

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND THE MASS MEDIA

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The debate whether newspapers, film magazines and comics, radio, television and movies exert deleterious influence on juveniles and prompt and promote delinquent conducts, or these limbs of mass media have no such influence has remained unabated. Impressionistically speaking, it is difficult to view them only as sources of information, education, and entertainment but the results of most of the available studies indicate that their harmful effects are very limited, if at all. An effort is made here to spotlight both sides since imposition of any 'undue' curbs on freedom of expression, particularly in democracies, is a volatile subject.

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A. *Introduction*

Communication lies at the foundation of all organised society. In the present-day world, man's communication processes have become tremendously vital to him. Science and technological developments teamed with commerce and industry have revolutionised his communication avenues thereby facilitating his functioning as a rational being. But there has also been expressed concern that the mass media which inform, educate and entertain have also become the sources of contamination.

It is frequently alleged that newspapers, film magazines and comics, radio, television and movies have been exerting deleterious influence on children: that there is a positive relationship between mass media and juvenile delinquency. But before discussing this relationship, let it be understood that 'juvenile delinquency' is itself rather an imprecise term which does not convey clear meaning. Many times it is used as a handy label to pin on any youngster displaying some degree of norm-violating behaviour; some times its use is limited to denote only that category of young persons under a certain age who have been referred to the courts for acts in violation of the criminal laws of the state. Other times, the term connotes, in addition to criminal offences

conduct such as being ungovernable, desertion from home, association with undesirable companions, truancy from school, etc. Further, among the countries and also many times within a country the age criteria of childhood are not standardized, and may also differ for boys and girls. Again, there is the problem of recorded versus unrecorded amount of delinquent conducts. How many children actually violate the legal norms in a given society, nobody can say for sure. Some answers to the delinquency profile no doubt must come from statistics compiled by police, courts, and other social agencies, though it is generally commented that these statistics are only the tip of the iceberg. Evidently, the recorded volume is affected by various factors. "Some misbehaviour even of a serious nature is not detected by responsible adults; some is detected, but not by the police, and is not referred to the police. Neighbours may adjust payment for property damage with the parents of the offending child: storekeepers may stop a young shop lifter as he leaves the store and relieve him of stolen articles; schools adjust many types of delinquent behaviour in and near school property. Many minor delinquencies are simply passed over by observers, even by the victims, as part of the process of growing up" (Cavan and Ferdinand, 1975:58). But the picture gets more complex when we exa-

mine the results of the 'self-report studies*. Though not very many, these researches do assert that delinquency, especially of minor types, is quite widespread throughout the communities and the socio-economic backgrounds are no barriers as such. And though there do not seem to be available any Indian studies of the type, the memories which very many of us have of our childhood activities and the informal inquiry among one's classmates, friends or guests at get-togethers ordinarily turns up with plenty of information about the 'actionable' occurrences in 'good' families of stealing, shop lifting, assault on acquaintances or friends, robbing the garden or throwing stones at passing trains, etc.

B. Newspapers

The senior most member of the mass media, the daily newspaper, has been under attack since 1892 when Ferri, for the first time, called attention to its relationship with crime (Schafer and Knudten, 1970: 240). Though the debate has continued without decisive results, generally the allegations have been that newspapers promote crime and delinquency by constant advertising of criminal activities and glorifying the criminal besides teaching the techniques of crime. When the crime news is not presented in the form of brief factual statements but is sensationalised on the front page the treatment implies adventure and excitement; it can have snow-ball effect, particularly on the 'suggestibles' since the modus operandi is explained in details. It is contended on the other hand that, besides the public is made

aware of the types and techniques of such activities to limit the scope of their recurrence the effect of such constant presentation of crime news cannot be demonstrated in specific criminal cases, Occasionally a person states that he got the idea for a crime from a newspaper account of the activities of another criminal. But the publicity given to the activities of this person may also demonstrate to many others that it will be foolhardy to attempt repetition of such activities (Sutherland and Cressey, 1965: 211).

