
INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRIME AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The media significantly influences public perception of crime and the criminal justice system. News coverage, television shows, and social media often portray crime in a sensationalized and sometimes misleading manner, emphasizing violent or unusual cases while underreporting broader trends or systemic issues. This selective representation can lead to a biased understanding of crime prevalence and justice processes, increasing fear of crime, reinforcing stereotypes, and fostering mistrust in legal institutions. Such portrayals also shape public attitudes toward policies on policing, sentencing, and rehabilitation, often favouring punitive responses over preventive or reformatory approaches. Examining this dynamic is crucial for addressing misconceptions and promoting a more accurate and balanced view of the criminal justice system.

Keywords: Media influence, crime perception, criminal justice system, public opinion, media bias

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital age, media has emerged as a dominant force in shaping public discourse, particularly in matters relating to crime and the criminal justice system. Through news reporting, televised crime shows, social media narratives, and film portrayals, the media exerts significant influence on how the public perceives criminal activity, law enforcement agencies, and judicial processes. These representations are frequently sensationalized and selective, emphasizing violent crimes and exceptional incidents at the expense of systemic problems including trial delays, police accountability, and prison reform. Because of this, the general public's perception is often skewed, which feeds fear, strengthens prejudices, and puts undue strain on the judicial system.

Over the past 20 years, the media's coverage of high-profile criminal cases in India has significantly increased. Sensational incidents like the 2020 Hathras rape case, the 2021 Aryan Khan drug case, and the 2012 Nirbhaya gang rape have dominated news coverage and sparked heated public discussion. These events included live updates, panel discussions, and frequently highly charged speech in addition to being court processes and media spectacles. Significant legislative reforms, such as the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, were brought about by the public outcry after the Nirbhaya case, demonstrating the direct impact of media-driven public opinion on criminal justice policy. However, while media coverage can sometimes lead to positive social reform, it can also distort facts, oversimplify complex legal issues, and create moral panics. When crime reporting lacks context or factual accuracy, it can lead to exaggerated fear, mistrust in institutions, and demands for harsh punitive measures without due process.

Given the increasing reach of digital platforms and the growing politicization of crime and law enforcement, this influence is especially noticeable. Media cycles tend to be dominated by high-profile cases, which cause public indignation, calls for prompt justice, and occasionally media trials that jeopardize the accused's rights. Although the media is essential for drawing attention to injustices and influencing public opinion, unbridled media power may undermine fundamental legal precepts including due process, judicial independence, and the presumption of innocence. This study aims to critically analyse how the media affects how the general public views crime and how India's criminal justice system operates. The goal is to examine how various media portrayals and reporting impact legal policy-making, social attitudes toward crime and justice, and the conduct of law enforcement and judicial institutions. Identifying

media bias patterns, investigating the effects of misinformation, and evaluating its broader implications for democratic accountability and the rule of law are further objectives of the study.

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA INFLUENCE

The role of media in shaping public perception of crime and the criminal justice system is multifaceted and significant. In India's rapidly evolving media landscape, citizens are exposed to a wide array of content across traditional, digital, and social platforms. From traditional television and newspapers to digital streaming services and social media apps like WhatsApp and YouTube, crime-related content has become deeply embedded in everyday media consumption patterns. These varying forms of media not only inform the public about crime but also influence how crime is understood, feared, and responded to at both the social and policy levels.

According to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), 57% of Indians aged 15–34 watch television news multiple times a week, 53% read newspapers, and 18% consume news through online sources. WhatsApp alone has over 230 million users in India, many of whom rely on it as a primary news source¹. A 2024 Times of India report, based on a University of Madras study involving 2,033 schoolchildren, revealed that over 34% of children who bingewatched crime shows for more than two hours a day experienced symptoms of anxiety, fear, or nightmares about personal safety². These findings point to a growing intersection between media exposure and psychological distress, especially among younger audiences.

