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MEDIA AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR – BETWEEN SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND DESTRUCTION

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the interplay between media and criminal activities, highlighting the numerous stereotypes and misconceptions about criminality that often originate from the media's construction of reality, driven by sensationalism and profit-seeking. In scrutinizing the media's engagement with criminal matters, the paper comprehensively analyzes the intricate dynamic between providing informative content and the allure of sensationalism. The paper accentuates the pivotal role of the media in disseminating information to the public, promoting justice, and stimulating discourse on the causal factors and repercussions of criminal behavior. The paper underscores the adverse societal impacts of the media, including the propagation of disinformation, the endorsement of violence and aggression, the cultivation of media dependency, and the ramifications for mental health. It meticulously explores the dissemination of false news, identifies sources of disinformation, and formulates strategies to mitigate this predicament. The nexus between the media's portrayal of violence and tangible instances of aggressive conduct is scrutinized, delving into industry self-regulation and the roles played by family, education, and society in addressing this issue. Furthermore, the paper conducts an in-depth analysis of how the media portrays criminal activities, with a particular

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emphasis on popular television genres centered on criminal themes. It elucidates the psychological dimension of the appeal of such narratives, offering insights into diverse motivators prompting viewers to identify with criminal acts. In conclusion, the paper presents an empirical research into the perceptions of citizens in Serbia concerning the influence exerted by both legacy and new media.

Keywords: *media, criminal behavior, social responsibility, perception of crime.*

1. Introduction

Media wield significant influence in shaping public opinion on critical societal issues, including criminality as a negative social phenomenon. The majority of stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding criminal behavior are a consequence of the media's portrayal of these phenomena. Behind many media reports lies the need for sensationalistic depictions of criminality, particularly violence, and the pursuit of profit. By adopting such an approach towards criminality, the media jeopardize the normal functioning of the justice system, which must strike a balance between the "right to know" and the freedom of the press on one hand, and the presumption of innocence on the other. The phenomenon of moral panic, which has garnered the attention of scholars in recent decades, is closely tied to the issue of media construction of a reality that does not necessarily align with the truth.

Media coverage of criminal events and personalities exerts an intense and continuing impact on people's understanding of security, justice, and social cohesion. Given that criminality is often perceived as a threat to society, the media plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward this phenomenon and bears the responsibility to inform the public about crime in a manner that promotes justice, legal security, and constructive discussions about the causes and consequences of criminal behavior. This dual role of the media, encompassing reporting on crime and the promotion of social responsibility, creates a complex framework for analysis and discussion. This text will analyze various aspects of this problem, providing deeper insights into propaganda, disinformation, the promotion of violence and aggression, media addiction, the effect on mental health, and the link between media and criminal behavior.

Lorimer (1998) highlights that mass media easily engender an uncontrolled dynamic of influence on a broader audience. These media become a means of manipulation, employing diverse techniques such as propaganda,

disinformation, and associative methods. Propaganda is often used as a tool for shaping public opinion, while disinformation can significantly undermine social cohesion. Movies, video games, and news frequently depict violence in ways that can influence the aggressive behavior of viewers. How can the promotion of violence in the media be reduced, and which strategies can be effective in this regard? Regulatory frameworks, media industry self-regulation, and the role of families, educators, and education all have a place in addressing this problem.

The ubiquity of digital media and smart devices has led to media addiction, which presents an additional problem and prompts consideration of preventive measures and treatments for media addiction. The effect of the media on psychological health also requires attention, given the establishment of unrealistic standards and the idealization of perfection. Constant exposure to violent content can increase levels of anxiety and depression. Although research indicates a moderate causal link between exposure to television violence and real aggressive behavior, the issue remains complex because the popularity of certain programs suggests that the audience desires such content. With the aim of exploring the perception and awareness of citizens in the Republic of Serbia regarding the influence of the media on them and their families, we conducted an empirical study, the results of which we will present in this paper.

2. Types of Negative Impact of Mass Media on Society

Although the media plays a positive role in providing information, entertainment, and education, there are times when their negative influence prevails, whether by promoting competitive ideologies or supporting the erosion of moral values. Electronic media, general computerization, mobile phones, music, and “many other technological advancements designed to make life and work easier for modern humans not only categorize their alienation as a “new age” phenomenon but also instruct and compel the “new man” not to always treat other people as individuals” (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020a). According to Lorimer (1998), mass media encompasses a diverse range of activities concerning their fundamental, underlying function of signifying or constructing reality. Electronic mass media, in particular, stand out due to their capacity to signify and shape reality. Consequently, their influence is exceptionally significant and essentially challenging to control, given the continuous growth of the audience and the availability of content. This phenomenon leads to the mass adoption of the attitudes communicated by

the media, whether through core programming or advertising, often without critical evaluation (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020d).

