Chapter 4
Adolescents in the News Media

On January 14, 2010, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince committed suicide after experiencing a day of bullying and harassment at school. Her case and that of others like it such as Megan Meier have prompted a national discussion on bullying and cyberbullying that is both long overdue and ironic. I say ironic because our national fascination with bullying among adolescents comes during a time period where bullying is already on a national decline, not increase (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2010). The case of Phoebe Prince is worth examining for, aside from being a personal tragedy for her family, it raises questions about the ways in which the news media portray adolescents and discuss adolescent behavior.

Phoebe came to the USA in September, 2009 along with her mother and siblings, from Ireland. Her father, a British national, remained behind. Phoebe appears to have been a charming and sociable young girl. Indeed, one of the narratives to emerge from the case is that Phoebe may have been too successful with some of the high school boys, leading to jealousies and conflict with at least two groups of girls (Bazelton, 2010). In particular, Phoebe briefly dated 18-year-old Sean Mulveyhill, and, after their breakup, informed his on-again off-again girlfriend Kayla Narey about their relationship. Sean became angry at Phoebe for discussing these matters with Kayla.

In December Phoebe struck up a friendship with another 18-year-old male student, Austin Renaud. He too had a girlfriend, Flannery Mullins. Although Austin denied having a sexual relationship with Phoebe, Flannery nonetheless became jealous of their friendship and turned on Phoebe.

Increasingly both groups of teens confronted Phoebe, often in harsh terms. She was picked on for her Irish background, being called things such as "Irish slut." Sean and Kayla appear to have been behind the worst event, occurring on the day of her suicide. On that day Phoebe was subjected to a series of taunts. One of them wrote "Irish bitch is a Cunt" on a library signup sheet, and she was verbally taunted with calls of "whore" and "slut." As she walked home from school that day, a friend of

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Sean and Kayla yelled "whore" at her from a moving car and threw an empty drink can at her. She went home, and texted a male friend about her misery. The friend tried to console her but it was to no avail. Phoebe hung herself in the stairwell.

Six teens including Sean, Kayla, Austin, and Flannery were charged in the case (Austin and Sean with statutory rape). The teen who had thrown the can was charged with assault with a deadly weapon. Most others were charged with charges related to criminal harassment, stalking and civil rights violations (due to commenting on Phoebe's Irish heritage). The DA in charge of the case, Elizabeth D. Scheibel, accused the school district of ignoring the widespread bullying (Boston Herald, 2010), which the school district denied. Ultimately the teens involved plead guilty to lesser charges and received probation and community service.

The narrative I described above is that most often contained in news reports of the case. The Phoebe Prince case and a handful of others involving bullying, particularly involving teen girls or gay male teens, have greatly accelerated our national discussion of bullying behavior. Cases such as that of Phoebe Prince have pushed most states to pass stricter anti-bullying legislation, although some groups feel at least some of this legislation and research may be more trendy and "feel good" than practical (National School Safety and Security Services, 2010).

Others (e.g. Bazelton, 2010) argue, however, that the narratives that cycle through news reports are often incomplete and polemical rather than informative. For instance Bazelton notes that while the narratives of the Phoebe Prince case fall neatly in what I would call the *Mean Girls* narrative of teen female behavior, they often overlook crucial details in the case. For instance, Phoebe appears to have had a considerable history of mental health problems, including self-cutting, depression, and suicidal behaviors prior to the bullying incidents on record, or even her coming to the USA. This is not to diminish the culpability of some of the youth involved in this case, nor the tragedy of Phoebe's death, although it does point to the Phoebe Prince case as being more complex than that often shared in news narratives. Bullying is a trendy topic in the news and this has, not surprisingly, spread to the research and activist community. In many ways, this is welcome; however, it is often observed that "trendy" or "hot" topics, even within the research community are often the product of serious errors in knowledge (Ioannidis, 2005).

With this in mind, the current chapter concerns itself with several issues related to news portrayals of adolescents and crime:

- Why do news media highlight certain cases as "high profile" while ignoring others?
- Does the news media report information accurately?
- What effect do news media reports of adolescents and crime have on the beliefs of viewers?

In examining these issues we will get a fuller idea of the impact of news media on both the way crime is portrayed, and the way adolescents are portrayed more generally. This will provide some insights into societal understandings and misunderstandings of youth violence.