Agenda-setting theory, which maintains that the media doesn't teach people what to think but rather what to think about, provides a clearer understanding of the media's influence. The intense media coverage following the 2012 Nirbhaya gang rape, for instance, not only triggered national outrage but also catalysed substantial legal reform through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013. This demonstrates the media's power to direct public attention and pressure policymakers into rapid action, sometimes without sufficient deliberation.

Framing theory also clarifies how audiences' perceptions of criminality are influenced by media narratives. Television shows like *Crime Patrol* and *Savdhaan India* often dramatize real events,

¹ Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), India Political & Social Attitudes Survey (2016).

² Ram Sundaram, Binge-Watching Crime Content Triggers Fear in Youth: Report, Times of India, May 9, 2024.

portraying law enforcement as heroic and criminals as morally deviant antiheroes. This creates a dichotomy that oversimplifies systemic issues within the criminal justice system while reinforcing public support for punitive measures.

Cultivation theory, developed by George Gerbner, suggests that prolonged exposure to televised crime creates a distorted perception of reality, where viewers begin to believe that the world is more dangerous than it actually is—a phenomenon known as the “mean world syndrome.” An empirical study published in 2023 found that Indian youth who consumed a high volume of crime web series were more likely to overestimate crime prevalence and support harsh law enforcement strategies³. Social media platforms also reinforce this perception through the rapid spread of sensational content, often devoid of statistical or contextual grounding.

This ongoing exposure raises people's fear of crime, which influences not just individual behaviour but also collective behaviour. Particularly in urban regions, media-driven narratives have demonized particular neighbourhoods and communities, impairing the mobility, social trust, and sense of safety of the local population. Furthermore, researchers have discovered that WhatsApp and Telegram spread what they refer to as “fear speech”—subtle but emotionally charged interactions that increase dread and mistrust in communities, frequently aimed at vulnerable groups. When combined, these findings show how the media has a significant influence on how society views crime, how laws are changed, and how the public's faith in the legal system may be distorted. In order to guarantee that criminal coverage represents fair, fact based narratives rather than sensationalism or fear-mongering, it is imperative that responsible reporting, media literacy training, and regulatory supervision be implemented immediately.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF CRIME

The reports created and spread by various media outlets have a greater influence on the public's view of crime than personal experiences. Television, newspapers, and increasingly, social media, construct crime as a frequent and dangerous threat. However, these representations often diverge greatly from statistical reality.. Media scholar George Gerbner's *cultivation theory* posits that individuals who consume large amounts of television content begin to perceive

³ C. P. Rashmi & Lalitank Jain, An Empirical Study on Indian Crime Web Series and Its Effects, 2(3) J. Commun. & Mgmt. (Sept. 9, 2023).

reality through the lens of what they watch⁴. This theory is especially relevant when considering crime-related content. Heavy television viewers are significantly more likely to believe that crime is pervasive, random, and increasing, despite national statistics often showing the opposite. This phenomenon, often termed the "Mean World Syndrome," leads individuals to overestimate their personal risk of victimization and to support punitive criminal justice policies⁵.

There is often a gap between perceived and actual crime rates. Public opinion surveys constantly show that a large number of people believe crime is increasing, even while crime figures in nations like the US have been dropping for decades. The public's perception of safety has been influenced by media narratives that highlight the spectacular and the unique, which is mostly accountable for this mismatch.

Disproportionate Reporting and Sensationalism

The overrepresentation of violent, relatively rare, and urban crimes in the media frequently comes at the expense of more common offenses like property or white-collar crimes. Sensationalism increases public fear by using dramatic imagery, emotional headlines, and frequent coverage of violent crimes. The deviancy amplification spiral theory explains how widespread media coverage may boost public outrage over crime, causing moral panic and, ultimately, more aggressive police tactics.

Social Media and Agenda-Setting

The increasing use of digital media, particularly social media, has sped up the dissemination of news about crime, frequently without context or verification. Based on the agenda-setting theory, the media tells individuals what to think about rather than what to consider. Sensational crimes are frequently prioritized over systemic issues in viral blogs, hashtags, and emotionally charged films, which shapes public discourse and influences policymaker agendas.

