A Critical Study of Media Profiling on Society's Social Problems from a British Perspective

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Abstract—This article explores the sociological perspectives on social problems and the role of the media which has a delicate role to tread in balancing its duty to the public and the victim   Whilst social problems have objective conditions, it is the subjective definition of such problems that ensure which social problem comes to the fore and which doesn't. Further it explores the roles and functions of policymakers when addressing social problems and the impact of the inception of media profiling as well as the advantages and disadvantages of media profiling towards social problems. It focuses on the inception of media profiling due to its length and a follow up article will explore how current media profiling towards social problems have evolved since its inception.

Keywords—Media Profiling, Policy Response, Social Problems

I. INTRODUCTION

IN every society, people experience some form of social problems which are viewed as undesirable by certain segments of society. Social phenomena such as poverty, disease, racial discrimination, etc may be referred to as social problems for some, whilst others may not totally agree with the above as constituting social problems but may view social problems differently. Therefore social problems are matters perceived as causing difficulty by a given select or by the public within a society. Although our knowledge of social problems can come from individual experience, much of our information about them is derived from the media profile. The mass media are, in general, commercial institutions trying to earn profits from attracting as many 'customers' as possible. Hence as the old cliché suggests sex and violence sell well, (P.Golding and S.Middleton, 1982). Consequently, the media tend to exaggerate and sensationalise the nature of the social problems they report. Sociologists have been closely linked with the study of the nature of social problems given that society is the subject matter of sociology. They have put forward various perspectives of which the following five are the most prominent. These five perspectives also entail suggested solutions to the social problems.The first perspective is social pathology. This is based on the application of organic concepts to social problems. Society is regarded as using the biological or medical model. Social problems are compared to bodily mal-functions. Hence, whilst the doctor views social problem in the angle of a physical illnesses, the social pathologist concentrates on individual's social problems as a disease. Social pathologists have suggested that a social problem as breaching of moral expectations and the solution to correcting social problems is to provide moral education, [8].

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The second perspective views social problems in wider society rather than to do with individuals.

Although it has different connotations according to different sociologists, in general it refers to the disturbance of pattern tradition and discipline as a result of social change. For example, social problems exist when the changes occur in the pattern of work, the family or the community causing disorganisation, political unrest, etc.

The solution is to bring the various parts of the social system that are out of tune into equilibrium, for example by social control, (E. Butterworth and D. Weir, 2006).The third perspective is that of value-conflict which sees social problems emerging as a result of conflict in values and roles amongst various groups due to contact and competition. The resolution of the problem could be through negotiations, such as collective bargaining, the exertion of power or suitable changes in the law [8].Fourthly, the deviance perspective puts forward the suggestion, that individuals who deviate from social norms are those who reject some or all of the beliefs of that society. They may also behave in ways which are unacceptable to the majority in society. This is seen to constitute the social problem. The deviants may be part of a group where members accept different beliefs or behaviour from that common in general society. For example, people who are brought up in deprived or delinquent environment may adopt delinquent behaviour related to the character of the sub-culture which they inhabit. The extent of behaviour depends on the structure of opportunity and resources, and their limitations within society. [11] suggests that if pressure is placed on certain groups in society, the result would lead to non-conforming behaviour which would create social problems such as, crime, drug addiction, alcohol abuse etc. The solution is to analyse and remedy such social problems before they pose a serious threat to the social structure, (E. Butterworth and D. Weir, 2006).Finally, the labelling perspective maintains that a process exists whereby people in power are able to label certain individuals and groups as deviant. For example, deviant behaviour can be labelled as criminal or mentally ill, by influential groups. [12] suggests that deviance is about breaking rules which have been established by society. [12] argues that deviance is not about the way people behave but about how people label that behaviour, (E. Butterworth and D. Weir, 2006). The solution would be to understand the labelled behaviour as being in some way responsive and adaptive. As such, one ought to discover the true cause and nature of that behaviour, then changing society in terms of the forces that are affecting the labelled individuals (E. Butterworth and D. Weir, 2006).