4.1 How Does the News Media Portray Crime?

As discussed in Chap. 3, most people appear to understand that fictional portrayals of crime are fiction and not necessarily representative of real-life crime. Thus, the effect of fictional crime media on consumers appears to be fairly minimal. However, news media portrays real criminal news events. As such, the mechanisms that people use to distinguish "fact from fiction" may not apply to news media. Ostensibly the news media report on "real life" events, and events portrayed in the news media are representative of society itself. Yet, how accurate are the news media in portraying crime?

One thing that must be understood upfront is that, while news media ostensibly report "facts," their lifeblood is effectively no different from that of fictional crime dramas or other fiction. In other words, the news, like other media, is dependent for survival on ratings, sales, and viewership. This fundamental reality has influence on the kinds of stories that news media select to report on. This has less to do with irresponsible reporting, although that can certainly happen as well, and more to do with the realities of the marketplace. The news media report on the kinds of stories that people like to hear about. Naturally, this may not be a representative sample of all the possible news stories available in society.

Not surprisingly, news media tend to focus on more "sensational" crime, including violent crime being generally favored over reporting nonviolent crimes as well as a preference for crimes with either bizarre elements, or those with exceptionally sympathetic victims (Surette, 2007). The result can be mistaken beliefs on the part of the public about the frequency or nature of actual crimes, particularly as a majority of people use the news as a primary source to form their views about crime (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001). The way news media present crime could potentially lead to distorted impressions of crime among news consumers.

The report of one multi-organization partnership, including the American Bar Association's Juvenile Justice Center, the Juvenile Law Center, and National Council on Crime and Delinquency, noted several issues with news reports of violent crimes (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001):

- Violent crimes are disproportionably represented in news stories.
- Coverage of crime stories has increased while actual crime rates have fallen. This is true for crimes involving adolescents as well as adults.
- Unusual crimes get more coverage than "typical" crimes. This includes interracial crimes in which victims are white, even though most violence is intraracial.
- African-American youth in particular are overrepresented as perpetrators of crime, and underrepresented as crime victims.
- Youth are oftentimes represented as perpetrators of crime, despite that youth make up a minority of crime perpetrators and youth violence has been declining.

From this the authors conclude that news media present a false impression of crime in general, particularly as pertains to minorities and youth. The authors recommend more balanced reporting, although, as noted above, this may be difficult when market forces place greater value on some stories over others. There seems to be a general favoritism in the news for "bad" news as opposed to "good" news.

4.1.1 Missing White Girl Syndrome

Missing White Girl Syndrome (MWGS) refers to the news media and society's fascination with violent crimes occurring particularly with white, affluent, physically attractive, morally upstanding girls (and women). Criminal cases such as those involving Polly Klaas, Madeline McCann, Elizabeth Smart, or Natalee Holiway, all girls or college-age youth who disappeared or were murdered (of those listed only Elizabeth Smart was later found alive) receive national and oftentimes international media attention. Meanwhile similar cases involving non-white girls, boys, or men receive comparatively little media attention. This phenomenon draws upon issues related to race, gender, social class, and society values.

Case Study 1: Natalee Holloway

Natalee Holloway was an 18-year-old American youth on a high school graduation trip to Aruba along with other kids from her high school. While in Aruba the teens are alleged to have engaged in wild partying and drinking. She was last witnessed outside an Aruban night club on May 30, 2005 with local Joran van der Sloot and two of his friends. She did not show up the next morning for her return flight to the USA and her luggage and passport were found in her hotel room.

Her disappearance set of an intense search by Dutch (Aruba is owned by the Netherlands) and American authorities. Her family also flew to Aruba and significant media attention was devoted to the case. Holloway was a young, photogenic woman. Suspicion quickly focused on van der Sloot and his two friends, whose stories about what happened that night kept changing. They acknowledged meeting her but the circumstances of how, when and where they dropped her off or whether sexual contact had occurred changed. Their stories initially implicated other men who were detained, then released.

Meanwhile the search for Holloway or her body continued, involving scores of searchers and even F-16 jets. Numerous tips lead effectively nowhere and the rewards were offered for information leading to her return or identification of her remains. Van der Sloot and his friends were detained again several times, although ultimately released as no conclusive evidence linked them to a crime and Holloway's body was never recovered.

