

**Media Coverage of Organized Crime:
Impact on Public Opinion?**

by
Judith Dubois
Université du Québec à Montréal
dubois.judith@uqam.ca

Research & Evaluation Branch
Community, Contract and Aboriginal Policing Services Directorate
Royal Canadian Mounted Police
Ottawa

June 2002

Available on the Internet at: www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca
Available on the Infoweb at: infoweb.rcmp-grc.gc.ca

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction	3
Methodology	3
According to Researchers...	4
According to the Media...	8
According to Reporters...	11
Theme 1: Definition of Organized Crime	12
Theme 2: Crime vs. Organized Crime	13
Theme 3: Interests and Selection Criteria	14
Theme 4: Influence on Public Opinion	17
Theme 5: Media Handling and Sense of Insecurity	20
Conclusion	20
Recommendations for Future Studies	22
References	24
Appendix 1	26
Appendix 2	28

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our research assistants: Nadine Clark, Guillaume Bourgault-Côté and Louise-Maude Rioux-Soucy.

This study was made possible by a grant from the Research and Evaluation Branch, Community, Contract and Aboriginal Policing Services Directorate, Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Introduction

The Canadian public is exposed to extensive media coverage of events related to organized crime (OC). Every day, an impressive array of stories appear in both print and broadcast media. A study carried out last year estimated at more than 27,000 the number of articles that referred to organized crime in 15 Canadian dailies and magazines over a six-year period (Beare & Ronderos, 2001).

This massive exposure is significant, as the media are among the sources of information people count on to mould their opinion of the world around them.

And with respect to crime, surveys have shown that up to 95% of people say they rely on the media as their primary source of information in this regard (Graber, 1979).

Given the extensive OC media coverage here in Canada and its role as a possible source of public information in this regard, it seems imperative that we answer the following question:

Does media coverage of OC-related events influence public opinion, and, if so, how?

Methodology

In seeking answers to these questions, we will first review the various scientific articles, studies and analyses that deal specifically with OC media coverage and public opinion.

We will then consider what reporters themselves have to say about OC media coverage, via public opinion articles published in Canadian print media in the past few months.

We will then interview some Canadian reporters who cover OC stories (dailies and TV), to get their views on the matter.

This preliminary study is the first of its kind in Canada. It will provide an overview of available information regarding OC media coverage and its possible impact on public opinion. Our findings will help establish relevant research avenues and set forth recommendations in this regard.

According to Researchers...

We reviewed a series of scientific articles and studies written by academic researchers, research groups and various agencies based in Canada, the United States and Europe.

We scoured various data banks containing more than 26,000 scientific articles (Appendix 1), but were unable to find anything dealing specifically with the impact of OC media coverage on public opinion.

This is surprising, as OC receives extensive media attention. But the lack of data on the topic was probably to be expected considering that even the relationship between the media and crime/justice has not yet been thoroughly explored.

Despite the widespread, increasing interest in the relationship of the mass media to crime and justice, however, a comprehensive survey has not been available. One reason is that the relevant research is far-flung. Media, crime, and criminal justice relations involve interdisciplinary perspectives. Important research is conducted within the disciplines of criminology, criminal justice, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, political science, law, public administration,

communications and journalism (...). It is not surprising, therefore, that such a multi disciplinary area has no comprehensive general resources (Surette, R. 1992, p. IX,X).

In the absence of topic-specific articles, we decided to focus on the more general theme. We found that some of the articles tied in with the problem, leading to the following three findings.

1. The criminal events that the media decide to report on are not necessarily always those, in actual fact, that are the most significant in terms of frequency, trends or the way they represent the offenders involved. In our opinion, giving precedence to the coverage of specific types of crime might influence public opinion with respect to crime, at least regarding the perceived relative importance of specific types of crime.

For instance, researchers Sheley and Ashkins (1981) conducted a study based on the seven FBI-defined criminal indices. They compared trends reported by police, newspapers and television, and verified the public image of said trends. They found that the trends set forth by the media did not generally correspond to police statistics. The relative distribution of crimes on television apparently corresponded even less to police statistics than what appeared in newspapers. These researchers did not say that television had a major impact on how the public sees crime, but they did make it clear that with respect to the relative distribution of reported crimes, public opinion was more a reflection of media reports than police records.

