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Crime and Justice

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Introduction

Crime, justice and punishment were major topics in eighteenth-century newspapers. Not only were they a constant and inexpensive source of content, but they addressed an issue of pressing contemporary concern. As the principle source of information on this topic for most readers, newspapers had the potential to shape public attitudes towards crime.

King has shown that crime and criminal justice accounted for 10 percent of the news hole in late eighteenth-century London papers, not including reports originating from outside Britain and those concerning the civil law (2007:80). The volume of reporting varied by title, but also according to fluctuations in the other major sources of content, meetings of parliament and war. Provincial papers, relying heavily on material taken from London papers, devoted even more space, with crime accounting for 26 percent of reports in the *Kentish Post* between 1729 and 1767 (Snell 2007:19). Focusing particularly on transported criminals, crime was also frequently reported in American papers.

Types of Report

There were several stages in the life-cycle of a crime story, but most incidents only appeared in one or two of these stages. The substance of reports varied considerably depending on the type of information and its source. Initial crime reports typically came from victims, while information on arrests often came from law enforcement officers seeking to call attention to their achievements, but neither of these were routinely reported. The promoters of new forms of policing, such

as Henry and John Fielding's *Bow Street Runners*, used the papers (notably the *Public Advertiser*) both to solicit information about unsolved crimes and to advertise the success of their innovations. The committal hearings held by magistrates to determine whether a suspect should be held over for trial afforded another source of reports, often provided by officials seeking publicity for the court's activities. There were regular reports of trials, particularly concerning felonies. Those held at the Old Bailey were typically derived from the separately published *Old Bailey Proceedings* (also known as the 'Sessions Papers') and, like the periodical they were derived from, these tended to justify the court's verdicts and sentences. Reports of punishments (primarily hangings, but occasionally also convicts placed in the pillory or subjected to public whipping) tended to turn the focus back to the behaviour of the offender and that of the attending crowd, both of whom could subvert the intended official message.

Two other types of crime report are particularly worth noting. Occasionally, newspapers made more general editorial comments about the extent of the crime problem, or the effectiveness (or more often ineffectiveness) of systems of policing and methods of punishment; these could be attached to individual crime reports or tied to broader themes of social or political instability. Crime appeared also in the advertisements which dominated many papers: victims frequently offered rewards for the return of stolen goods and, less often, officials placed notices describing wanted suspects or seeking information concerning those held in custody.

Tone and Impact

Like today, the newspapers focused disproportionately on violent crime. Murders, robberies and burglaries were most likely to be reported, while more mundane offences such as the simple larcenies, frauds and assaults which filled the courts' dockets were infrequently reported, though the provincial papers drew attention to some misdemeanours. The brief and evocative language of reporting, particularly victim reports, highlighted the most threatening and disturbing aspects of crime. The culprits were frequently labelled in pejorative language as rogues, ruffians and villains, and were often said to be working in gangs, and the violence they committed was exaggerated. Such reporting must have increased public concern about crime, and since prosecutorial discretion meant that only a small proportion of crimes were actually brought to trial at this time, they had the potential to alter prosecutorial behaviour. At certain times when reports intensified (by publishers attempting to increase circulation, or when an impending peace threatened to unleash large numbers of demobilised soldiers into the country) they encouraged 'moral panics', leading to increased prosecutions.

As King has argued, however, crime and justice reporting was 'contradictory, sporadic, and multi-vocal' (2007:103). Alongside reports which emphasized the threat violent crime posed to their readers, other reports, such as those of arrests, convictions and punishments, offered reassurance that criminals received their just desserts, and that the agencies of law enforcement were able to respond to the crime problem effectively.

Evidence of reader reception of newspaper crime reports is limited, but indicates that the papers were read sceptically. Horace Walpole repeatedly told his correspondents that newspapers were full of 'lies' and could not be trusted, though he acknowledged that they 'seldom fail to reach the outlines at least of incidents' (King 2007:103). Readers encountered diverse representations of crime in a variety of other publications at the time, including the *Old Bailey Proceedings*, the *Ordinary's Accounts* and other criminal biographies, polemical works and fiction, and attitudes towards crime and justice were influenced by all these works, as well as individual experiences.

Change

Over the course of the century newspaper coverage of crime and justice expanded considerably, and changed in content and approach. The revision of the duties on paper in 1757 led to increased newspaper size and the need for more content, while increasing regulation of the genre with which the papers competed most directly for crime news, the *Old Bailey Proceedings*, and the demise of the *Ordinary's Accounts* meant that after 1775 the public relied even more heavily on the papers for trial reports. But rather than increase the comprehensiveness of coverage, the papers provided in-depth coverage of a relatively small number of crimes involving apparently respectable criminals and victims, such as the soldier James Hackman who, in 1779, murdered the Earl of Sandwich's mistress, and forgers such as William Dodd. As Devereaux has argued, in the late eighteenth century elite and middle-class readers lost interest in the lives of ordinary criminals.

Conclusion

Crime, and responses to crime, was a major topic of newspaper reporting in the eighteenth century, and this reporting contributed to a lively public debate on the topic. There was no single message, however, with reports which stimulated fear sitting alongside those which offered some reassurance. Overall, the newspapers' biggest influence on public perceptions of crime was to increase awareness of the topic, keeping it in the foreground of the public imagination.

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