Methods of manipulation. Due to their biological nature, humans are susceptible to suggestion, imitation, and misinformation. Individuals and social groups that control the media recognized this potential early on and made it available to various groups, often in exchange for money or social power. Such media activities aimed at producing the expected opinions of individuals and large segments of society are not ethical because people cannot control the influence exerted on them and are generally powerless against such suggestions.

One of the negative impacts is propaganda, which has developed a variety of techniques to manipulate public awareness and influence the masses. According to Laswell (1979), “propaganda is in any case always a deliberate act, associated with a pre-defined controversy, that is, a fundamentally conflictual situation, as a kind of given.” One of the negative impacts on people’s awareness is the method of disinformation that affects the human subconscious. However, the method of disinformation is coarse and therefore easily recognizable, so it is less frequently used in modern media, unlike the influence associated with associations. The method of association involves careful selection and a specific arrangement of concepts that evoke either positive or negative associations, enabling influence over information selection. Since the method is based on specific associations, it facilitates influence on an individual due to their habits and beliefs. This subsequently leads to the formation of stereotypes. Stereotypes effectively control the entire process of information perception. Stereotypes are formed under the influence of two factors: unconscious collective processing and individual sociocultural environment, as well as deliberate, sometimes subliminal media influence. With the help of stereotypes, it is easy to manipulate human awareness because stereotypes are closely linked to society’s life. Arendt (2023) points out the close connection between stereotypes and the significant influence of the media on behavior that reproduces the actions of “heroes” created by print, radio, or television.

Fake news. Mass media, especially social media, is often criticized for spreading disinformation and fake news. This phenomenon can have serious consequences for society, including polarization, reduced trust in the media, political instability, and risks to public health. Fake news can exhibit a wide range of negative effects on society (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard, 2023). Disinformation can lead to societal polarization because people often accept and spread information that confirms their existing beliefs, regardless

of its accuracy, leading to increased social divisions and a reduced ability for constructive discourse. Disinformation can threaten political stability and the legitimacy of institutions. Disinformation can be used to destabilize societies and often poses risks to public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the spread of false information about the virus, treatments, and vaccines could lead to dangerous situations. Disinformation can originate from various sources, including individuals, organizations, political groups, and foreign actors. Social media often performs a crucial role in the spread of disinformation. Individuals may spread disinformation out of ignorance, misunderstanding, or deliberate misuse. Organizations and political groups often use disinformation for political purposes, using it as a tool to manipulate public opinion. Foreign actors may also spread disinformation to destabilize other countries or promote their interests. Algorithms that show users the content that engages them the most often favor the spread of sensational or controversial information, regardless of its accuracy. Fighting disinformation is essential to limit its negative impact on society. This includes educating the public on recognizing disinformation and developing critical thinking. Collaboration between governments, civil society, and technology companies can help the development of effective strategies to combat disinformation. Addressing disinformation is crucial for preserving the integrity of the information space and upholding democratic values.

Promotion of Violence and Aggression. Media content, including movies, video games, and news, sometimes depict violence in ways that can influence aggressive behavior and violence among viewers, especially young people. People can be more sensitive to violent media content, and prolonged exposure to such content can lead to increased anxiety, fear, and trauma. Media violence can distort perceptions of the real world, especially in terms of risk perception. Continuous exposure to depictions of violence can create an exaggerated fear of crime and real-world violence. Research (Reissler, 2006) studies measures that can be taken to limit the promotion of violence in media content, including regulatory frameworks and self-regulation within the media industry. Besides the state, the role of the family and schools in promoting media literacy and critical thinking in viewers should be emphasized. Through a better understanding of these issues, society can work toward creating media that adhere to ethical standards and promote positive values rather than violence and aggression.

Media Addiction. The ubiquity of digital media and smart devices can lead to media addiction. Media addiction is a phenomenon that develops gradually due to the ubiquity of digital media and smart devices. Media

addiction shapes individuals' behavior patterns, often developing gradually, frequently hiding factors contributing to its formation. Media addiction can manifest in various ways, including addiction to social media, video games, online shopping, and more. Different components of media addiction correspond to technological and behavioral aspects, particularly the influence of information and communication technology (ICT). Media addiction can impede productivity, consume time that would otherwise be spent in the real world, and affect relationships with family, friends, and partners. Research (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021) has shown destructive effects on mental health and the perception of quality of life. Proposed prevention strategies include education, the promotion of healthy media usage, and therapeutic options, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and group support (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021).