The fact that the media give more coverage to specific types of crime might also explain why, despite a relatively low crime rate in Ireland, the Irish apparently believe themselves to be in the midst of a criminal crisis. According to O'Connell (1999), the media are to blame for this distorted sense of reality. His study, based on articles published in Irish newspapers, claims that the media influence the perception of crime by presenting it in four ways:

- by more frequently reporting extreme or atypical crimes

- by giving a lot of space to extreme crimes
- by choosing mostly crimes involving vulnerable victims and invulnerable offenders
- by being pessimistic about the justice system (O'Connell, 1999)

2. The commission of violent crimes against the public seems to affect how it perceives crime-related risk. There is also believed to be a connection between how crimes are presented by the media, society's sense of fear and the public's crime-policy preferences.

A researcher from Birmingham University (Kemshall, 1997) found that the Dunblane massacre¹ heightened the perception of crime-related risk, both in the public and the media themselves.

The researcher looked into how risks and danger are perceived, the possible exaggeration of said perception, the possible influence of this exaggeration on debates about the risks for citizens, and the effect of this on the development/implementation of crime-fighting policies. His article raises more questions than it gives answers, but it does nonetheless make the connection between the public's perception of risk and demand for more crime-fighting policies.

It was shown that the type of policies people want may depend on the feeling of fear instilled by the media's coverage of criminal events. According to Sotirovic (2001), use of the media is important in defining the relationship between people's knowledge of events and how they are affected by said events. This relationship is believed to lead citizens to favor two types of crime-fighting policies: punitive or preventive. According to Sotirovic, opting for prevention requires a complex thinking process, whereas calling for punishment is apparently directly related to a sense of fear. Both scenarios depend on use of the media. The use of more complex media is believed to lead to more complex reflection on crime, whereas exposure to information shows and TV news magazines is believed to be linked to low levels of complexity. The author indicated that local news bulletins focusing on crime and violence are exclusively related to the

¹This refers to a killer's mad rampage at a primary school in Dunblane, Scotland, where he killed 16 children and their teacher on March 13, 1996.

fear of crime.

Since, in general, people choose the type of media to which they are exposed, it is impossible to state that the media are directly or exclusively to blame for the sense of fear in citizens. Yet it seems that the number of news items or, on a broader basis, crime-related topics dealt with in a more complex fashion in the media greatly surpasses that of topics that demand less reflection.

For instance, the study conducted by Thompson, Young and Burns (2000) showed that articles which describe criminal events by far outnumber those which reflect on the matter. It included 4,445 articles on gang-related offences. According to the authors, the number of articles dealing with gang-committed crimes by far surpassed the number of articles describing the various community reactions to said crimes. And articles focusing on the results of scientific studies on gangs were the fewest of all.

3. If the media seem to favor coverage of specific types of crime, they seem to shun others, including environmental and corporate crime. The media apparently make these choices to satisfy public interest or save on resources.

In a study on the coverage of environmental crime in Hillsborough County, for instance, Lynch, Stretesky and Hammond (2000) found that of the 878 chemical spills reported to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), only nine were reported in the *Tampa Tribune*. The researchers considered the stories to be a reflection of public interest for this type of crime.

The public's lack of interest in corporate crime might also explain, in part, the poor media coverage of said incidents. Despite a significant rise in the number of corporate frauds (fostered by technological developments and OC involvement) in the United Kingdom, economic investigative reporting is on the decline. According to Lloyd and Walton (1999), this type of journalism requires too many resources to justify the end result.

In short

The foregoing shows how the media coverage of crime can influence public opinion. It raises questions on the choices made by the media with respect to the criminal events on which they report. These choices, in light of the above-noted studies, do not seem to fall in line with the true criminal reality of our society.

The review of scientific articles uncovered the existence of a connection between crime, media coverage of criminal events and public opinion. These studies also serve as the basis in considering a link between the media coverage of crime, the perception of risk (or fear) and the population's preferences with respect to crime-fighting policies.

In our opinion, these findings could also apply to the area of OC, depending on the type of criminal incident at hand.

According to the Media...

Canadian magazines and dailies

In reviewing scientific articles, we also wanted to check if the media deal with the impact of OC coverage.

