

THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN CRIME PREVENTION AND CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

The role of the Mass Media in waging war against crime cannot be underrated in any society. This paper critically examined the role of the Mass Media in crime prevention and control. The functional role of the mass media in the protection of fundamental human rights, the prevention and control of child abuse, prevention of suicide, campaigns against driving offences and curbing corruptions were the main issues addressed by this paper. The advantages of media coverage of crime were also enunciated while the shortcomings of the reports on crime in the media were also explained. It was recommended that the government should give press adequate freedom of expression to do their work and to desist from intimidating, threatening or torturing of journalists in the course of carrying out their responsibilities of investigation and reporting of crime in the society. The paper also recommended constant training and re-training for the journalists to equip them with skills and techniques of investigating and reporting crime incidences. Finally, recommendation was made in area of acquisition of modern media facilities to ensure effective and admired dissemination of crime news.

Keywords: Crime; Mass media; Press; Role; Prevention and Control.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The roles of the medial in any society cannot be overlooked. Mass Media act as an illuminant which throws light to the hidden phenomena in every society. The Mass Media act as 'a tale bearer' which informs the entire society the events and social occurrences within such society, whether positive or negative. It is very difficult to imagine a life being lived without having access to the means of information in this age of globalization. Mass Media act as the light which exposes 'darkness' in the society.

The media is a powerful 'director and mould' of public opinion, and a powerful means of creating general attitudes of thought and feeling. It is a big force to reckon with in any community capable of doing almost anything such as improvement of societal tastes and standards; its wants and desires. The media is the fountain of information in the present day world of globalization. Citizens rely on this information for their actions. In the process of informing and educating, the media provide inputs for the formation of ideas; hence they constitute veritable channels for social mobilization (Anatsui and Azeez, 2011)

National issues like political elections, wars, sporting events and even natural disasters are relayed through the media. Average citizens cannot directly or regularly access information on these national issues. They look to the media – news papers, television, magazines and internet blogs to attend and interpret those events (Wallinger, 2010). The media, therefore, play a significant role in forming and influencing people's attitudes and behaviours (Saunders and Goddard, 2002)

2. MASS MEDIA AND CRIME

Media play significant role in crime prevention and control. The media is a prime source of information on crime and safety for a significant proportion of the world's population (Carli, 2008). Schneider (1988) observed that there is a huge demand in the population for crime news because they are entertaining, and banish the boredom of everyday life. The Mass Media willingly fulfill this demand because crime news are cheap and easy to get hold of and because they help to sell products.

Crime prevention through Mass Media is one such way which has started to attract widespread interest. The principle behind programmes of Mass Media crime prevention is a relatively easy one; to use radio, television and newspapers to educate citizens regarding crime prevention behaviour (Silverma and Sacco, 1981).

Estrada (2001) explained that the Mass Media have a key position with regard to the image of reality that is conveyed to the public. The author argued that media research has indicated that crime reports have long been an important constituent in news reporting and people are now able to follow police as they work to catch criminals and live in the safety of their living rooms. The part of any explanation to these can be sought at the level of the media itself.

3.0 THE ROLES OF THE MEDIA IN CRIME PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Newspapers, radio, and television are all considered important and they play similar roles of informing, educating, and entertaining the audience (Kwansah –Aidoo, 2003). One of the numerous areas where Mass Media educate the public is in the area of crime prevention and control. The available literature indicates that mass media expose crime phenomenon and conduct a follow up of such crime to the logical end. The citizens were sensitized of the prevalence of a crime and how such crime can be prevented. Mass Media can also instigate the Criminal Justice System toward a particular crime and the need to handle such crime by the Criminal Justice System. Media operators, and by extension, the media, savour and feed on crime and violence because it makes and sells headlines and news programmes: crime and violence make news reports juicy; they are sensational, dramatic and at times colourful. The media owners are in business to make profit, and because crime and violence sell newspapers and programmes, making circulation figures and programme ratings to go up, no media operator is likely to omit rape case, sophisticated bank robbery, a first class murder or a monumental fraud (Amzat et al, 2007). Crime coverage is one of the ways through which the media give the audience what they want.