II. The Objective And The Subjective Social Problem

According to Fuller and Myers (2007), social problems have two aspects, the objective condition and the subjective definition [9].The objective condition is true in the real world. The subjective definition is one that is open to personal opinion or interpretation and more often than not subjectively defined by policymakers which we will address in a later part of this article. Objective observers such as academic researchers define conditions as problems and suggest the forms of action that are necessary. For example, in one culture, infant mortality levels could be seen as a natural or inevitable whereas in other cultures the same levels can be perceived as unusually high, [1]. The objective conditions remain the same but the subjective attitude is usually always different. Similarly, C. W. Mills and C. M. Case (2003) argue that unemployment can be regarded as an individual's personal tragedy but mass unemployment indicates the existence of a structural or economical problem whereby collective action is required to remedy the situation. The objective facts of unemployment (jobless statistics) exist regardless of subjective interpretation. Furthermore, in defining social problems, where one group within a society perceive a solution to a social problem, others can regard these as the reverse [11].Within a culture, what is regarded as a social problem, varies from different moral, religious and political subjective beliefs. Abortion may be regarded by some sections of the community as a solution to the social problems caused by unwanted children and under-financed parents but a different segment of the same society may regard abortion as a serious social problem, for instance, the 'Right to Life' movement [11]. Sociologists or Social Scientists such as C.M. Case (2003) and F.E. Merrill (2007) have also pointed to the significance of measurement when defining a social problem, [1]. This can be seen in the case of poverty in Britain. At the turn of this Century, research was carried out by [10] when he established the concept of a 'poverty line'. By questioning people suffering from clear cases of poverty and establishing measures of their economic situation, [10] developed methods of establishing the objective existence of that social problem. His measurement and definitions were successfully used in the establishment of the Social Security system by way of W. Beveridge's Report (1942). In addition, in the 1960s, P. Townsend and B. Abel-Smith through their measurements of poverty were able to highlight the scale of the problem which called for social action by pressure groups such as the Child Poverty Action Group [5]. A similar situation indicated by measurement of poverty in the United States identified about 40 million people living below the poverty line in 1963, [1].An unusual or unique event, such as flood, an earthquake or an airplane crash can hardly be regarded as a social problem by virtue of their lack of generality. Road accidents, domestic murder, or death through drugs or drink are social problems because they affect lives throughout society. Disasters can cause social problems (post-traumatic syndromes etc) but are not, in themselves, social problems. Very often the existence of a social problem emerges into the public eye when a solution to the problem becomes available. The battered wife phenomenon has always been around but the emergence of women's refuges as a defensive measure made the subject of public knowledge.

III. Policy Response By Policy Makers

Policy response is the reaction by government, authorities and institutions that are generally regarded as the policy makers. This can take the form of public statements, channelling of finance or resources and the making of rules, regulations and legislation to cover a particular area of life. In the case of government policy, it is made in Parliament and carried out by the Civil Servants. Important policy issues are determined by advice given to Government by Civil Servant researchers, Royal Commissions, select committee hearings, questions asked by MPs and lobbyists, and by prominent issues in the media.Governments and MPs are sensitive to popular issues and hence sensitive to panics or concerns in the popular imagination. If MPs and Governments are not popular they do not get elected. By championing popular issues an MP gets media attention, and by making an issue popular the media almost guarantee that politicians will show some interest. Politicians are dependent on the media for publicity and the media need politicians to find out 'news'. To a lesser extent, local authorities and QUANGO's have a similar dependence on the media. In response to such dependence, Public Relations companies and PR experts are often hired by organisations to create or enhance a media image. The mechanism by which social problems arise in the 'factual' media (news, current affairs and documentaries) is usually by way of paradigm cases. This usually entails a spectacular or exaggerated event taking place. Examples of these include crimes done by serial killers, a brutal mugging, child and nanny abuses, human trafficking, an outbreak of high speed car-thefts, bizarre cult practices etc. These are sufficiently unusual, outstanding and apparently threatening to pose, on their own, an apparent threat to normality, the status quo, the stability of society or associated cherished values.