We selected OC articles published in 34 Canadian magazines and dailies over the past 15 months (Appendix 2).

Inasmuch as editorials usually reflect the "opinion" of the media, while news stories and reports, for their part, are supposed to be "objective", we focused on articles published in editorial and opinion sections.

In so doing, we were able to confirm that the media give very extensive coverage to OC-related events. We found 6,082 articles on the matter.

But we want to make two things clear about opinion articles:

- No editorials focused on the impact of OC media coverage on public opinion.
- The few articles that referred to any sort of impact all dealt with the shooting of Montreal crime reporter Michel Auger by outlaw motorcycle gangs.

In *L'Actualité*, reporter Paule Beaugrand-Champagne focused on victims of crime. She mentioned that the shooting of Michel Auger awakened citizens to the danger of outlaw motorcycle gangs. She explained how after the attack, the media and newspapers started providing more and more information on the street war apparently being waged by bikers.

In *Le Devoir*, editorial writer Paule des Rivières, regarding the incident sparked by Toronto mayor Mel Lastman shaking hands with a few Hells Angels at city hall, made the connection between organized crime, media coverage, public opinion and the actions of authorities. For the author, Quebec is in no position to lecture Mayor Lastman, having turned a blind eye to the ravages of organized crime. She explained that the death of an 11-year-old in 1995 had a decisive impact on public opinion and on the determination of authorities to take action. But the shooting of crime reporter Michel Auger convinced authorities to allocate the necessary resources to the fight against organized crime, in response to the extensive media coverage of this incident, which revealed a certain level of police carelessness for all to see.

The impact of OC media coverage on public opinion and the reaction of authorities (after the Auger incident) also seemed obvious to criminologist Jean-Paul Brodeur, who shared his opinion in *Le Devoir* regarding a police operation against the Hells Angels.

[TRANSLATION] This operation targets public perceptions more than it does illicit trafficking. By taking aim at the most obvious source of the panic spreading through Quebec since the shooting of crime reporter Michel Auger, the police is conducting a dual operation in trying to appease public opinion. This show of force reassures the public in the short term that it is safe, and will be applauded by the popular press, which actively moulds public opinion (Brodeur, 2001).

Le 30

The connection between organized crime, the media and public opinion is seldom dealt with in journalism magazines.

For its part, *Le 30–Le Magazine du Journalisme Québécois* (magazine associated with the Quebec Federation of Professional Journalists) has published no specific articles on the issue since 1992.

But the shooting of crime reporter Michel Auger also paved the way for a few articles that referred to the impact of OC media coverage on public opinion, without dealing with this problem *per se*.

The connection between organized crime, the media and public opinion is also very eloquently discussed in Patrick Lagacé's interview with Michel Auger, in November 2000. The reporter said he wanted the media in Quebec to spend more resources on OC coverage, since, in his opinion, the public was quickly losing interest. He said that talking about it more and finding reporting angles on the impact of OC might influence public opinion ("society may see the phenomenon differently"). He added that the truce in the biker war was a direct result of public pressure on elected officials to tighten the grip on OC, in angry response to Auger's shooting.

Michel Auger's viewpoint is reiterated in issue 30, September 2001. Valérie Dufour reviewed the incidents of September 2000, and Auger talked about changing his work habits (as a

precaution), but mostly about the fact that media coverage of his shooting, instead of silencing him, had the opposite effect. In his opinion, the media coverage of his attack had an impact on public opinion, united against outlaw motorcycle gangs. “Without this media attention, the recently-passed federal anti-gang legislation would not have been the same.”

In short

There are very few articles on OC media coverage and public opinion. But the articles that do exist are unanimous, with respect to the shooting of crime reporter Michel Auger, in stating that media coverage awakened public opinion and led to the implementation of crime-fighting policies.

The Canadian media published a large number of editorials and opinion articles on OC-related matters. We tallied close to 400 for the period under review.

Since editorials and opinion articles are capable of directly influencing public opinion, it would be interesting to see what editorial writers and opinion reporters had to say in their articles on OC.

According to Reporters...

In an effort to consider the foregoing under another light, we contacted five Canadian reporters who cover OC-related events, either as news (in the field), legal (court house) or investigative reporters².