3.1 MASS MEDIA AND THE PROTECTION OF FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS

One of the primary functions of the media is to act as a watchdog in the political system. The Media is an instrument of checks and balances in the political system of every democratic nation of the world. For instance, this is enunciated in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 22 of 1999 which States that “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the Mass Media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibilities and accountability of the government to the people” (Anatsui and Azeez, 2011). Hence, through the above provision, mass media are recognized as the watchdog over government and individual activities within the Nigerian Polity.

Anatsui and Azeez (2011) opined that Mass Media help to mount pressure on government and to legitimize the complaints of individual in case where fundamental rights and freedom are not respected, and also go against the conduct of government and military forces which does not come in line with standards of operations

Universality nature of human rights means that human rights cannot be denied on the basis of race, creed, ethnicity, sex or gender, religion etc. Various rights that cannot be violated under any circumstances are listed in the International Human Rights Document (Anatsui and Azeez, 2011). The various Fundamental Human Rights must be protected by the Mass Media. Mass Media have been known to expose those that are vulnerable to the infringement of Fundamental Human Rights, especially the women and the children in the society.

3.2 THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF CHILD ABUSE

Violation of child right is a common phenomenon in both the developed and developing countries of the world. Such violation includes: sale of children, violence against children, child sexual abuses, child trafficking, child detention e.t.c (Anatsui and Azeez, 2011).

Saunders and Goddard (2002) argued that child abuse drew attention to the essential role of the media in increasing society’s awareness of, and response to, child abuse and neglect. These were especially of the news and features that reported specific child abuse cases, researches and intervention strategies.

The media attention to child abuse, according to Saunders and Goddard (2002), positively influenced the public, professional and political responses to the circumstances in which children and young people find themselves. Mass Media campaigns and media coverage of the abuse and neglect of children perform an important and significant role in placing issues such as child abuse on the public and political agenda.

According to Eckenrode (2004), media played a significant role in the prevention of child abuse in Netherland in the early 1900s. As the author said, the multi-media campaign was aimed at increasing disclosure by victims and by adults caring for children. It included a televised documentary, short films and commercials and radio programmes, as well as printed material such as posters and booklets. The result was an increase in calls to the National Child Line Service which consequently lowered the rate of child abuse. Similar to this was the research conducted by Stevenson and Awosola (2008). The authors argued that television with the reference to the programmes that address child abuse has been able to place the problem of child abuse in the minds of the public. The fall out of this result, according to them, is that programmes under reference have indeed, helped and are still helping to conscientize the populace about the dangers of child abuse; be it child labour, child battering, child prostitution or sexual exploitation. Furthermore, their result showed that television has been able to place the problem of child abuse on the political agenda, for there are governmental and non governmental agencies that are engaged in various activities aimed at reducing this problem to its barest minimum. Hence, the media serve as a powerful tool in addressing the problem of child abuse worldwide.

Mass Media campaigns have the potential to confront society with the horrific nature of child abuse. Such campaigns will equally educate the public about many forms of abuse suffered by children. Media can also draw the attention of the public to the status of children in society, featuring children's dependency and vulnerability to abuse and neglect (Saunders and Goddard, 2002).

Mass Media education and prevention campaigns give a viable means for government to be seen to be doing something in relation to the problem of child abuse and neglect. Media campaigns may assist not only in the prevention of immediate harm to the children and young

people but will also solve the long – term social and economic consequences of child maltreatment (Saunders and Goddard, 2002)

3.3 MEDIA ROLE IN SUICIDE PREVENTION

Suicide is a social problem in all the nations of the world. Although, research continues to demonstrate that vulnerable youth are susceptible to the influence of reports and portrayals of suicide in the Mass Media (Gould et al 2003). However, there are noticeable roles of Mass Media in curbing the problem of suicide in our society.