Impact on Mental Health. Mass media often play a role in shaping body images and idealizing perfection, which can contribute to a negative impact on mental health, including eating disorders and low self-esteem. Media create standards of good and bad, desirable and undesirable, and can harm individuals with these standards. Media beauty standards and the idealization of perfection are often associated with negative effects on mental health. Research conducted at University College London (UCL, 2023) indicates that media body image perception can contribute to eating disorders. The negative emotional effects of media standards can affect self-confidence and self-esteem. Media content that depicts violence, tragedies, and other stressful situations can increase levels of anxiety and depression in viewers. Research (Lambert et al., 2022) indicates that continuous exposure to such content can affect mental health, especially in the context of media reporting on current events.

3. Media and Criminal Behavior

Criminality has been an intrinsic element of popular mass media from the very inception of fictional films and later on television. Within these media, the central subject often revolves around criminal activities, frequently marked by excitement or violence. In recent times, psychological thrillers have emerged, offering a story from the criminal's perspective, providing a "deeper understanding of their motives" (VanArendonk, 2019). Such content creates an illusion of the power of criminals, suggesting to the audience that criminal behavior is desirable and profitable. The fascination with crime shows comes from their ability to portray the darker aspects of the human psyche positively. This phenomenon enables the observation of the darkest aspects

of human nature while simultaneously providing a sense of security within one's home (VanArendonk, 2019). It allows people to engage in hypothetical scenarios, allowing for imaginative role-playing that steps outside the bounds of legal constraints (more in: VanArendonk, 2019). The allure of crime in the media is born from the inherent attraction to what is forbidden. The motivations behind this appeal are complex, combining fascination, often associated with death and destruction, which includes the enjoyment derived from the sense of "corrupt" satisfaction (IvyPanda, 2022). As part of a study by the University of Augsburg and the University of Wisconsin-Madison (International Communication Association, 2013), 482 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 82, with various educational levels, analyzed film trailers with varying degrees of bloodshed, assessing the likelihood of watching the entire film while providing their perceptions of the movie. The researchers proved that "there is a greater likelihood that people will watch movies with violent scenes if they believe it makes sense to confront violent aspects of real life." Specific types of violent portrayals attract audiences by promising to satisfy their desires for truth through meaningful insights into certain aspects of the human condition (Bartsch & Mares, 2014).

Since the mid-20th century, violent TV programs have been the subject of extensive research, often concluding that there is a moderate but consistent causal connection between exposure to television violence and real-world aggressive behavior. Different theoretical explanations include social learning, excitation transfer, disinhibition, or desensitization (Mass Media and Crime, n.d). The central debate develops in two directions. The first direction, associated with the "general aggression model" (see: Bushman & Anderson, 2002; DeWall, Anderson & Bushman, 2011), argues that exposure to media reporting of violent crimes can "trigger" the development of aggressive attitudes or behaviors, leading people to real violence (see more: Phillips & Hensley, 1984; Laser, Luster & Oshio, 2007; Anderson et al, 2015; Gentile, 2016). In contrast to this theory, proponents of approaches such as "uses and gratifications" (Sherry et al., 2006) and "self-determination" (Przybylski, Rigby & Ryan, 2010) have not found solid evidence of such effects. These researchers argue that media reporting of violent crimes is better interpreted as a "crime steerer," a factor that can shape criminal behavior through influencing the style of crime but is not a factor that triggers criminal behavior (see more in: Ferguson et al., 2008; Savage & Yancey, 2008; Surette, 2012). To understand the phenomenon of crime fascination and the propensity for imitation, a good example is the American documentary TV series "CopyCat Killers."

While there are various contradictory viewpoints, we can conclude that the media can contribute to aggressive behavior. The media subtly guide us to adopt a distorted perception of reality, and as a result, our perception of reality becomes skewed, with digital violence having the “power to blur the boundaries between the virtual and the real world” (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2021a). It is essential to emphasize the challenges that children face due to exposure to inappropriate content on the internet, exposing them to numerous security challenges, risks, and threats (Bjelajac, 2012; Bjelajac & Filipović, 2021b; Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020b). The approach to protecting children from online abuse should encompass physical, psychological, and moral dimensions of safety (see more: Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020c). Mitigating the influence of media on criminal behavior involves promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and responsible media consumption among individuals, especially the youth. Additionally, implementing regulatory frameworks for age-appropriate content and self-regulation within the media industry can help limit the exposure to violent or criminal content that may contribute to criminal behavior.