²To ensure a thorough overview, we chose reporters who work for both print (dailies) and television media, Anglophones and Francophones, in outlying areas and large centres. Our choices were *Le Quotidien* (Saguenay), Radio-Canada (Montreal), *The Gazette* (Montreal), *The Calgary Sun* (Calgary) and *The Halifax Chronicle Herald* (Halifax).

We spoke to each of these reporters on the phone for approximately 30 minutes, in March 2002.

We covered five major themes, which were developed based on information contained in the report published by the Solicitor General of Canada (1998).

For reference purposes, we used the list of eight OC activities set forth in said report (1998:12).

These activities are as follows:

- Illicit drugs (trafficking and/or production)
- Environmental crime
- Selected contraband
- Economic crime
- Migrant trafficking
- Counterfeit products
- Motor vehicle theft
- Money laundering

Theme 1: Definition of Organized Crime

We asked reporters the following questions:

- How do you define organized crime?
- What type of OC-related events have you covered in the last few years?

All reporters had covered at least one biker-related event. Some had also worked on money-laundering stories, and one had covered the activities of the Caruana and Cuntrera families.

Their definition of organized crime was fairly general, i.e. it always involves a minimal number

of people (two or three), as well as the notion of criminal activities. The activities are described as structured and linked to outlaw motorcycle gangs. But reporters did not exclude the other types of activities identified.

And although they agreed that a criminal activity might involve as few as three people and mere auto theft, the reporters seemed to associate OC to events on a larger scale (involving murders, for instance) and consider less significant events as more common criminal matters.

Theme 2: Crime vs. Organized Crime

We asked reporters if there was a difference between covering OC-related events as opposed to a more general type of criminal incident.

This is probably where their responses varied most. Some reporters rarely had occasion to cover OC events (Halifax and Calgary), and others do not do the exact same type of work (news reporters, court house reporter and investigative reporter).

But all reporters agreed that they had never felt threatened in the performance of their duties. However, the three who most often cover OC-related matters said they were more cautious in their undertakings.

For the TV reporter, considering the importance of some OC-related trials (e.g. outlaw motorcycle gangs), extra vigilance is required in reporting the news. She said she did not want to risk making a mistake that might jeopardize major proceedings of this nature. The Saguenay reporter said that he too was extra careful in writing his articles so as to avoid lawsuits. Even when it is obvious to him that bikers are perhaps connected to a murder, he is very cautious in reporting the facts. "Just writing the article requires very careful attention because these people obviously don't like to be dragged through the mud, they too have lawyers to handle their

affairs.”

The reporter said that bikers had never brought him to court, but the paper he writes for was once ordered to pay damages for linking someone to outlaw motorcycle gangs.

For his part, the Montreal reporter said he was very careful not to create any friendships with his (criminal) sources, which might then lead to expectations (or disappointments) on their part.

I have rules. I don't get close to the people that I'm writing about, when it comes to organized crime. I don't want to be friends with organized criminals. And if I interview them, I make it quite clear through my questions and my body language that I don't want anything to do with them other than in a professional manner. I don't go out and drink with these people. I don't want to know what they are up to half the time, unless it has to do with a story that I am working on, etc. I don't want to get close to them, because as soon as you get close to people like that, then they demand things from you. And then if you don't perform, then you can get yourself into trouble and you can very quickly find yourself in a very bad situation.

They also seemed to have varying opinions with respect to access to witnesses in OC matters, as explained by the reporter from Saguenay:

[TRANSLATION] Of course if you arrive at the scene of a crime of passion, the neighbor will probably have something to say, but in matters of organized crime or bikers, you really have the impression that people are less talkative. There are often no witnesses, and if there are, they have nothing to say. It can really limit your sources of information.

Theme 3: Interests and Selection Criteria

We asked the reporters if any specific OC-related issues or activities interested the media more than others.

Although OC is more prevalent in some parts of the country than others (the reporters from Calgary and Halifax said it was rare, in their opinion, in their provinces), all reporters we interviewed said it was appealing material for the media, first and foremost because the public was interested in this subject.

For instance, the TV reporter said that the biker issue had become a national issue, receiving a lot more coverage than ever before. She explained that in the past, her show, *Téléjournal*, was a bit “disdainful” of this type of subject matter because it was considered to be a little “dirty”.