However, under the pretext of supplying what the public demands and has a right to know, crime and delinquency are not only made prominent by certain dailies but the details are supplied in colourful exposition. The most important reason for arousing emotions rather than providing an understanding of the crime situation is that newspapers are business concerns operated for the purpose of profit. With most of them the major concern is circulation and public welfare is secondary. This dramatization though is likely to create and perpetuate the impression that crime is rampant and may also foster the attitude of indifference to offenses among those who are not direct victims, it has also not yet been possible to prove that exposure through newspapers to the constant crime news is effective in changing individuals from non-criminal to criminal. For example, Healy (1920:302), after studying one thousand delinquents said some sixty years ago, that "in no single case can we in the least show that the reading of newspapers was a strong cause of criminality". Derby (1958:320-327) came to

* (i) Porterfield, A. L., *Youth in Trouble*, Leo Potishman Foundation, Texas, 1946.

(ii) Short, Jr. J. F. and Nye, F. I., *Extent of Unrecorded Delinquency: Tentative Conclusions*, *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1958, pp. 296-302.

(iii) Murphy, F. J., Shirley, M. M., Witmer, H. L., *The Incidence of Hidden Delinquency in Giallombardo, R., (Ed.), Juvenile Delinquency: A Book of Readings*, John Wiley and Sons, Inc., New York, 1966.

the same sort of conclusions some twenty years ago.

C. *Film Magazines and Comics*

The major targets of criticism among the magazines are crime and horror comics which are said to have come to the forefront in the late 19th century and the film magazines which are comparatively of recent origin. Though the latter are read by persons of all ages, the former are read chiefly by children. The vicious crime content of the comics* and morbidly glamourised details — written as well as in photographs — of film magazines which titillate, are alleged to prompt and promote violence and sexual excitation among children.

The Hendrickson Sub-Committee on Juvenile Delinquency of the United States Senate (1956) sought to determine whether exposure to vividly illustrated comics had a direct effect upon disturbed and potentially delinquent youth and caused them to indulge in wild behaviour. Because there were no definitive studies based on controlled experiments, the Sub-Committee requested a considerable number of sociologists, psychologists, and law enforcement officers to testify. The resulting testimony expressed a variety of opinions, which unfortunately did not add up to any definite conclusions. While many experts felt that though there was some humaneness about fairy tales, comics generally glorified murder, rape, and obscenity and seemed to enlarge on the

most perverse aspects of the human conscience; some others felt that these seem to offer constructive outlets for aggressive feelings (Robison, 1960:156).

Wertham, a noted American psychiatrist and an ardent opponent of the comics believes that these often suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas, suggest the forms a delinquent impulse may take, and create for young readers a mental atmosphere of deceit, trickery, and cruelty while another author, Cavanagh, asserts that no one has conclusively demonstrated that comic books are detrimental in any way (Sutherland and Cressey, 1965:214).

It is a fact that children are generally fond of comics and film magazines. Whether it is the charm of the make-believe world of glamour and/or adventure, the fantasy, the vicarious pleasure, or something else it may be difficult to say with any reasonable confidence. But since the interest is quite intense, can the impact be so transient that the quality of the characters and story will be just forgotten? There is evidently an urgent need for eliciting the facts through more of the research studies.**

D. *Radio*

In a country where literacy rate is quite low, the impact of radio on general attitude and approaches to behaviour can be much more potent than the published material. However, what is objected to in radio programmes are generally the crime dramas

* Though many of the Indian versions of Western Comics deal with epics, folklore, and fairy tales, some of them also deal with tales of dacoits and other desperado characters wherein a lot of violence is portrayed.