⁴ George Gerbner, Violence and Terror in and by the Media, 2 PEACE & CONFLICT: J. PEACE PSYCH. 237, 240 (1996).

⁵ K. Dowler, Media Consumption and Public Attitudes Toward Crime and Justice, 10 J. CRIM. JUST. & POPULAR CULTURE 109, 109–126 (2003).

Demographic Disparities in Perception

Perceptions of crime are not uniform across demographic groups. Age, gender, SES⁶, and race all play a role in how individuals interpret media messages about crime. Older persons, especially those over 50, are more likely to be influenced by the media to dread crime and are more dependent on television for information. According to a natural experiment conducted in Italy, elder viewers' apprehension about crime decreased by 8.3% when general entertainment content was substituted with crime-sensational programming.

IMPORTANT CASE LAWS THAT SHOW HOW THE MEDIA HAS CHANGED THE PUBLIC'S VIEW OF CRIME

Mukesh v. NCT of Delhi (Nirbhaya Rape Case)

A 23-year-old physiotherapy intern was brutally raped by a group on the evening of December 16, 2012, and in addition to being raped, she was also tortured and assaulted while riding in a private bus with a male companion. The event received severe national and international criticism. Following it, additional actions against the federal and state governments for not providing adequate security for women took place around the nation. As a result of this case, several laws were amended, such as the Indian Penal Code and the Juvenile Justice Act, which lowered the age of punishment for the heinous crime from eighteen to sixteen.

Manu Sharma v. State NCT Delhi (Jessica Lal Murder Case)

Manu Sharma, the son of Congress former Union Minister Venod Sharma, shot and killed Jessica Lal in 1999 when she refused to serve alcohol to him and his companions at the restaurant owned by socialite Boma Ramani in Mehrauli, South Delhi. The media trail acquitted this. The media and public pressure made this case one of the most prominent ones, forcing the legal system to give it another look.

K M Nanavati v. State of Maharashtra

In the history of the Indian judiciary, this case was historic. Unprecedented media attention was given to the case, which served as the basis for other books and movies. It was also the last

⁶ Socio Economic Status

case to be heard a jury trial in India, since the Government abolished the jury system as a result of the case.

MEDIA AND STEREOTYPING IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The public's opinion of crime is greatly influenced by the media, which frequently perpetuates preconceptions that feed institutional prejudices in the criminal justice system. In crime reporting, members of racial and ethnic minorities—especially Black and Latino people—are disproportionately underrepresented as victims and overrepresented as suspects. News broadcasts, print journalism, and social media posts frequently highlight minority suspects in visually prominent way using mugshots, aggressive language, or emotionally charged framing thereby perpetuating implicit associations between race and criminality⁷. This is particularly noticeable in online environments, where police departments more often post suspicious images of Black people than white ones. Conversely, when minority individuals are victims of crime or state violence, media narratives often invoke negative personal histories or community conditions, subtly shifting blame and dehumanizing the victim⁸.

The way that crime and victimization are reported is also influenced by gender. Instead of being portrayed as people impacted by systematic violence, female victims are frequently placed in tales of personal tragedy that emphasize their identities as mothers, wives, or daughters. Contextual analysis and requests for structural action are often absent from these depictions. However, media representations of female offenders are sensationalized, frequently reducing complex socio-economic or psychiatric reasons to simple character defects by characterizing them as emotionally unstable or morally aberrant. These gendered narratives shape public perceptions of victimhood and criminality while obscuring the underlying reasons of crime.

The impacts of media stereotyping are particularly severe for underprivileged and Indigenous people. In many locations, moral panics fanned by the press have led to heightened police and monitoring of immigrant or racialized populations. For example, in Australia, sensationalist reporting on so-called “African gangs” stoked public fear and contributed to social exclusion

⁷ See Rashawn Ray, *How the Media's Crime Coverage Creates a False Image of Black Criminality*, BROOKINGS (Dec. 16, 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-medias-crime-coverage-creates-a-false-image-of-black-criminality/>.