4. Discussion

In order to obtain data on the extent of citizens’ awareness of the media’s influence, we conducted a direct empirical study to gain a clear understanding of how citizens perceive the media’s impact. The study was conducted in the form of a random sample survey and included 504 respondents who were selected randomly and contacted by phone between September 1, 2023, and November 1, 2023. Initially, 1,244 respondents were contacted, but only 504 of them agreed to answer the questions. The study consisted of one primary research question, and additional questions were asked to segment the results into various categories, including gender, age groups (less than 30, 30-50, and older than 50), urban or rural living environments, educational levels (primary and secondary education or higher education), and family size (single individuals, couples without children, couples with one child, and couples with more than two children). These parameters proved significant as they revealed variations in the perception of media influence and responses to the primary research question. The primary research question was, “Are mass media good or bad for your family?” Below, we provide an overview and interpretation of the research results, beginning with a breakdown of the respondents based on the parameters mentioned in the previous text, followed by a tabular representation of the research findings.

In the study, 228 respondents were male, and 276 were female, representing 45% and 55% of the total sample, respectively. The total sample

included 104 individuals under the age of 30, 171 individuals aged 31 to 50, and 229 individuals older than 50. Out of the total number of respondents, 345, or 68%, lived in urban areas, while 159, or 32%, lived in rural areas. In the total sample of 504 surveyed citizens, 370 respondents, or 73%, had basic or secondary vocational education, while 134 respondents, or 27%, had a college education, including those with completed postgraduate studies at both levels. It should be noted that households with five or more members account for only 6% of the total number of households in the Republic of Serbia, so we combined that category, which typically represents families with three children, with the category of individuals or couples with two children to increase the representativeness and size of that part of the sample. Out of the total number of respondents, 146, or 29%, lived in households without children, 262 respondents, or 52%, lived in households with one child, and 96 respondents, or 19%, lived in households with two or more children.

Table 1. Are mass media good or bad for your family, total results

Good	Bad	Don't know/No answer
227 (45%)	171 (34%)	106 (21%)

Authors' Research

Table 2. Are mass media good or bad for your family, results by gender of respondents

Gender	Good	Bad	Don't know/No answer
Male	92 (40%)	81 (36%)	55 (24%)
Female	135 (53%)	90 (27%)	51 (18%)

Authors' Research

Table 3. Are mass media good or bad for your family, results by age group of respondents

Age	Good	Bad	Don't know/No answer
<30	61 (59%)	24 (23%)	19 (18%)
31-50	81 (47%)	60 (35%)	30 (18%)
>50	85 (37%)	87 (38%)	57 (25%)

Authors' Research

Table 4. Are mass media good or bad for your family, results by the area of residence of respondents

Area	Good	Bad	Don't know/No answer
Urban	145 (42%)	131 (38%)	69 (20%)
Rural	82 (52%)	40 (25%)	37 (23%)

Authors' Research

Table 5. Are mass media good or bad for your family, results by the education level of respondents

Completed education level	Good	Bad	Don't know/No answer
Elementary or high school	167 (45%)	124 (34%)	79 (21%)
Higher education	60 (45%)	47 (35%)	27 (20%)

Authors' Research

Table 6. Are mass media good or bad for your family, results by number of children in households of respondents

Number of children	Good	Bad	Don't know/No answer
0	76 (52%)	36 (25%)	34 (23%)
1	116 (44%)	89 (34%)	57 (22%)
2+	35 (36%)	46 (48%)	15 (16%)

Authors' Research

In interpreting the results, we will begin with the overall total, where 45% of citizens believe that the media has a positive impact on them and their families, while 34% consider the influence to be negative. The percentage of respondents who did not provide an answer falls within somewhat standard limits for this type of research. The fact that nearly half of the respondents believe that the media has a positive impact on their families is multifaceted and sometimes mutually exclusive because each individual selects the media content they will consume, making it difficult for individuals to believe that what they have personally chosen from the wide range of media content is harmful to them. The same explanation applies to responses based on respondents' gender, although we cannot directly conclude why women have more confidence in the positive impact of the media than men. This leads us to the limitations of this study because it does not provide the psychological context behind respondents' answers.