Since 1990, the effect of media coverage on suicide rates has been documented in many countries; therefore, greater efforts need to be focused on the media's potential for preventive programming or reporting. Studies have identified a decrease in suicides following the implementation of media guidelines (Gould 2003).

Sisak, and Varnik (2012) Opined that in suicide prevention, one of the recognized public health approaches is responsible media reporting on suicidal behaviour. According to the authors several countries and organizations – e.g the world Health Organization, the Samaritans, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention – have launched and disseminated the resources to educate and strengthen media professionals on suicide reporting. Modification of reporting on suicidal behaviour is feasible and can be effective in preventing suicide behaviour

3.4 MASS MEDIA AND CAMPAIGNS AGAINST DRIVING RELATED CRIMES

Aggressive driving and Alcohol Impaired Driving (AID) are two related problems in every nation of the world. As victims, witnesses, perpetrators or protectors, many drivers on roads are confronted with at least some type of aggression and violence on the roadway (Burns and Katovich, 2003). Elder et al (2004) observed that, like other preventive health efforts in the society, Mass Media campaigns are most likely to reduce drinking and driving if their messages are reinforced by other efforts from law enforcement agencies' grassroots activities.

Elder and colleagues (2004) were of the opinion that locales that devote the appropriate resources required to develop high – quality Mass Media campaigns against drinking and driving

and alcohol – involved crashes, such prevention activities may be particularly strong and effective.

The common motivational themes in Mass Media campaigns to reduce aggressive driving and Alcohol Impaired Driving include: fear of arrest and legal consequences of arrest, promotion of positive social norms; fear of harm to self, others, or property; and stigmatizing drinking drivers as irresponsible and dangerous (Elder et al, 2004)

The consequential actions prompted by such media campaigns vary, ranging from messages related to abstinence or moderation, to more specific behavioural recommendations such as using a designated driver or taking keys from an intoxicated person who wants to drive (Elder et al, 2004). Elder et al (2004) argued that their study indicates that well executed Mass Media campaigns can contribute to a reduction in Alcohol Impaired Driving and alcohol –related crashes. The campaigns are also known to be cost saving.

Mass media campaign can serve as an “agenda-setting” role by influencing public perceptions of the Alcohol Impaired Driving. The increased media coverage will equally increase importance of the Alcohol Impaired Driving problem; public support for actions to solve it may also increase. Campaigns with legal deterrence themes may be the most efficient strategy in solving this problem (Elder et al, 2004).

3.5 MEDIA ROLE IN CURBING CORRUPTION

Corruption has been identified as a phenomenon, which has been with all kinds of society throughout history as a global crime. It is a worldly phenomenon which manifests itself in different forms and dimension (Salawu, 2008). According to Salawu (2008), Corruption is any transaction which violates duty of a public office holder with a partial motive of acquiring or amassing resources illegally for personal advancement and self- gratification. It involves giving of bribe or the use of unauthorized rewards to influence people in position of authority either to act or refuse to act in ways that are beneficial to the private advantage of the giver and that of the receiver.

A valuable element of a country’s anti-corruption programme is an effective media. In this way, media have two roles to play: The media not only raise public awareness about

corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies but also carry out investigations and report incidences of corruption, aiding other oversight (and prosecutorial) bodies (Sowunmi et al, 2010).

It has been argued that the role of the media is very inevitable in promoting good governance and controlling corruption. Media raise public awareness about corruption and conduct follow up investigations and reports of corruption. The efficiency of the media in doing this depends on the access to information and freedom of expression, as well as a professional and ethical cadre of investigative journalists, argued Amzat et al (2007).