She explained how this attitude changed with the beginning of biker trials in the fall of 2001. “Public opinion is demanding convictions, people are interested. I think it changed a bit how news is seen, especially at *Téléjournal*.”

For his part, the reporter from Saguenay said that where he is from, people are worried about drug use among youth. He explained that the public feels directly affected by the criminal activities of groups involved drug trafficking and, as such, the response of the media is to look into it.

[TRANSLATION] Sometimes people contact us because their kids are doing drugs, stealing, because they have to steal to pay off their drug debts, and if they don't pay their debts, they're afraid of the drug dealers, stuff like that. Sure the public is interested in that... And it is really a normal reflex (by the media) because people know what's going on, they know PCP is being sold in secondary school yards, we know all of that, but when the police get the evidence... it's clear that we're interested and go about making the connection between these people and the consequences of their actions.

Everyone agreed that it is not always OC-related subjects that the public finds most interesting, but rather those that are likely to affect people more deeply. And first on that list are crimes against the person.

The reporter from Halifax pointed out that between a drug seizure and a murder, the crime against the person is always of greater interest to both the public and the media.

I think that when it is a violent crime, when someone is shot and it's linked to, or could be linked to, any form of organized crime, a crime family or bikers, or well-known criminals, that heightens people's awareness... I don't believe that there is an editorial slant where 'it's just marijuana'. I think it ends up on page A3 and A5, which is still decent play, but it is not page A1. When it comes to killing someone, that is a definite crime against the person and I think that's why it gets the play. Because that whole fear of 'what if they get the wrong person?' If there is a specific target, what if they get the wrong person? But when it comes to drugs, I think people believe 'If I'm not involved in this, I have nothing to worry about. It's not a big deal. Or if I don't know someone addicted to drugs because of importation and trafficking that may be related to organized crime, it doesn't affect me. It's O.K.'.

In the opinion of the reporter from Calgary, the spectacular aspect of some OC-related events is also a criterion of public interest. By comparison, issues such as economic crime pull a lot less weight.

Well, one time, the police had seized 70 different guns and bombs, and they made those things available so we could have a big picture on our front page. It was a room full of guns and stuff, and all those things made it most interesting because it was murder, guns and bombs. I think, if the question was organized crime linked to high finance and just managing deals, I don't think that it would have such an appeal.

The reporter from Montreal said that a lot of other topics might interest the media (and the public), but it requires too much effort on the part of reporters to make the stories interesting. He gave as an example an investigation he is working on involving the extortion of businessmen.

So, I have to ask myself 'How can I make this different, how can I make it interesting, etc. to the general public'? I may then look at the character of the story itself. Is there something unique in that story that makes it different from

other stories about extortion? Or just the topics of extortion. Yes, we know about it, but nobody really understands the kind of pain and suffering that people who are targets of extortion go through. So maybe that will be interesting to a broad level of the public, and maybe the fact that it happens to be out in suburbia, and we never expected it to be there, would be interesting.

Theme 4: Influence on Public Opinion

We asked the reporters if, in their opinion, media coverage of OC-related events influences public opinion. And if so, how?

More specifically, does coverage by reporters influence:

- how the public perceives OC groups?
- how the public perceives the administration of justice?

They were unanimous in their response. In their opinion, OC media coverage most certainly does influence public opinion. They feel that releasing information on OC-related events makes people aware of what is going on, and they are then able to create an opinion of the situation.

According to the Saguenay reporter, in general, people in Quebec want and get “correct information”, fair coverage of the facts, then use said information to see the situation as they see fit.

The TV reporter was unsure of just how much the media influence public opinion, but pointed out that at the very least, they feed the fire and serve as the basis for perceptions.

[TRANSLATION] There have been so many more reports on the issue in the past few years, and so much has been said, I find that we’ve gotten to the core of those organizations. We see how they work. If there’s something we want to know, we know it. So I think that people who have taken the time to read very detailed

documents, records of various court proceedings or analyses by André Cédilot or Michel Auger no doubt have a fairly accurate idea based on what they've read. I don't know if we're influencing them, but we are giving them a lot of food for thought.