However, when we consider the broader picture and when respondents took into account the effect of media content that is not personally selected by them but by their family members, we notice a decline in the number of positive responses to the survey question. The highest percentage of respondents who answered that the media has a negative impact on them and their families falls within the category of respondents living in households with two or more children. This may imply that they believe the media has a negative influence on the upbringing, education, and socialization of their children. Trust in the positive impact of the media decreases with the age of the respondents and is lower in urban than in rural areas. The reasons for this lie in the types of media content consumed by people of different ages, as well as in the availability and time spent consuming media content when it comes to place of residence, as differences between urban and rural areas, although significantly reduced, still exist, especially concerning the proportion of legacy media and new media usage.

Although it has clear limitations, this study has provided answers to the main research question, while also opening other questions that deserve further investigation. Based on the results obtained in this study, additional questions can be constructed to provide a much more detailed picture and a clearer understanding of why respondents provided the answers they did during the survey.

5. Conclusions

In addition to their multifaceted functions and significant role in society, it is imperative to acknowledge media's undeniable adverse effects on the collective and individual levels. A noteworthy aspect underscoring the subtlety of media influence is the fact that a substantial portion of the citizenry perceives media as having a positive impact on their lives and familial environments. While the media fulfill crucial roles in information dissemination, entertainment, and education, it is unquestionable that their potent capabilities can be susceptible to misuse. The advent of electronic media, computerization, mobile technology, music, and other technological innovations, despite being ostensibly designed for life facilitation, frequently contributes to societal alienation and fosters an altered reality that occasionally verges on dehumanization, thereby impacting human relationships. Manipulation through media channels has emerged as a methodological tool extensively employed to shape the perceptions of individuals and, collectively, society as a whole. Propaganda, disinformation, and the perpetuation of stereotypes stand as formidable instruments that wield significant influence over the collective consciousness, often resulting in homogeneity of thought and

the attenuation of critical thinking. Furthermore, our research has undertaken a meticulous examination of specific adverse consequences stemming from mass media. This includes the pernicious dissemination of disinformation, the tacit endorsement and dissemination of violent and aggressive content, the cultivation of media addiction, and the ramifications for mental well-being. Disinformation, notably, carries profound repercussions for society at large. These encompass the perilous phenomena of polarization, the erosion of public trust in media institutions, and the fomentation of political instability. Concurrently, the promulgation of violence within media content wields the potential to exert a discernible influence over aggressive conduct and the populace's apprehension of genuine societal hazards. The issue of media addiction, particularly salient in the contemporary digital era, has become a pervasive concern, impacting the daily lives of countless individuals. Mass media, spanning the spectrum from traditional legacy forms to modern digital outlets, occupies a pivotal role in shaping society's perceptual framework and norms. In essence, it is imperative to comprehend their influence, both the constructive and detrimental facets thereof, to foster the growth of a society characterized by information dissemination, receptivity, and the cultivation of critical thinking.

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MEDIJI I KRIMINALNO PONAŠANJE – IZMEĐU DRUŠTVENE ODGOVORNOSTI I DESTRUKCIJE

REZIME: Rad daje pregled interakcije medija i kriminala. Autori naglašavaju da mnogi stereotipi i netačne predstave o kriminalu proizlaze iz medijske konstrukcije stvarnosti, motivisane senzacionalizmom i profitom. Proučavajući odnos medija prema kriminalu, rad analizira kompleksnu dinamiku izveštavanja između informativnosti i senzacionalizma.

Naglašava se odgovornost medija da, informišući javnost, promovišu pravednost i raspravu o uzrocima i posledicama kriminalnog ponašanja. Posebno poglavlje obrađuje negativne uticaje masovnih medija na društvo, poput dezinformacija, promocije nasilja i agresije, zavisnosti od medija i uticaja na mentalno zdravlje. Detaljno se istražuje širenje lažnih vesti, identifikacija izvora dezinformacija i strategije za suzbijanje ovog problema. Obraduje se veza između medijskog prikaza nasilja i stvarnog agresivnog ponašanja, istražujući samoregulaciju industrije i ulogu porodice, obrazovanja i društva u rešavanju ovog pitanja. Rad produbljuje analizu medijskog prikaza kriminala, istražujući popularne TV žanrove koji se fokusiraju na kriminalne aktivnosti. Naglašava se psihološki aspekt privlačnosti ovakvih priča, pružajući uvid u različite motive gledalaca da se identifikuju s kriminalnim radnjama. Na kraju, rad predstavlja empirijsko istraživanje o percepciji građana Srbije o uticaju koji na njih vrše podjednako i tradicionalni (legacy) i novi mediji.

Ključne reči: mediji, kriminalno ponašanje, društvena odgovornost, percepcija kriminala.

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