Amzat et al (2007) were of the opinion that if democracy is to survive and be a successful social phenomenon, the responsibility of the media in sustaining it through anti-corruption crusade could not be swept under the carpet. Amzat and colleagues (2007) highlighted the channels through which journalism serves as an impediment to corruption. In the first instance when corrupt bureaucrats or public office-holders are impeached, prosecuted or forced to resign their public offices after their misdeeds are exposed to public light. Secondly, reporting corruption may prompt public bodies to launch formal investigations into allegations of corruption. Thirdly, news' accounts disseminate the findings of public anti-corruption bodies, thus reinforcing the legitimacy of these bodies and reducing the ease with which interested parties who hold power can meddle in their work. The effectual public pressure, through Mass Media, leads to a long-term effectiveness, and potential of the media to act as a counterweight against corruption, is further strengthened.

4. THE ADVANTAGES OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF CRIME

Carli (2008) has identified five categories of the advantage of the media coverage of crime. These five categories are summarized below:

- (1) Media exposure to crime and crime related events can be an effective crime prevention strategy, and can be a useful tool for sensitizing and educating the public on underestimated or overlooked social problems. Media can play an active role in mobilizing support and advancing nationwide and international commitment to crime prevention.

- (2) Media can help to improve the state of violence and crime in society, especially for women and children. Media coverage of violence against women began in the 1970s. Such coverage has led to heightened social awareness and policy for protection of women and girls. Media, in this regard, can be useful for providing responsible coverage of sexual behaviour and raise awareness of issues on high – risk sexual behavior. It supports open dialogue within the family and community, encourages awareness and helps the therapists offer services and information to families and children.
- (3) Media equally takes part in disseminating public information on self protection and safety strategies against crime. Media campaigns on prevention against residential burglary and information on the risks of using illegal drugs and alcohol, exemplify the means by which the media can have an important role in crime prevention.
- (4) The media can play a democratic role when it comes to the question of crime prevention. The media educates the populace on some issues, which prompt critical thinking on the part of the population and promotes responsibility on the part of institutions, agencies, organizations and the government. Media can help to guarantee transparency of institutions specializing in crime prevention and safety. The media encourage proper policies and government initiative to allocate resources to crime prevention agencies.
- (5) Media can help promote ‘Civic Journalism’. Media have responsibility to provide reliable information and engage in positive crime prevention initiatives. Media can work within communities to encourage more in-depth and responsible reporting on the causes and effects of violence.

In addition to the above five categories of media advantage of crime coverage, Schneider (1988) argued that media prompted the Criminal Justice System to change its orientation towards a particular crime or a particular group in the population which is vulnerable to crime. The author argued that, through media’s efforts, in 1976 in New York City, Juvenile Court System was criticized for being too lenient and indulgent and through the impression of the public opinion, juvenile courts and training schools altered their practices. Estrada (2011) argued in the same direction, on the Swedish media and Juvenile Justice System, the author said that the attention focused on juvenile violence in the Swedish media increased in the mid – 1980s, and descriptions of juvenile offenders altered in character, becoming less understanding and more punitive. The juvenile offender has gone from being perceived as a victim of a poor upbringing

and a difficult environment, to being a 'super predators' who assault other people out of choice. With the submissions of Schneider (1988) and Estrada (2011), media perform the function of changing the orientation of Criminal Justice System in crime commission.

5. THE DARK SIDE OF THE CRIME IN THE MEDIA

Kumar (n.d) protested that many negative features of crime and the news - media reporting practices have been articulated by commentators as well as social scientists over the years. Kumar (n.d) argued that crime in news media is characterized with racial biases. The author cited examples of homicides that were underreported among Hispanic and black Americans. He argued that media/press ignores black crime(s) so as not to exacerbate racial stereo types. Another significant charge by social scientists against the news-media is that when presenting criminal events for public consumption, it exaggerates, distorts and sensationalizes the real world of crime (Kumar, n.d)

In their investigation of a link between media exposure and children's reactions to crime and terrorism, Becker – Blease and associates (2008) discovered that media – crime exposed children manifested both traumatic – specific fears and generalized fears. Children's fears manifest in a variety of ways, including plays that reenact traumatic events and an attempt to keep themselves safe. In adolescents, there was a reported elevated level of anger, anxiety and sadness.