So reporters are not convinced that the media handling of stories *per se* influences public opinion, as events, in general, are reported in a fair and balanced manner. In their opinion, just staying abreast of events is what makes a world of difference for the public.

But there have to be events to cover. The reporter from Calgary said that since his province is home to little OC activity, media coverage is fairly slim. As such, he feels that how the people of Alberta perceive OC is based more on what they see on TV series than in newspapers or news bulletins, even if what they watch on TV has nothing to do with the reality in their region.

So based on what reporters told us, people who have better access to fair and in-depth OC coverage will in turn have a better idea of what is really going on.

The Montreal reporter said that it is important for people to be informed because they are then aware of the various problems plaguing society, and thus in a better position to demand police intervention.

I think they realize that organized crime will always be part of the landscape. But what they worry about is that it will become too dominant and that's why, let's say, the Hells Angels, are such a serious problem in our community. That is why people demand that the government do something about it and the laws be strengthened and the laws be changed. But without us telling them this is what is happening out there, people won't know what the situation is and won't know what to support when their politicians come to them and say 'we need another 50 million dollars to spend on this or we need to change the laws to strengthen anti-gang laws' and stuff like that.

The reporters we interviewed felt that being informed of what is happening in the world of OC

influences the public's perception of the world around them. So despite efforts by some groups, such as outlaw motorcycle gangs, to enhance their image, the public seems to see them in a negative light, as explained below by the reporter from Saguenay.

[TRANSLATION] The public is not blind, it can see that these are not good corporate citizens, even if they sometimes try to give that impression. Because there are always two parts to the story. The first is the police operation, where you find out some of what is going on, and what I feel is equally important, the second part, is the trial at the court house. I think that the combination of the two can really influence how people see the organizations involved.

Some reporters felt that people are unaware of just how widespread and damaging OC activities are, and if they did know, public opinion would be even more negative.

With respect to how the administration of justice is perceived, the reporter from Saguenay said that even if the general public tends to believe that justice is poorly administrated (too many criminals get off), well-informed members of society (via the media) are able to recognize the efforts being made to see that justice is done. But police face a great many obstacles that prevent them from being fully effective (e.g. *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, difficulty with evidence), and, if informed, the public is able to identify these stumbling blocks.

The Montreal reporter was less qualified in his opinion. He felt that people are right in believing that the legal system as it currently exists is too lenient. He also believes that the media influence their perception in this regard.

I think the perception of the public that the justice system is not doing its job as it should do is an accurate description of our justice system today. I think that this perception obviously comes from the media. I think that the public would like to see more attention paid and more money going in to the justice system to strengthen it, and strengthen our laws, and strengthen our sentencing. I think that, probably, people that know or who read papers would probably agree that the justice system is too lenient with violent criminals.

Theme 5: Media Handling and Sense of Insecurity

Lastly, we asked reporters if they thought the media handling of some issues might influence the public's sense of fear or insecurity with respect to OC.

They did not really know if the media had a direct influence in this regard. They felt that the media did not exaggerate the risks for the population, but stuck to reporting the facts. But they all agreed that public opinion is concerned with the death of innocent victims, and since 1995, the array of violent incidents involving innocent people in Quebec may have heightened the public's sense of insecurity. The reporters we interviewed believe that if people are afraid, it is because of the events themselves, as explained by the TV journalist:

[TRANSLATION] I think the individual events that occur are to blame for feeding the public's fear—young Marc-Alexandre Chartrand killed at the entrance to a disco, the shooting of Michel (Auger), the much-talked-about case of little Daniel Desrochers, the owner who was beaten in Terrebonne because he didn't want to let the bikers take over his bar. Things like that affect all of us... We often hear 'let them kill each other, eliminate each other, it doesn't affect me, I don't care'. But when innocent people who have nothing to do with the goings-on are hurt, it feeds the public's fear.

Conclusion

The Canadian public is exposed to extensive media coverage of OC-related events. Every day, an impressive array of stories appear in both print and broadcast media.

The media are among the sources of information people count on to mould their opinion of the world around them. With respect to the presence of crime in said world, we believe the media are the primary source of information.

Although the media are capable of playing a major role in conveying information to the public,

we were unable to find any scientific study dealing with media coverage of OC-related events.