⁸ See Melissa Chan, *An Old Phenomenon: The Victim as Criminal*, TIME (Oct. 4, 2016), <https://time.com/4508748/victims-as-criminals/>.

and distrust between law enforcement and Sudanese-Australian communities⁹. Similarly, in India, newsrooms dominated by upper-caste journalists tend to minimize or distort coverage of violence against Dalits and Adivasis, reinforcing caste hierarchies and silencing the voices of victims. Media narratives surrounding Indigenous communities in countries such as Canada and Bangladesh also suffer from selective reporting, where the focus is on criminality or conflict rather than socio-economic inequality or historical disenfranchisement.

Stereotypes are further reinforced by visual media, particularly television and internet platforms, which use excessive imagery. Studies reveal that white individuals are more likely to be portrayed as victims or heroes, while Black and Latino individuals are disproportionately shown as suspects in violent or drug-related crimes¹⁰. Even in reality-based programming such as *Cops*, Black and Hispanic men are more frequently depicted in confrontational or criminal contexts, while white suspects appear in less aggressive roles or as beneficiaries of police leniency. These portrayals reinforce social hierarchies and shape unconscious biases in viewers.

If put together, these patterns have a significant impact. Stereotypical media portrayals undermine attempts at reform and equity, promote support for harsh criminal justice laws, and lead to misconceptions regarding crime rates among the general public. Additionally, oppressed communities lose faith in legal institutions as a result of their growing perception that the media and the court system are involved in their oppression. In order to ensure that the media not only informs but also equitably empowers all communities, addressing these discrepancies calls for both structural reform and journalistic accountability.

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON LEGAL PROCESS AND POLICY

Media Pressure and Policing

Media coverage has a direct and immediate effect on policing and public safety demands. Sensationalist reporting on violent or unusual crimes tends to create moral panic, leading to increased demands for aggressive policing, surveillance, and crime control—even when crime rates are in decline¹¹. High-visibility crimes amplified by the media often compel law

⁹ See African Gangs Moral Panic, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_gangs_moral_panic (last visited June 23, 2025)

¹⁰ See R. L. Entman & A. Rojecki, THE BLACK IMAGE IN THE WHITE MIND: MEDIA AND RACE IN AMERICA 43–51 (2000).

¹¹ Sara Sun Beale, The News Media's Influence on Criminal Justice Policy: How Market-Driven News Promotes Punitiveness, 48 WM. & MARY L. REV. 397, 405–06 (2006).

enforcement to increase patrols, conduct mass arrests, or adopt militarized tactics to display responsiveness¹².

Influence on Jury Selection and Trial Outcomes

Pretrial publicity and biased reporting significantly affect jury selection and trial outcomes. Research shows that jurors exposed to intensive media coverage before a trial are more likely to form premature opinions about the defendant's guilt or innocence¹³. This is particularly problematic in high-profile cases where public opinion, shaped by media portrayal, becomes difficult to filter during voir dire. In some cases, the sheer volume of media exposure makes it impossible to find an unbiased jury pool, leading to mistrials or appeals¹⁴.

Media Coverage and Due Process

Media behaviour regularly compromises the right to a fair trial, which is guaranteed in the majority of democratic judicial systems. The presumption of innocence is undermined when suspects are presented as guilty prior to a verdict being rendered—for example, through headlines, chosen images, or leaking information. This “trial by media” erodes legal integrity and puts pressure on courts to deliver outcomes that match public expectation rather than legal standard¹⁵. In some cases, suspects suffer irreversible reputational damage even if they are acquitted.

Furthermore, extensive coverage may potentially jeopardize the rights and dignity of victims. The media frequently sensationalizes personal history in situations of domestic abuse or sexual assault, blaming victims or casting doubt on their veracity. This distorts court decisions, deters reporting, and retraumatizes survivors.