There have been many serious debates on media contagion and suicide among the social scientists. Researches continue to demonstrate that vulnerable youths are susceptible to the influence of the reports and portrayals of suicide in the Mass Media. According to Gould and colleagues (2003), recent content analyses of newspapers and films in the United States reveal substantial opportunity for exposure to suicide, especially among the young victims.

Sisak and Varnik (2012) were of the same opinion that irresponsible media reports can provoke or heighten suicidal behaviour. The authors argued that media reports are not representative of official suicide data which tend to exaggerate sensational suicide, for example, dramatic and highly lethal suicide methods, which are rare in real life. Schneider (1988) also criticized crime in the Mass Media in the area of "Crime Waves". The author argued that Mass Media produce 'Crime Waves' which is a subjective impression of periodic outbreaks or

epidemics of criminal offences. The media crime wave had no factual basis whatsoever; because the official reports on crime statistics always show the opposite of the media reports.

Schneider (1988) argued that Mass Media “create” their own crime news and shape social visibility of crime according to their media needs, not according to criminological research or according to the needs of social control. Finally, the mass media campaigns against crime cannot be sold through the utilization of traditional marketing techniques. Crime prevention campaigns are not conventional product. To attempt to market crime prevention is to sell something which is quite abstract. Media campaigns appeal to the members of the society to change their behaviour so that they will not be victimized. However, the achievement of such payoffs may be too uncertain and too distant to be motivated by conventional advertising programmes (Silverman and Sacco, 1981). This of course, is a limitation to the effort of Mass Media in using their campaigns to prevent and control crime in the society.

6. CONCLUSION

Although, there are some shortcomings in the efforts of Mass Media to prevent and control crime through their campaigns, as explained in the previous section, however, the overall responsibility of the media in crime prevention and control cannot be overshadowed by those mentioned shortcomings. Mass Media play critical roles in the lives of the people in every society, even to the level of what they eat, how they eat them and the effects of what they eat. (Spettigue and Henderson, 2004).

The functions of the Mass Media in all the nations of the world cannot be underrated. In relation to developing societies, the communication functions of the Mass Media are even more crucial. A developing society is in a more or less continuous condition of crisis, faced with the possibility of disunity, with the need to mobilize its people for a war on poverty, disease, hunger, indiscipline, economic sabotage smuggling, armed robbery, hooliganism, vandalism, brigandage, social injustice and crippling attitudes and traditions (Olayiwola, 1991). We can say that Mass Media serve multiplicity of purposes in every nation, especially the developing ones.

The functions of the mass media in crime prevention and control cannot be overlooked in any viable society. Some of the functions of mass media in crime prevention and control have

been highlighted and explained. The functions of the media in protection of fundamental human rights, prevention and control of child abuse, prevention of suicide, campaigning against driving offences, war against corruption and the advantages of media coverage of crime enunciated in this paper and from other related literature show clearly that Mass Media have a gigantic and unavoidable role to play in warring against crime in human society.

7. RECOMMENDATION

Since, Mass Media play prominent roles in combating crime in every nation of the world; there is a need, therefore, to strengthen Mass Media in the performances of those roles. In order to have efficient and viable performances in combating crime, the following are the recommendations that may be implemented to ensure effective Mass Media which can successfully wage war against crime:

There must be adequate freedom for the press or media house to investigate and report crime in the society. There were many incidences of top government officials' involvement in crime, especially, crime of corruption, from which they were shielded by the government. Such should not be allowed. The media must be given adequate freedom to investigate and expose any offender in the society, whosoever the person may be. They must not be denied access information. The journalists must be allowed to carry out their functions without any intimidation or threat from the government or individuals. The rights of the journalists must be protected. They must be protected in the course of carrying out their duties or thereafter. Journalists must not be subjected to torture or threat of such, for publications they make on a particular crime or deviant behaviour in the society.