** Sutherland and Cressey (1965: 214-215) quote two studies. One study (1949) compared 235 delinquents and a comparable group of non-delinquents matched in general for age, sex, school level, and socio-economic status, and found that delinquents read the 'harmful' and 'questionable' comic books more often than the non-delinquents. Another study (1956) elicited information from 792 high school students on their delinquencies, the extent of their reading of crime and horror comics and the extent of their association with delinquents. The results indicated that comic books were a relatively ineffective medium for influencing behaviour patterns, as compared to the effectiveness of intimate personal groups. (There was observed positive correlation between delinquency and association with delinquents.)

and advertising of films with violence themes, especially the sponsored programmes by producers/distributors. But it is contended with equal vehemence that it depends on what type of a child is listening to a specific programme. Just as some criminals (in America) say that they started on their career of lawlessness from reading about Sherlock Holmes, it might be that some got the same ideas from listening to the Holmes series on the air. We in India have sponsored programmes like 'Inspector Eagle', besides the advertisement for films providing highlights. But millions of children probably listen to such programmes and it would be absurd to state that most of them are adversely affected. The National Council of Juvenile Court Judges in April 1948 did adopt the resolution that there are many radio broadcasts harmful to the youth of America in that they place too much emphasis on crime and violence, story serials and court episodes, conveying to the minds of children lasting and harmful ideas and impressions not conducive to proper development of the youth of the nation, yet it is doubtful that there is much scientific evidence to show that socially well adjusted children are led into delinquency by such scripts or any other broadcast of lurid acts of violence and crime.

E. *Films and Television*

Audio-visual branch of the mass media has been of a very special standing in meeting the essential needs of the public by way of entertainment, education and instruction. Feature films have held fascination for many years, particularly for entertainment, in Indian life. Television has grown in importance tremendously and has reached in practically every household in

the western world. Though not a major force yet, very slowly but surely it is also catching up in Indian homes. However, these both, films and T. V., are also considered among the important reasons for increasing incidents these days of crimes against persons, property and decency. Not that all is objected to wholesale — the prime culprits are those films and T. V. programmes loaded with superstition, vice, violence or vulgarity which allegedly are said to induce viewers to raping, prostitution, robbery, assault or murder.*

Although it would be nobody's case that violence should be allowed to be depicted in films and on T.V. in an unbridled fashion, one extreme view is that it has cathartic effect; the other is that it is provocative. Studying the relation of television viewing to delinquency, the earlier referred Hendrickson Sub-committee (Robison, 1960:158) concluded that television viewing among elementary school pupils was to the tune of about 80 per cent, many of them spending as much time as they did at attending school: in 40 per cent of all the television programmes especially designed for children, crime and violence were the dominating factors. However, among the experts interviewed, some regarded the programmes as an escape or as vicarious experiences for children's hostile impulses. Others thought the programmes represented fantasy that bore no relation to real life experiences and therefore would not affect children one way or the other. Some testimony, however, indicated that these programmes were positively harmful.

The American National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, as reported in the Times Magazine, September 25, 1969, states that "violence on television encourages violent forms of behavi-

* As compared to many Indian and foreign films as well as Western television, lurid violence and sex shown on our television is minimal. Whatever of these come through the latter medium reach mostly through some of the two or three movies telecast every week.

our and fosters social and moral values about violence in daily life which are unacceptable in a civilized society". Some earlier support for this view is also available from the work of Eron (1963:193-196) who reports that he found a significant positive relationship between violence ratings of favourite television programmes and aggressive behaviour of boys**. However, if the findings that televising affects real life behaviour, and television models are imitated, has to be accepted then it must also be proved that aggressive individuals fail to recognise that most aggression shown on television is acted rather than real aggression. Noble (1971:230-244) in his efforts to verify this aspect, matched a controlled sample of non-delinquents in terms of age, sex and intelligence to a sample of adjudicated delinquent boys from a Classifying School in England. The delinquent boys were further assessed for aggressiveness. His findings indicate that delinquents, whether aggressive or not, did not perceive fighting in television programmes as significantly more real and life-like rather than dramatic presentations, than controls. Similarly, delinquents, whether aggressive or not, no more than controls, thought the fighting seen on television was any more or less justified. He concludes by saying that "such evidence suggests that the attempts to explain delinquency in terms of the imitation of television models is as yet not proved. Whilst delinquents seem in most instances as capable of 'using' aggressive television portrayals as controls, could it not be argued... that televising, even by deviant individuals, can serve escapist functions without fear of direct imitation"?