Based on some topic-related studies, the criminal events that the media decide to report on are not necessarily always those, in actual fact, that are the most significant in terms of frequency, trends or range of offenders involved. The little research we were able to find indicates that the media seem to give precedence to crimes that are extreme or involve vulnerable victims.

Other studies suggest that the commission of violent crimes against the public may affect how it perceives crime-related risk. There is also believed to be a connection between how crimes are presented by the media, society's sense of fear and the public's crime-policy preferences.

Little has been written about the impact of OC media coverage on public opinion in editorials and opinion articles in Canada. However, problem-related analyses published in the media clearly show that the death of innocent victims at the hands of bikers, and especially the shooting of crime reporter Michel Auger, have led to extensive media coverage of the issue, in the process awakening public opinion and leading to the implementation of harsher crime-fighting policies.

In-depth interviews with news, court house and investigative reporters confirm this hypothesis. In fact, the reporters we interviewed all agreed that OC media coverage most certainly does influence public opinion.

They felt that providing information on OC-related events makes people aware of what is happening and lets them then develop an opinion. Individuals who are well informed have a better grasp of reality.

However, these same reporters did not believe that media handling *per se* influences public opinion. They felt that incidents are reported in a fair and balanced fashion.

But they confirmed that some OC-related events receive more media coverage and often make

headlines in newspapers and news bulletins, compared to other less “appealing” crimes. According to these reporters, the media is apparently merely responding to the demands of public interest.

The information compiled in the course of this study leads us to believe that in some circumstances, media coverage of OC-related events can influence public opinion. The Michel Auger shooting, referred to in both opinion articles and by the reporters we interviewed, is a very prime example of this impact. Various other hypotheses may help us explain public reaction.

But this example may also be a mere exception to the rule. Do the media have an impact on public opinion in matters not involving crimes against the person? And can it be said that media handling *per se* in no way influences public opinion?

In the absence of any scientific studies dealing specifically with OC media coverage, and considering the high-ranking position of OC in the information media, we believe that further research should be done into the matter.

Recommendations for Future Studies

In light of the findings of this preliminary study, we believe that future research into determining if OC media coverage influences public opinion should focus on the following:

1. The connection between the media people use as sources of information and their perception of OC-related events. It would be interesting to establish a correlation between
 - a) the selection and profile of preferred media (TV, newspapers, specialized magazines, etc.),
 - b) the type of content consulted (news, public affairs or information

shows/chronicles, news, editorials, etc.)

c) and how people perceive the administration of justice, the world of OC or OC risks for society.

2. Does media handling *per se*, i.e. how the media treat OC-related events, influence public opinion?

3. Does the personal viewpoint of reporters, columnists and editorial writers in matters of OC-related events influence public opinion?

References

- Beaugrand-Champagne, P. Les victimes contre-attaquent. *L'Actualité* 1 January 2002.
- Beare, M. and Ronderos, J. *Exploratory Review of Media Coverage on Organized Crime in Canada:1995-2000*. Department of Justice: March 2001.
- Brodeur, J. P. Opération policière contre les Hells Angels hier. *Le Devoir* 29 March 2001.
- Des Rivières, P. Des bons gars, vraiment? *Le Devoir* 15 January 2002.
- Dufour, V. Michel Auger: des mots pour guérir les maux. *Le 30* September 2001.
- Graber, D. Evaluating Crime-Fighting Policies. *Evaluating Alternative Law Enforcement Policies*. Ed. R. Baker and F. Meyer. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1979. 179-200.
- Kemshall, H. Sleep Safely: Crime Risks May Be Smaller Than You Think. *Social Policy And Administration* 31. 3 (1997).
- Lagacé, P. Michel Auger se raconte. *Le 30* November 2000.
- Lloyd, C. and Walton, P. Reporting Corporate Crime. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 4. 1 (1999): 43-48.
- Lynch, M., Stretesky, P. and Hammond, P. Media Coverage of Chemical Crimes, Hillsborough County, Florida, 1987-97. *British Journal of Criminology* 40. 1 (2000): 112-126.
- O'Connell, M. Is Irish Public Opinion Towards Crime Distorted by Media Bias? *European Journal of Communication* 14. 2 (1999): 191-212.
- Porteous, S. *Solicitor General's Report: Organized Crime Impact Study*. Public Works and Government Services Canada: 1998. <http://www.sgc.gc.ca>
- Sheley, J. and Ashkins, C. Crime, Crime News, and Crime Views. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45 (1981): 492-506.
- Sotirovic, M. Affective and Cognitive Processes as Mediators of Media Influences on

Crime-Policy Preferences. *Mass Communication and Society* 4. 3 (2001): 311-329.