IV. The Role Of The Media And Its Social Obligation

In reporting and editorialising on matters of popular concern, the media tend to amplify the problems. The media categorise and stigmatise 'deviant' groups as being the problem, rather than the structure of society or the distribution of resources. The topic of black 'muggers' [7] was an example where firstly the British media engaged in the use of social labelling borrowed from the American media. Secondly, the media made that phenomenon the moral responsibility of the individuals concerned rather than a fault in society. The actual causes that included general racism, prejudicial policing and resource deprivation were ignored, and the more sensational and emotional issues were exaggerated, [7]. Consequently, the policy response was forensic rather than social. Police were brought into 'trouble' areas in greater numbers like in Brixton, London and the wider social issues which include relatively high unemployment among black groups were not addressed until the policing method was seen to fail completely in an even more spectacular fashion, with the riots of the '80s. It

was only when the media had a more spectacular event (the riots) to report as 'breaking news' were the social and economic roots of the black crime phenomenon tackled (Scarman Report, 1981), and the British Government at the time felt constrained and forced into introducing funding policy with respect to the inner cities.The media has always been seen to serve two contradictory roles when dealing with social problems that involve sexual and physical abuse of children. It was to highlight the failures of the social services and secondly, in cases of apparent injustice to innocent parents deprived of their children, the media complained on their behalf. The media prominence of sexual abuse relied upon the permissive and tolerant mood of society, which allowed such subjects to be discussed at all, but was also to some extent a reaction against permissive attitudes, the welfare state and changes in the traditional family. Both views were reflected in the media. The result of the media prominence of M. Collwell, (1974), K. Carlisle, (1987) and the Cleveland (1987) case was that the Department of Social Security instituted structural reforms in response to government concern, which allowed local authority social services to develop specialized sectors of their organisation to avoid potential media scandals and popular public demands.Similarly, whenever there was a serious case of social workers failing to be effective in preventing child abuse, the media coverage ensured that some changes were made in policy or provision's instituted, if only at a very local level. Whether the attacks on social work provision are politically motivated or independent or not being motivated enough (in failing to interfere when necessary) or for being over-zealous, raised serious concerns. In these cases the media for the wrong reasons were found to be acting as checks and constraints on institutional and organisational activities. It must be stressed that without such media profiling, these checks and constraints would not have existed.