Role in Shaping Criminal Justice Policy

Beyond particular events, the media continues to influence punitive policies and criminal

¹² Yasir Aleem, Sanan Waheed Khan & Saima Jamroze, Media's Portrayal of Crime and Public Perception Toward the Criminal Justice System, 10(4) B.B.E. 167, 167–75 (2021), <https://bbejournal.com/BBE/article/view/329.BBEJournal>

¹³ Nancy Marder, Bringing Jury Instructions into the Twenty-First Century, 81 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 449, 459 (2006).

¹⁴ Christina Tilley, Trial by Media: Why It Threatens the Judicial Process, 53 AM. CRIM. L. REV. 141, 145–46 (2016).

¹⁵ Erwin Chemerinsky, Fair Trials and Hostile Media Coverage, 28 U. HAW. L. REV. 99, 102 (2005).

justice reforms. Communities of colour were disproportionately affected by the harsh sentencing legislation, mandatory minimums, and the growth of the prison-industrial complex that resulted from the media's inciting fear of crack cocaine and "superpredators" in the 1980s and 1990s. The public pressure that led to the enactment of these policies was largely sparked by media reportage that incited anxiety.

Media has also played a central role in the rise of the **#MeToo movement**, pushing governments to amend statutes of limitations for sexual assault, redefine consent standards, and reform workplace harassment laws. Still, the media's focus can be fickle. While certain reform movements gain traction, others—like prison abolition or restorative justice—receive little mainstream attention, which limits their political viability. In this way, media continues to shape not just what legal reforms are pursued, but which are deemed legitimate or desirable.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND RISE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram enable instant reporting of live events, from protests to natural disasters. During the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, citizen-generated posts were crucial sources of early information and shaped coverage by traditional media¹⁶. Yet immediacy carries risks: unverified claims, misleading visuals, and rumours can go viral before fact-checkers intervene¹⁷. Studies show that false news often spreads faster than truth—false political news is reshared three times more than accurate information on Twitter. Social bots also worsen the situation: bots were found to amplify 400,000 low-credibility articles during the 2016 U.S. election. This “infodemic” environment complicates public perception and judicial processes alike.

Viral Cases and Online Trials by Media

Digital trials, where public opinion affects identities and legal morale long before courts make a decision, can be sparked by citizen journalism's expanded reach. Media campaigns that pushed courts to reconsider or reevaluate decisions greatly influenced high-profile cases in India, such as the Jessica Lal murder (1999) and Aarushi Talwar (2008). Critics warn that a

¹⁶ See Citizen Journalism, WIKIPEDIA (last visited June 30, 2025) (describing emergence via Web 2.0, tsunami eyewitness accounts, Hong Kong protests)

¹⁷ Real-Time Reporting: Challenges of Misinformation, EDICTS & STATUTES (explaining how live updates can distort trial perception).

presumption of guilt rather than innocent could result from this type of viral publicity.

Tensions Between Free Speech and Fair Trial Rights

Democracies recognize freedom of speech, but this right clashes with the imperative for impartial justice. Courts worldwide—including in India and the UK—have ruled that free expression must yield when it threatens due process and trial fairness. Still, enforcing gag orders or limiting social media content is difficult: digital leaks, screenshots, and endless reposts circumvent traditional legal barriers. Social media also fosters harassment, digital vigilantism, and defamation claims that survive acquittal. Jurists caution that increased surveillance of public statements is needed, but must be balanced against basic freedoms¹⁸.

LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The intersection of social media, citizen journalism, and the legal system raises urgent legal and ethical considerations, particularly regarding media regulation and freedom of the press. While press freedom is a cornerstone of democratic societies, it is not absolute; governments often impose restrictions—such as defamation laws, contempt provisions, or gag orders—to protect individual rights and the integrity of legal proceedings¹⁹. Judicial interventions, including postponement orders and media blackouts, have been used to mitigate prejudicial reporting in high-profile cases, though such measures often clash with the public's right to know²⁰. The ethical obligations of journalism—accuracy, accountability, and minimization of harm—are not uniformly observed in the digital space, especially by unregulated citizen journalists who may lack legal awareness or professional training. This vacuum calls for nuanced legal safeguards that uphold fair trial rights without eroding press freedoms, such as clearer standards for sub judice reporting and accountability mechanisms for digital publishers. As courts increasingly contend with viral content that influences legal outcomes, balancing open justice with responsible reporting remains a pressing constitutional and ethical challenge.

¹⁸ Democracy, Social Media, and Freedom of Expression, Chicago J. Int'l L. (2021) (discussing balancing speech rights with judicial integrity).

¹⁹ New York Times Co. v. United States, 403 U.S. 713, 717 (1971); Sahara India Real Estate Corp. Ltd. v. SEBI, (2012) 10 SCC 603 (India) (recognizing limits to press freedom when prejudicial to fair trial).

²⁰ R. v. Dagenais, [1994] 3 S.C.R. 835 (Can.) (establishing that publication bans must balance fair trial and free expression); In re P.C. Sen, AIR 1970 SC 1821 (India) (media cannot prejudice ongoing trials).

RECOMMENDATION AND REFORM PROPOSALS

The public's opinion of crime and the criminal justice system is significantly impacted by the media, which frequently exaggerates fear and sensationalism while underrepresenting intricate structural problems. The public may form distorted perceptions of crime frequency and severity as a result of continuous exposure to violent crime reporting and dramatic depictions; this phenomenon is known as the "mean world syndrome," and it subsequently strengthens support for severe sentencing guidelines and undermines confidence in due process. Furthermore, media trials can undermine the assumption of innocence and the impartiality of court proceedings, especially in high-profile cases. A comprehensive reform approach is required to solve these issues. First, improving media literacy among the public through educational curricula and national awareness campaigns is essential to equip individuals with the skills to critically evaluate crime reporting and distinguish fact from opinion or entertainment²¹. Second, the establishment of clear and enforceable guidelines for responsible crime reporting, based on ethical standards such as those advocated by the Society of Professional Journalists, is crucial to ensure balanced, privacy-respecting, and non-prejudicial coverage²². Third, judicial and legislative measures need to be reinforced. For example, courts could consider jury sequestration and issue gag orders in delicate cases, and legislatures might pass laws that restrict pre-trial publicity and make it illegal to publish prejudicial material²³. These measures, collectively, aim to strike a balance between freedom of the press and the right to a fair trial, ensuring that public discourse on crime supports democratic accountability without undermining the rule of law.

CONCLUSION

Crime reporting's reach and risks have increased due to the changing media landscape, which is marked by the emergence of 24/7 news cycles, social media virality, and citizen journalism. The ideals of natural justice and a fair trial are seriously threatened by these advances, even while they present previously unheard-of chances for openness and public participation. This is particularly true when reporting deviates into sensationalism or biased opinion. Press freedom and judicial integrity must be balanced again because the media continues to shape

²¹ Renee Hobbs, Media Literacy Education and the Challenge of New Media, 48 Communicator 4 (2013).

²² Soc'y of Prof'l Journalists, SPJ Code of Ethics (2014), <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

²³ Sheppard v. Maxwell, 384 U.S. 333 (1966) Supreme Court case that addressed the conflict between the Sixth Amendment right to a fair trial and the First Amendment right to freedom of the press, particularly in the context of intense media coverage surrounding a criminal case.

institutional decision-making as well as public opinion. The law must react with precision and forethought, protecting the accused's rights while promoting educated public debate.. At the same time, the media must embrace its ethical responsibilities in reporting crime with accuracy, sensitivity, and fairness. Ultimately, the legitimacy of the criminal justice system—and the public trust it commands—depends on a well-informed citizenry, a responsible press, and a legal framework that protects both liberty and truth in equal measure.