Van der Sloot had settled on a story that he had left Holloway on a beach by herself, alive. He was subsequently caught on film stating that she had begun convulsing while in his company and died, her body buried by a friend of his. He later recanted this story, saying he was under the influence of marijuana when he told it. Further twists and turns occurred in the case, but although suspicions continued to hover over van der Sloot, neither he nor anyone else

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was ever charged with the crime. In 2010 he attempted to extort money from Natalee's mother in exchange for revealing the location of her body and the circumstances of her death and was charged in the USA with extortion in that situation. Van der Sloot confessed in 2010 to killing another young woman in Lima, Peru where he remains incarcerated as of this writing. As of this writing the disappearance of Natalee Holloway has not been solved.

The case of Natalee Holloway is indicative of the MWGS in that international media attention became focused on the plight of a single, Caucasian, pretty youth. Even within the USA many young girls go missing under differing circumstances on any given year. Even were we to eliminate the majority from consideration as runaways or noncustodial parent kidnappings, most disappearances of youth which may be potential homicides do not garner significant media attention. Internationally in many areas of the world deaths of female youths are at a much higher rate than in the USA, yet most of these deaths remain anonymous. Thus, the criticism is maintained that attention to potential homicides of youth tend to be limited to photogenic and usually Caucasian females.

Although race appears to be one element of MWGS, it is important to note that, as most cases involving non-white female victims receive little media coverage, most white female victims of violent crime do not receive much media coverage either. Thus, MWGS is not a privilege that is extended to the majority of white female children or youth. Most of the victims who receive extensive coverage are also physically attractive, or cute if they are little girls. Most beneficiaries of MWGS are also financially affluent; few come from blue-collar or low-income backgrounds (see Jewkes, 2004). Most also are "morally upstanding" citizens. That is to say, girls with a history of behavior problems arguably are less likely to receive much notice.

Some have argued that the MWGS reflects our society's fascination with "damsels in distress" (Robinson, 2005). From this perspective the particular victims that are highlighted are chosen, consciously or unconsciously, for their qualities which are representative of innocence. Thus, our fascination with their deaths or kidnappings stems from our own desire to protect innocence, particularly as represented by the "ideal" female and dismay when these protective efforts fail. In other words we indeed place greater value on particular victims, though consciously we may be loathe to admit it, as these victims are more "innocent" than others. Male victims, minority girls, or girls from less-affluent backgrounds, or with visible human weaknesses, do not fit this bill. It is my guess that, as our culture becomes more racially integrated and accepting, more minority girls will find their cases receiving greater media attention. Yet I suspect that issues related to class and value based on perceived innocence, as indicated by the absence of behavior problems, legal problems, drug use, welfare status, or even single parenthood, will be with us for some time.

4.2 How Accurately Does the News Media Report on Crime?

As noted earlier, as with fictional depictions of crime, news depictions of crimes involving youth overwhelmingly focus on violent crimes. Indeed, coverage of violent youth crimes appears to be on the rise, despite that the actual incidence of violent crimes has been decreasing (FBI, 1954–2010). For instance in recent years there has been extensive coverage of bullying cases among youth despite that bullying has been declining for at least a decade (Finkelhor et al., 2010). As noted, this focus probably reflects typical news related ratings wars and the pressures of the marketplace. In other words, news outlets have to "thrill" their audiences to keep them loyal, particularly when increasing numbers of viewers are turning to the Internet for their news. Although news media usually do report on actual data of violent crimes, these numbers, mentioned only occasionally, may get lost against a constant backdrop of reported violent crimes, particularly when kids are involved. Local nightly news may particularly give residents the impression that local violent crimes among youth are common. However, if the broadcasting area draws upon a large municipality or even many small municipalities, it may not be difficult for local news to report a steady diet of violent crimes, given the size of the local population. Other local news outlets may report on crimes occurring in nearby big cities in order to maintain the steady flow of violent crime news. Given some youth now post bullying incidents and assaults online on sites such as YouTube, the visibility of such incidents has increased markedly despite the actual incidence of such behaviors decreasing. It is true more kids than ever are posting videos of assaults on the Internet simply because they could not do so at all 10 or 15 years ago as the technology was not available.

