

A Global Analysis of Crime, Fear, and the Media



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Being in a U.S. presidential election year, this book's publication is particularly timely in that the campaign rhetoric from both political parties centers on various degrees of post-9/11 jingoistic fear, fuelled by recent ISIS-engineered attacks in Paris and Brussels.

Media coverage of such terrorism on Western targets trivializes the daily threat of suicide bombers and actual slaughters in war-torn cities throughout the Middle East, but also the Boko Haram genocide in Nigeria and other global bloodshed inflicted on innocent parties.

It is under that backdrop which this illustrious international team of academics consider the psychological and sociological links between crime and fear fuelled by media attention. That is not to suggest that in today's world the only kind of violence instilling a deep concern in your average citizen no matter location is always caused by terrorism.

A typical New York evening newscast that did not report an armed robbery or lover's quarrel homicide sadly would appear unusual to the average viewer, not to mention the media hardly reports all that is going on – crime or otherwise – in communities.

A dozen chapters in this fine anthology destined to be a required text or popular trade title tackle various aspects of crime through a multicultural prism. Most of the theses focus on the U.S., but other countries studied either quantitatively or qualitatively include Canada, Trinidad, Great Britain, Denmark, and Italy, among them.

In Trinidad (as elsewhere), media tastes and preferences in general are greatly influenced by American culture. Fictional police shows, such as *CSI* and *Law & Order*, are a staple of commercial television exported globally, so you have art imitating life, and no doubt real crime, as well as the dramatized, likely influence both crime victims and those committing the criminal acts.

Chapter 1 explores how to research crime victims, and statistics confirm some obvious observations: elderly people and women are at greater risk when compared to young people and men.

Common sense also tells one not to venture into perceived "bad neighborhoods," especially desolate areas at night despite geography.

Yet a paradox exists that people with a low "objective" chance of becoming a victim of a crime, feel more insecure and experience victimization – *and vice versa!* Which results in a false sense of security for even those in the assumed safe categories.

Chapter 10 deals with media bias and quotes from a 1998 study finding that murders most likely get reported when they are committed against whites, females, children, the elderly and wealthy, while less attention is given to African and Hispanic Americans.

This theory was proven recently in *The New York Times*, which analyzed 358 U.S. shootings with four or more casualties, not including mass shootings. "Surveys show that they are more fearful than whites that they will be crime victims and that they feel less safe in their neighborhoods," the article stated.

Citations date back to 1933 when academics first considered Hollywood glorification of violence on the big screen. Fast-forward a generation or two, and an interesting chapter in the book considers the possibility of insulated millennials, whose idea of entertainment is playing by themselves violent video games, and to what extent does this pastime influence already mentally ill individuals who plot a rampage, such as was the case with Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in 2012. It was speculated by the media that the heavily armed shooter responsible for killing 12 people as well as himself in 2013 at the Washington, DC Naval Yard was addicted to violent games, but that assumption was never confirmed.

An area that begs further study by sociologists and psychologists – perhaps in a new volume – is to what extent crime falsehoods are repeated on social media, needlessly promulgating fear. A Tow Center white paper (not cited in the book) in 2015 entitled "Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content," details how digital journalism often does not confirm facts, and subsequently fake rumors are believed by readers who do not accept real news.

On the other hand, actual video footage on July 6 of a black Minnesota man after being shot in a car by a police officer has garnered 5.7 million views on Facebook (as of July 15); his last minutes alive and death were visually chronicled by his girlfriend. On July 12, 2016 three black men hanging out in a parked car in Norfolk, Va., listening to rap music and smoking while streaming themselves live on Facebook, were suddenly hit with a barrage of gunfire, later learned to be from police. The video has been viewed 905,000 times as of July 15).

Since people around the world have different levels of access to the media (and the Internet), the difficulty to establish uniform metrics is obvious. Government control of

¹Following the submission of this review, on June 12, 2016, 49 people were killed and 53 others injured in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in the worst mass shooting in modern U.S. history. The killer reportedly pledged his allegiance to ISIS, and was eventually killed by police.

the media obviously will dictate how much reporting is really occurring. A totalitarian regime will naturally want to instill fear in its citizens to not even think about committing a crime.

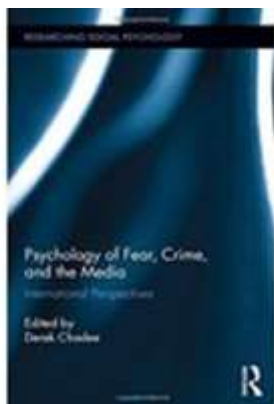
Yet corporate-owned U.S. media tends to practice what is known as “pack journalism”; the major outlets cover the same stories the same way with little variance, demonstrated repeatedly by the work of media consultant Andrew Tyndall. Newscasts are formulaic, almost always ending on a light positive note (and certainly not on a crime story).

The alternative press usually goes far more in-depth than the typical 30-second mainstream media’s soundbite that masquerades as real news. But independent media outlets, such as Democracy Now!, do not reach mass audiences.

Surely the media plays a role in prompting hateful individuals with bad intentions (e.g., the reported physical attacks against the Muslim community after their U.S. citizenship is called into question by a leading presidential contender). With the U.S. Constitution’s Second Amendment (right to own a gun) a perennial GOP platform pillar, occasionally factoids get reported, such as there are more gun stores in the U.S. than McDonald’s and Starbucks outlets combined.

I end this book review with a personal true crime story. When I first moved back to suburbia four years ago after nearly four decades of living in urban settings, I remember how I kept checking every morning that my new car was still in the driveway. Living in Manhattan for an extend period of time will condition you that way.

I slowly felt more secure, even leaving my car at the local railroad station overnight, occasionally for consecutive days. My luck ran out. Towards the end of the lease a few weeks ago, my automobile was one of two vehicles vandalized in the train station parking lot. Lesson learned: crime can occur anywhere.



Note: Adjunct Professor Larry Jaffee, MA, teaches media studies at both St. Joseph’s College in Patchogue, NY, and the New York Institute of Technology in Manhattan. He is a widely published journalist, concentrating recently on cybercrime for *SC Magazine* for IT Security Professionals. His writing has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Huffington Post*.



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