The Departmental Committee on Children and the Cinema, Great Britain (1950: 49-50) examined at comprehensive basis the views and experiences of all those whose work brought them into close personal touch with young delinquents or with juveniles whose conduct had shown moral laxity of a kind which had brought them before a juvenile court as being in need of care or protection or as being beyond control. It was enquired whether this conduct was thought to be attributable in any degree to attendance at the cinema and the request was made for information about specific cases in which there appeared to have been a definite connection between a child's misbehaviour and something he/she had seen in a film. The questions were addressed to all chairmen of juvenile courts, principal probation officers, directors of child guidance clinics, chief constables, heads and welfare officers of approved schools, superintendents of remand homes as well as probation homes and hostels, 70 per cent of whom sent in their replies. The Committee had estimated that nine out of ten children of school age in Great Britain went to the cinema from time to time and more than half of them did so atleast once a week. And from the replies of 1344 respondents all of whom were specially qualified to express opinions on the matter, the great majority had indicated no substantial connection with delinquency or moral laxity in the case of boys and girls under 12. As to the age group between 12 and 16, a small majority considered the connection slight as regards delinquency and a very small majority considered it substantial as regards moral laxity, particularly among girls in

** Belson also finds that long-term viewing of violence on television makes teen-age boys seriously violent themselves. In his survey of more than 1,500 London boys he contends that 13 to 16 year old boys who watch a lot of screen violence are 50 per cent more likely to indulge in serious violence than those who see less violence on the screen. They also become more aggressive in sport and play and use more bad language.

this age group. About the specific cases they had dealt with during the six months ending 30th June, 1948, in which it had appeared to them that an incident in a film seen by the child was directly connected with the child's appearance before the juvenile court, out of approximately 38,000 children under the age of 16 brought before the juvenile courts during the said period, there had been only 141 cases in which delinquency and only 112 in which moral laxity were seen to have such direct connection. In view of these figures the Committee felt that "it cannot be said to be proved that cinema attendance is likely to lead to delinquency and moral laxity in children."

Although opinions may be strong on both sides of the fence, the recent review by Howitt and Cumberbatch (1975:411), of all the available research literature in the field concludes that the causal connection between mass media violence and delinquency and crime has not been proved. Nonetheless, it also needs to be accepted that with the exception of the classic study by Blumer and Hauser* and a few others, most of the researches concerned with the relation of the movies and T.V. to delinquency are based on samples too small to be depended upon for judgement on so important an issue in which the freedom of expression is vitally involved. Film industry argues that it is box-office oriented and to achieve this purpose provides what the public wants. Had this not been so the films filled with violence and sex would have proved utter failure rather than super successes in the market! Should it be the function of the film industry alone to be the 'conscience-

keeper' of the nation and suffer financially in the bargain? These are weighty questions put by them in reply to the accusing finger. Further, it is not the elite, they say, who see films that often or the same film more than once. Box office money comes much more from other groups and children are no mean contributors. If the 'good influence' role is expected from the film industry, other areas from politicians to private businessmen must improve or be improved first. Why single out film industry for all the ills in the country. And in contradistinction to villainy and violence, what about the sentiments of love, affection and sacrifice which the themes also propound? Are these feelings of no avail in the cultural contents and contours? In reply it is argued that as compared to bad characters, good characters are mostly shown suffering throughout the major part of the film and at the end the dictum that 'crime, sex or violence does not pay' is given a reel or two. It is not absurd to think that the impact of 12-13 reels cannot be wiped off with the 1-2, reels where 'good is shown to triumph'!