The result is that viewers may subsequently overestimate the actual incidence of violent crimes among youth both locally and nationally. Research indicates that many members of the public believe that violent crime rates are increasing, not decreasing (Doob, Marinos, & Varma, 1995). Indeed news media and politicians alike may tend to focus on statistics inflating violent crime rates (Niskanen, 1994) particularly where youth are involved. Rare crimes, in particular, may see fluctuations in their rates that clever statisticians may use to make dramatic claims. For example if City A has 10 youth homicides 1 year, then 13 homicides the next year, a politician can claim that "youth homicides in our city have risen 30 % in the last year" which sounds dramatic until one understands the data underlying the statistics. A change of three or so victims in either direction in a city of, say 200,000 is fairly negligible (except to those victims!), and likely due to normal fluctuations rather than any particular societal influence.

This tendency for the news media to over focus on rare but titillating crimes involving youth may explain recent focus on *Knockout King* a "game" in which youth assault random strangers to demonstrate their power to other youth. There has been much attention to this phenomenon in St. Louis, which may (or may not) have seen a rash of such incidents in the past few years (STLToday.com, 2011). From news reports, this phenomenon appears to involve youths traveling in packs who

assault strangers, in attempt to show off for their peers. Usually the youth involved are low functioning, low SES youth. News reports of this phenomenon have often taken a frightening tone, implying a rash of new behavior (e.g., Mann, 2011). Academics have been critical of this view however (see Tucker, 2011), noting that youth assaults are both rare and nothing new, and youth violence has been decreasing, not increasing. Even the use of terms like "knockout king" or "knockout game" can be traced to the early 1990s and it is unclear whether this term was coined by youth or by news reporters.

The issue likely has less to do with any malfeasance on the part of the news media and more to do with the ways in which humans process information. Indeed the news media typically will report on crime trends, even reductions, as reported by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (1951–2010). However, they also may give considerable attention to pundits who expound upon violence "crises" without being burdened by facts. For instance, in the 1990s it was not uncommon to see juvenile violence described as a "national crisis" (e.g. Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1996). Much was made of a supposed epidemic of female juvenile youth violence in particular (Alder & Worrall, 2004). Yet during this time, violence rates among youth, male and female, were actually decreasing (Childstats.gov, 2011).

The salacious details about such crises, whether real or imagined, make excellent fodder for news media, of course. Including the opinion of an "expert" (although news media sometimes consult the opinions of individuals with little expertise in the matter at hand) in a news broadcast lends the air of credibility to a supposed crisis, although experts oftentimes vary widely in their opinions, and the social science community is arguably as given to dogmatic wrong turns as any other. Such expert opinions are oftentimes combined with shocking, yet anecdotal footage of specific crimes to lend emotional impact to reporting on a supposed crisis. It has been observed that the news media is an important contributor to the moral panic cycle in which false crises are widely discussed in the media (Gauntlett, 2005) (Fig. 4.1).

Moral panics often form along pre-existing societal beliefs. The media reports on these concerns, contributing initially to the panic, and adding to public calls for research on the topic. Of course, the research that is being demanded is research to support the existing belief, not research to contradict it. It is more difficult to get a grant when arguing in one's grant application that an issue is "no big deal." Some scientists eagerly produce "research on demand" while others may be critical of this research. Research supportive of the moral panic is accepted without question (or thorough examination), whereas research suggestive that little problem exists is typically ignored (or at best, criticized and discarded). In at least one recent court case on video game violence, it was pointed out that even some social scientists have "cherry picked" data which support the panic view, ignoring unsupportive research (ESA & IRMA v. Blagojevich, Madigan and Devine, 2005). The media dutifully reports on the most negative results, as these results "sell" to an already anxious public. Politicians seize upon the panic, eager to be seen as doing something particularly as it gives them an opportunity to appear to be "concerned for children." The media's motive for doing so is to gain ratings. People tend to pay