V. MEDIA PROFILING

Apart from its positive contributions in the news, current affairs programmes and documentaries, it must be remembered that the media contains a fictional element. Crime, homelessness, sexual deviation, racism, drug abuse and alcoholism are staple themes in drama, film, soap opera etc. Frequently famous stories act as paradigm examples by which the nature of social problems are discussed and campaigns have begun can be started by sympathetic fictional media treatment. Examples are aplenty and what immediately comes to mind are buffs like 'Boys from the Black Stuff on casual labour'; 'Cathy Come Home on homelessness'; 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' on ill treatment of the 'mentally ill' and even 'Reefer Madness' on the perils of marijuana use, (M.'Donnell, 1987). However, such fictional dramas had helped to campaign against Prohibition of alcohol in the USA put an end to related of crime and social disruption by gangsters by decriminalising the consumption of alcohol, (P. North, 1972). The media, in response to campaigning by a temperance group, had been responsible for the criminalisation of alcohol in the first place. The false society theory put forward had been that alcohol was the cause of social problems rather than a symptom of deprivation which resulted in an anti-alcohol lobby which managed to get the policy of prohibition enshrined as the Eighteenth Amendment of the American constitution! Decriminalisation of marijuana has been suggested on the grounds of success of the repeal of prohibition in successfully reducing the crime and social problems surrounding illegal alcohol bootlegging etc, (P. North, 1972).Pressure groups such as voluntary organisations like the Child Poverty Action Group, Shelter, Mind, ASH as well as professional bodies like British Medical Association, Police Federation, Trade Union Congress, and religious and moral groups have exercised their influence. These organisations exercised their influence both on the media as representative bodies and as lobbyist groups on parliament and individual MPs and local councillors. To some extent their influence on the political process relies on their access to the media in order to demonstrate failures by authorities to institute policy in the pressure groups area of interest. Where those groups' areas of interest are related to objective issues to do with the nature and cure of social problems, they can influence policy response by the effective use of the media, in raising the problem's profile.Some campaigns in the media are built around academic research done by people who are regarded as expert critics and pundits on social policy. Royal Commissions, Select Committees and research institutes provide both advice to the government and information to the public via the media. On subjects like poverty and housing, such sources can influence policy makers directly, or via the media. Very often minority reports of dissenting members of research teams will be made publicly known. The same is true of dissenting factions in political parties or even parts of the government. In recent years, the unattributable media leak has been an essential part of political and hence social policy, public relations. This is one of the ways that benefits to the poor are defended and concern about changes which could cause social problems are brought into public debate, (Lamd et al, 1975).Social policy and the state apparatus which makes the response, are by their nature in the public arena and hence social services and problems are a valid topic of media concern which help fix a recognised social problem and bring to the notice of the policy makers, lobbyists, constituents and colleagues since they are generally subject to media exposure. In view of this, policy response to media coverage can work to eliminate social problems caused by unjust legislation. Homosexuality, when decriminalised for adult men ceased to be as a great a social problem as when illegal. Given that social policy is innately political, the perception of social problems like poverty and its causes are usually stated by policy making politicians in partisan terms. A good example of this was the growth of the mythology about benefit scroungers. In the 1970s and the early 1980s there was an increased concentration within the Department of Social Service on the detection and discouragement of benefit fraud. This was a response to many populist statements of policy by opponents of the welfare state in all sectors of the media. Similar media campaigns on the subjects of immigration and education are familiar during election campaigning. The

difference between concerted political propaganda and the normal media concern with paradigm examples of social problems is one of degree. The aim of such myth and horror story-telling can be to use the media as a political platform by which the public can choose a whole range of policies and a definite group of social policy makers, i.e. political parties.

VI. Conclusion

The literature and the examples given do show that the media profile of social problems does have an impact on policy response. Policy may be produced in response to popular outrage but it may also be merely a cosmetic device. Given that the media are universally experienced in Western countries, it would be amazing if they did not affect policy response and indeed contribute enormously to what we know from the above considerations is a nature which is largely socially defined. This is due to the fact that media profile of most social problems are our only experience of a large number of social problems, i.e. 'if it is not on television- it is not real'. Given that what is 'news' is what's new and unusual – the media report what are variations on standard background normality. If and when social problems are variations of the status quo, they will almost definitely be reported as unusual events. This does mean that the surface phenomena of a social problem will hit the headlines whereas the media may not give a high profile to the long-term causes and theory about the origin and cure of those social problems.The power of the media, in affecting the very existence of issues in the public mind, is reflected in the outrage experienced whenever deliberate media censorship or 'media cover-ups' are detected. That outrage comes from the realisation that our view of society – and hence social problems – comes from the perceptions entirely provided by the collective effect of media profiles whereby any interference or manipulation of the media profile of a problem would inevitably be playing with our view of actual reality. It is however important for policy makers (including social workers and pressure groups) who try to solve social problems to be aware of the nature of the problem themselves rather than be influenced by the media profile. On the other hand, part of the method of solving social problems must be to get those problems media coverage. If finance, resources or new legislation are needed from policy makers to solve the problem then publicity – lifting the level of the media profile – is an important way of encouraging the appropriate policy response.

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