ryan was also said to be a fan of the film *First Blood*, which some of the press claimed had sequences similar to the events that had occurred in Hungerford. However, it is doubtful that Ryan had ever seen the film, even though he did own copies of a number of other violent films.

### Other examples

Accusations of copycat crimes and other violent acts followed the release of the horror film *Scream* in 1996. CBS News in the USA reported on the killing in January 1998 of Gino Castillo by her 16-year-old son Mario and his cousin Samuel Ramirez (aged 14). This murder became known as the 'Scream murder' after the two killers

claimed that they were inspired by the films *Scream* and *Scream 2*. However, the trial judge ordered that no evidence pertaining to *Scream* be allowed and that the case should not be referred to as the 'Scream murder'.

More recently, in reporting on the mass shooting at the screening of the new Batman film, *The Dark Knight Rises*, in a cinema in Colorado in July 2012, the *Guardian* headlined an article, 'Will the Dark Knight Rises shootings revive the debate on "copycat" crimes?' (21 July 2012). In that case, 24-year-old James Holmes walked into a cinema showing of the Batman film and opened fire with a selection of weapons, killing 12 people and wounding many others.

### Weighing up the evidence

Further examples of the supposed 'copycat' effect are cited by Coleman (2004) including a series of school shootings in the USA. While providing a catalogue of patterns and connections between different events, the evidence generally seems to be circumstantial at best. Certainly, some studies conducted under experimental conditions suggest that watching violence on the screen can lead to more aggressive attitudes and possibly more violent behaviour. The psychological experiment





The Century Movie Theater, Colorado, where 12 people were murdered during a screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*

undertaken by Bandura and others in the 1960s are good examples of this. However, whether this is the trigger or cause of that behaviour is another matter.

It is hardly surprising that some young male offenders are interested in films that sensationalise crime and violence, or that sex offenders show an interest in pornography. However, this does not prove that the media incites violence; rather it suggests an attraction for some young people to viewing content which reflects their own behavioural traits — and that this attraction is reinforced by the media.

In a study that examined the extent of self-reported copycat crime in a sample of serious and violent juvenile offenders, Surette (2002) summarised the somewhat limited previous research in the area. He suggested that there was a growing amount of anecdotal evidence which indicated that criminal events that are quite rare in real life are sometimes committed soon after similar events are shown in either the news or entertainment media.

However, he found that most of those individuals who did imitate crimes reported by the media already had criminal records or histories. He concluded that it was more likely that the media influenced *how* people commit crimes rather than *why* they commit them in the first place.

In his own study of 81 youth offenders, Surette found that about one in three reported having considered a copycat crime, with one in four having attempted one. Bearing in mind the limitations of quite a small-scale survey, Surette suggests that a significant number of juvenile offenders who identified themselves as engaging in copycat behaviour do seem to see the media as a significant influence.

### Conclusion

This discussion of the so-called 'copycat' syndrome highlights the vast array of social, cultural and individual influences that can help shape violent behaviour, as well as the more general debate about the effects of violence in films and in the media more generally.

Indeed, the various violent crimes referred to above, plus the school killings in Colorado in December 2012, inevitably lead to discussions (often politically driven) about the role of the media in promoting violence. There is far less debate, in the USA particularly, about the role of inequality and poverty in the construction of violent masculinities and questions of gun ownership and control. Focusing on the media as a 'cause' of violence may be politically attractive, but the case is hardly proven that such a causal chain exists.

**IT IS HARDLY SURPRISING THAT SOME YOUNG MALE OFFENDERS ARE INTERESTED IN FILMS THAT SENSATIONALISE CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

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