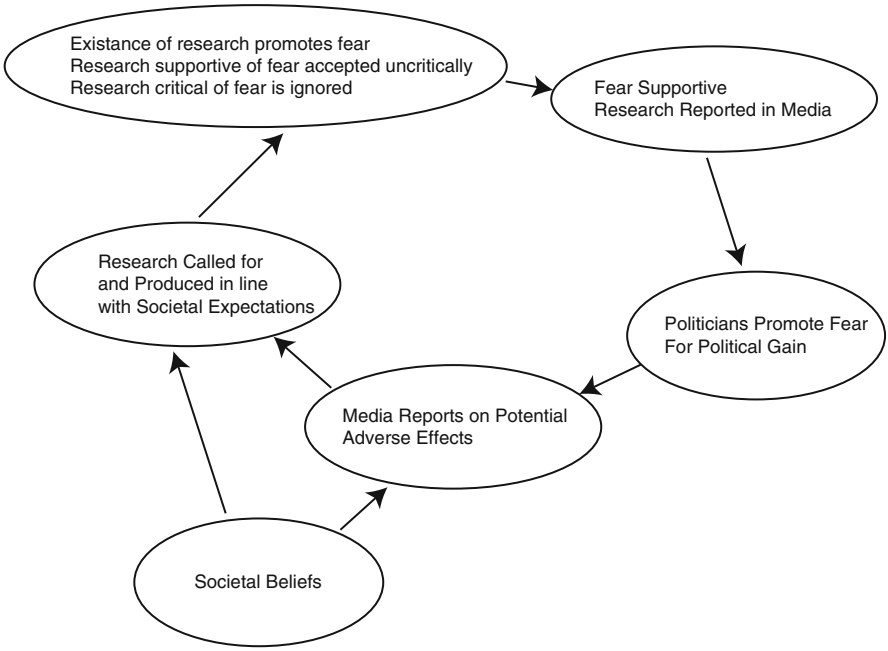

Fig. 4.1 The moral panic wheel

more attention to issues which are pressing, immediate concerns…hence the overuse of words such as "crisis" or "epidemic," rather than statements arguing for calm. The end result is a distorted public belief in exaggerated or even imaginary crises.

4.3 The Follow-Through Failure Effect

Sometimes the investigation of a crime outlives the news cycle's ability or willingness to follow the story. Many violent crimes are of "modest" interest…interesting enough to make an appearance on local news, but not interesting enough to become long-term media spectacles. In such cases, the viewing public may learn the initial details of a crime, but never find out how the investigation turns out. Arguably, for cases that are of "modest" interest, if they are not solved within 24–48 h after initial reporting, the odds of the final outcome being reported in the news media diminishes substantially.

The results can be misleading to the public for two main reasons. First, the public may be left with the impression that a higher number of cases go unsolved than is actually the case. Although a case may be unsolved when initially reported, it may be solved soon after, but the resolution goes unreported in the news media. This may create the impression that police have difficulties in solving violent crimes, or that there are a higher percentage of "master" criminals (those who are able to go unpunished) than is actually the case.

Perhaps more damaging is when an initial suspect is identified in the news media, but that suspect is later exonerated. If the news cycle has moved beyond the particular case, the exoneration of a former suspect may go unreported. As such, the former suspect's colleagues and associates may continue to believe that he or she may have committed the crime. As such, individuals may continue to live under a cloud of suspicion, long after the real perpetrator has been caught and even convicted. Case study 2, regarding the Duke Lacrosse rape case, involving numerous youth falsely accused of gang rape, is a classic "Trial by media" case which can have similar long-lasting repercussions for the accused.

4.4 Trial by Media

A guilty suspect is more interesting than an innocent suspect. News media are aware of this phenomenon, and thus may select news stories focusing on information that implies that a suspect may be guilty. Even the information reported in such stories may be unfairly selected. For instance, a recent article in the Lancet medical journal highlights a case in which journalists may have selectively interpreted ambiguous statistics to claim that a British surgeon was incompetent in treating breast cancer patients (Wright, Bradley, Sheldon, & Liford, 2006). Many experts appear to have disagreed with the journalists' interpretations of the statistics. However, as journalists essentially control the news flow, they can control what side of a story the public gets to hear. This is the phenomenon of *trial by media* in which a suspect's guilt is implied through selective media coverage. As juries are usually drawn from the population of individuals likely exposed to relevant local news coverage, this phenomenon has the potential of tainting jury pools and influencing trial outcomes themselves.

The issue of trial by media involves several legal issues: the free press, right to privacy, libel laws, and right to a fair trial. In the USA the rights of a free press to remain uncensored by government is ingrained in the Constitution. There are limits on the free press as pertain to legal cases, although they exist in something of a state of flux. For instance, courts may issue *gag rules* or *gag order* either prohibiting participants in a trial from speaking with the media, or preventing the media from discussing specific elements of a case. The constitutionality of the latter example, a gag order on the media itself, remains a debated issue (e.g. Nebraska Press Association v. Stuart, 1976; Sheppard v. Maxwell, 1966).