Surette, R. *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice-Images and Realities*. California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1992.

Thompson, C., Young, R. and Burns, R. Representing Gangs in the News: Media Constructions of Criminal Gangs. *Sociological Spectrum* 20. 4 (2000): 409-432.

Appendix 1

Main Research Sites Consulted

- Ingenta: On-line search engine containing more than 26,000 scientific publications in various fields, i.e. 12.5 million articles published since 1988. Keywords used: media/crime/ public, media/public, media/crime, media/crime/public. Research covers the period from 1988 to 2002.

<http://www.ingenta.com>

- Metapress: Search engine containing 1,021 professional and academic publications (in various fields), totalling hundreds of thousands of articles from 21 publishing firms since 1995.

<http://www.metapress.com>

- ComAbstracts: Total of 107 scientific publications, all on communications. Since 1986. (Formerly Communications Abstracts). Texts available on-line at UQAM library site. Keywords used: media/crime/ public, media/public, media/crime, media/crime/public.

Appendix 2

Review of Articles: Sources

French Language Canadian Newspapers

Cyberpresse
L'Acadie Nouvelle
L'Actualité
La Presse
La Presse canadienne
La Tribune
La Voix de l'Est
Le Devoir
Le Droit
Fil de presse CCN
Le Nouvelliste
Le Quotidien
Le Soleil
Les Affaires
Voir

English Language Canadian Newspapers

The Calgary Sun
The Cambridge Reporter
The Canadian Press
The Chronicle Herald
The Edmonton Sun
The Fredericton Daily Gleaner
The Hamilton Spectator
The Kitchener-Waterloo Record
The London Free Press
The Moncton Times and Transcript
The New Brunswick Telegraph Journal
The Ottawa Sun
The Saint John Telegraph Journal
The Sunday Herald
The Toronto Star
The Toronto Sun
The Whitehorse Star
The Winnipeg Sun
Winnipeg Free Press

Yellowknifer

French Language Canadian Sources

1. Period from January 1, 2001 to March 30, 2002.

Keyword: “crime organisé”

Category of articles: All categories

Result: 2,557 documents contained the expression “crime organisé” for this search. (557 from January 1 to April 7; 1,000 from April 8 to October 14; 1,000 from October 15 to March 30)

2. Period from January 1, 2001 to March 30, 2002.

Keyword: “crime organisé”

Category of articles: Editorials and opinion

Result: 137 documents.

3. Period from January 1, 2001 to March 30, 2002.

Keywords: “crime organisé and “médiat” and “opinion publique”

Category of articles: Editorials and opinion

Result: 9 documents, but only 3 written by reporters. The rest are mostly expert accounts.

English Language Canadian Generalist Sources

4. Period from January 1, 2001 to March 30, 2002.

Keyword: “organized crime”

Category of articles: All categories

Result: 3,525 documents (525 from January 1 to February 23, 1,000 from February 23 to June 16, 1,000 from June 16 to November 20, and 1,000 from November 20, 2001 to March 30, 2002)

5. Period from January 1, 2001 to March 30, 2002.

Keyword: “organized crime”

Category of articles: Editorials and opinion

Result: 254 hits

6. Period from January 1, 2001 to March 30, 2002.

Keywords: “organized crime” and “media” and “public opinion”

Category of articles: Editorials and opinion

Result: 1 document, not written by a reporter—a collage of excerpts from political speeches on freedom of the press and its importance.

Comments:

The Eureka search engine found only articles containing the word as typed in to be searched. Various events associated to an OC-related activity or group may not include the expression “organized crime”. This also means that a large number of articles containing the expression “organized crime” do not focus on said issue, but merely mention the expression at some point in them.

Opinion articles include letters sent in by readers and expert accounts.