Be the controversy as it may, we do not yet know for certain about the impact of films and T.V. shows. Many authorities do warn that violence and uninhibited exhibition of human anatomy in movies are inflaming youthful copycats. But others feel that influence of movies and television is transient and everything is forgotten soon after the show is over. Generalizations may be notoriously invidious and both views seem extremes which are not likely to contribute in dealing with the very complex issues of human behaviour. Many variables,

* This study interviewed 386 delinquent boys and 252 delinquent girls. In addition autobiographical data were assembled in connection with the role of motion picture in the lives of delinquents from state training schools and non-delinquents from grade and high schools. The major findings were that only 10 per cent of the boys and 25 per cent of the girls thought that the movies had played a role in their delinquent actions. About 8 per cent of the 440 grade and high schools boys said that pictures had influenced them 'to do something wrong'.

environmental and psycho-biological, are involved in the formation of human conduct. What the rigorous research must conclusively prove is whether the 'action' seen in movies and television has the cathartic or safety-valve effect on the hostile impulses and the impact soon forgotten or carried in mind for long and easily recalled for use, before the classic question as to 'whether art imitates life or life imitates art' can be reasonably answered. Nevertheless, in the meantime, the film industry must share its responsibility along with the administration and take note of the apprehensions. They must critically examine and edit contents where superfluous violence and sexuality are exhibited. Grant of 'A' Certificate should mean 'Adults only' and not 'Attraction' since this is what happens when the enforcement at the cinema gates is lax.

F. *Conclusion*

Side by side with the gradual growth of mass media the debate over the relationship between media's branches and juvenile delinquency has also grown but without definitive results. Newspapers, film magazines and comics, radio, films and television have all come under attack, individually and severally. Although the term 'juvenile delinquency' has itself remained imprecise and complex (it should be considered as any act, course of conduct or situation which can be taken cognizance of by a juvenile court or similar competent authority, whether in fact it comes to be attended there or by some other resource or indeed remains unattended) some people believe that mass media are responsible for the increased delinquency rates though others feel that they have very little ill-effect, if at all.

Mass communication media have become quite important in the present times for disseminating information and education as well as for providing entertainment. Nonetheless, while offering nourishment for culture, their contributions to juvenile delinquency and crime as also moral laxity have equally been considered substantial. Children's learning processes are influenced largely by what they read, hear and observe and when they are provided with the materials which run counter to desired norms in a civilized society, their values and attitudes can get vitiated.

Evidently, though the negative contributions by different wings of the mass media will be differential, collectively they have been condemned on four major counts:

- (i) help children to acquire deviant and criminal techniques;
- (ii) make delinquency and crime appear attractive and encourage the belief that 'crime does pay';
- (iii) lend glamour or sympathy to the criminal;
- (iv) stimulate sexuality.

Indictment of the mass media for their responsibility in the apparent increase of juvenile violations of the legal laws and the moral codes should however not be exaggerated. Contributory cause can be suspected but to what extent still needs rigorous indigenous assessment. Whether the influence in this regard of each medium is substantial or slight will require systematic enquiries before necessary curbs should be imposed; otherwise the mass media can legitimately feel that the censorship is unjustified. The freedom of expression is a very sensitive subject for democracies.

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Juvenile delinquency is also known as teenage crime. It is like any crime that human beings commit but these crimes differ because they are committed by young people. Before coming of age girls and boys have less understanding of the world. Parents, friends and teachers are all responsible along with the juvenile who commit a crime. There are separate juvenile courts and the purpose of juvenile punishment is to help the teenager understand the importance of staying away from crimes. There are various theories of juvenile delinquency and various researchers have reported different reasons of delinquency. Most of the delinquent teenagers belong from low social, economical or psychological background. Juvenile delinquency is defined by the Pennsylvania Juvenile Court Act as "A delinquent child is one who violated any laws of the commonwealth ordinance of the city, a child who by reasons of being wayward or habitually disobedient is uncontrolled by his parents, guardian, custodian or legal representative, a child who is habitually truant from school or home or child who habitually so deprives himself as to injure or endanger the moral or health of himself or others". Delinquency in the view of Coleman (1981) refers to "behaviour of youths under 18 years of age which is not acceptable to the current situation with juvenile delinquency in China arouses reasonable public concern. The number of crimes committed by young people in China is rising incessantly. And the attributes of those crimes are violence and greed. Over the last years have been characterized by the rejuvenation of crime offenders, the incensement in crime activity among younger children, considerable increase of youth group crime statistics, the development as to the methods of committing crimes among youth. In order to prevent juvenile delinquency efficiently, a range of complex measures should be taken, based