In the *Sheppard v. Maxwell* case, the Supreme Court found that pretrial media coverage tainted the jury pool and deprived the defendant of a fair trial. In this case Sam Sheppard was accused of bludgeoning to death his wife. He was subjected to intense media for months leading up to the trial, including a televised 3-day inquest in front of numerous spectators in a gymnasium. Names of the jurors during the trial were publicized and they began receiving calls about the case. The jurors were also not sequestered or shielded from the media scrutiny. Reporters were positioned near the defendant during the trial, preventing him from having private counsel with his attorney. The Supreme Court found that this scenario precluded the defendant's

right to a fair trial (Sheppard v. Maxwell, 1966). The latter case addressed a court order limiting pre-trial press coverage of a brutal multiple murder in order to assure a fair trial for the defendant. In this case the Court ruled that the pretrial gag order violated the First Amendment and was impermissible. The problem with the court order in the Nebraska case was that, rather than shielding the jury from the media, the court ordered a "prior restraint"; that is the court ordered the media not to report certain information about the case at all. The bar for "prior restraint" or outright censorship of the media is very high and was not met in this case as the trial judge did not adequately consider alternate methods to ensure a fair trial.

In some cases the media may voluntarily censor themselves. For instance in rape or child sexual abuse cases, the media typically does not reveal the identities of alleged victims. However, the media is typically under no legal obligation to refrain from doing so (Cox Broadcasting Corp et al. v Cohn, 1975). Although confidentiality laws may prevent court personnel from releasing the names of rape or abuse victims, the media continues to enjoy First Amendment rights to disclose these names although, out of respect for the plight of rape and abuse victims, they typically do not do so (Beloof, 2005; Berlin, 1996). However, some states such as Florida, have specifically designed laws meant to shield victims' identities from media publication (Berlin, 1996). In the past, such laws have had difficulty surviving constitutional challenge.

Case Study 2: The Duke University Lacrosse Case

In March of 2006 Crystal Gail Magnum, an African-American student at North Carolina Central University who also worked as a stripper, accused several members of the Duke University Lacrosse team, who were mainly white and from privileged backgrounds, of raping her at a party. Magnum alleged that she and another ethnic minority stripper had been called to the party at which much alcohol was consumed, only to be taunted with racial slurs. The strippers left the party but also got into an argument. Police were called when Magnum refused to leave the other stripper's car. She was taken to a mental health facility by police where she alleged she had been raped by the Lacrosse players at the party.

The story fed easily into narratives of race, gender and white male privilege and quickly the accuser garnered much sympathy. The team coach was forced to resign and the remainder of the season cancelled. A group of 88 Duke faculty members signed an ad implying that they believed a rape had occurred and connecting it with wider sexism and racism at Duke. A second group of 17 Duke faculty later sent a letter of support to the accused players expressing concern that they had not been given due process and may have experienced hostility by some faculty despite not having been convicted of a crime.

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The lead prosecutor, Mike Nifong made numerous statements to the press implying that the evidence against the Lacrosse players was solid. In fact, DNA evidence exonerated the players and the case began to disintegrate. DNA evidence from multiple other males who were not the accused Lacrosse players were found during testing, although this evidence was initially withheld by the prosecution. The accuser, Ms. Magnum acknowledged having taken alcohol and other drugs, and also had a history of mental health problems. Inconsistencies in differing versions of her story also reduced her credibility.

In 2007 the prosecutor, Mike Nifong was disbarred and sentenced to a day in jail for dishonesty and fraud in his representations of the case to the court. Soon after, the case against the Lacrosse players was dropped and they were declared to be innocent. Magnum was not charged with filing a false report, apparently due to her mental issues. Magnum continued to have legal problems including an alleged 2011 assault in which her boyfriend died, a crime for which she remains in prison as of this writing. Several lawsuits have been filed by Duke Lacrosse players against the city, Mike Nifong, the university and others involved in the case.

This case presents an excellent example of trial by media, given the intense scrutiny that the Lacrosse players came under during the initial stages of the investigation. As often happens in crimes involving sex, the accused were essentially *presumed to be guilty* in much of the coverage (including the ad by Duke University faculty). An accusation of rape or sexual abuse can follow someone for years or life, even if charges are dropped.