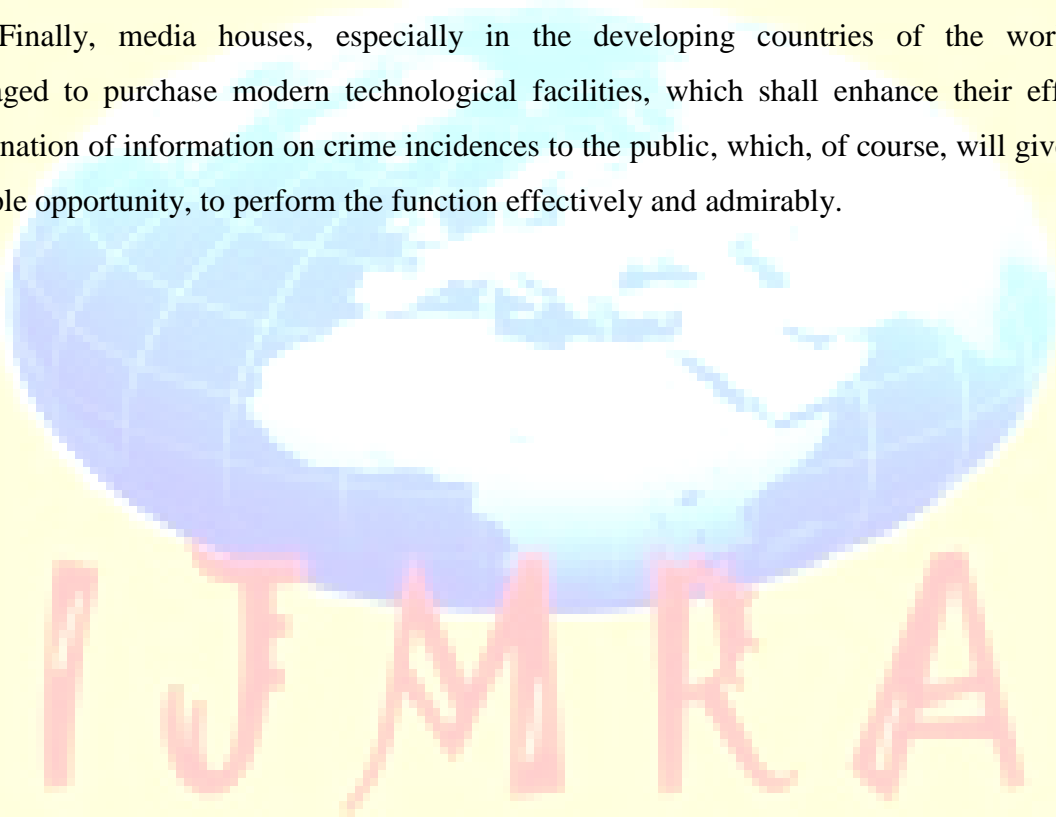
We recommend on- job training and retraining for the journalists handling reports on crime. The journalists must be allowed to attend seminars, workshops, conferences and symposia (both at home and abroad) which deal with media crime. Through this, journalists would be well equipped with the skills and techniques of reporting crimes in such a way that it would not have negative effects on the people in the society.

It is recommended that journalists should desist from exaggerating their reports of crime. This may create undue crime fear in the society. The crime reports must not be over reported.

Creation of unnecessary 'Crime Wave' must be discouraged. Journalists should report incidences of crime as they occur. The tension of incidences of crime must not be heightened to increase the possibility of increase in sales. The journalists should be reminded the ethics of 'just' in their profession.

The people in the society are encouraged to give support to the media houses in the course of their investigations and reports of crime incidences in the society. Journalists should not be given distorted information on crime incidences. People should be factual in giving such information.

Finally, media houses, especially in the developing countries of the world, are encouraged to purchase modern technological facilities, which shall enhance their efforts in dissemination of information on crime incidences to the public, which, of course, will give them, the ample opportunity, to perform the function effectively and admirably.



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