4.5 What Effects Do the News Media Have on Viewers?

As discussed in the previous chapter the Cultivation Hypothesis (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) suggests that media viewers gradually develop beliefs about the world that are based on their consumption of media. Put somewhat simplistically, if you watch a lot of media involving crime, you may begin to believe that such crimes are commonplace. If you watch lots of news coverage of bad youth behavior, you may begin to believe today's youth are nothing but hooligans even where data suggests otherwise. As noted in the previous chapter, the literature on entertainment media was generally not supportive of the cultivation hypothesis. One possible explanation is that entertainment media consumers understand that what they are watching is fiction, and know not to base their beliefs upon fiction. However, the news media purports to report *real* crime. It is then possible that research on news media might produce stronger effects on beliefs, than research on entertainment media.

Researchers seem to have picked up on this possibility, as within recent years at least, there appear to be more articles focused on news media than entertainment media, at least as far as the cultivation hypothesis is concerned. As might be expected the research generally suggests that the effects for news media might be stronger than

for entertainment media. For example, exposure to negative news events appears to increase consumers' perceptions of the risk posed to themselves by those events (Daly & Chasteen, 1997). The effects appear to be short lived, with recent news events exerting the greatest influence (McCombs & Gilbert, 1986). Exposure to negative news may also increase fear and anxiety in viewers (McNaughton-Cassill, 2000), although the effects are small and seem to pertain mainly to those who are already prone to irrational beliefs about the world. Indeed, far from being a general effect, or one which is passive, research suggests that particularly groups of individuals may be vulnerable to cultivation beliefs about crime, whereas the larger segment of the populace may not be affected. For instance, people living in urban areas, the unemployed, women and prior crime victims are most likely to have their fears of crime influenced by media reports (Smolej & Kivivouri, 2006). Indeed crime victims themselves may respond particularly negatively to news reports of their own victimization, particularly when news reports contain factual inaccuracies (Maercker & Mehr, 2006).

Coverage of rare but spectacular crimes such as the Columbine Massacre in 1999 in which two youths killed 12 students, a teacher and themselves, may be instrumental in perpetuating "moral panics" about crime that are out of proportion with real risks. For instance the Columbine Massacre may have sparked off fears of a new breed of juvenile "superpredators" that never materialized (Muschert, 2007). Note that even the word "superpredator" appears to have been chosen to instill maximal fear in news consumers. Ironically the same issue has been said about concerns about media violence effects themselves, with news media whipping up fears about media violence effects that are wildly out of proportion with actual data on youth mental health (Grimes, Anderson, & Bergen, 2007). Fears about waves of female juvenile offenders, serial murder and child stranger abductions may also be inflamed in a similar manner, despite criminological data that such crimes are relatively rare. The cultivation effects of the news media may be strongest when erroneous beliefs are exploited by politicians, special interest groups or even social scientists who wish to enforce a particular moral agenda on the wider populace (Ferguson, 2008a). Youth are very often at the center of such moral panics, given the protected role they have in society as well as cyclical patterns of adult suspiciousness of youth. In other words, cultivation effects may be less due to passive viewer effects, and rather due to the active efforts of special interest groups to sell a particular moral message. Many groups may seize upon the perceived vulnerabilities of youth, in particular, to stoke fears in adults and parents in particular (Grimes et al., 2007). Note that these risk factors overlap, so that a person with all of these (an urban, non-employed, female former crime victim) is most likely to be influenced by crime related news in regard to fear of crime.

In short the following conclusions are made about the influence of news media on crime belief and fear:

1. The effects of news media on crime beliefs are stronger than for entertainment media. Nonetheless these effects remain weak overall, with certain specific groups particularly at risk.
2. Previous crime victims may be particularly likely to have their crime beliefs influenced by news media, probably because they are already primed to believe that crime is common due to their own victimization.

3. Gender appears to be related to the news media's influence on crime beliefs with women more likely to be influenced by news media. This may be because of women's heightened concerns about crime victimization, despite that men are more often violent crime victims than women.
4. "Moral panics" may, at times, ensue due to news coverage or rare but spectacular violent crimes such as school shootings or serial murder cases. Passive viewership alone does not appear to be sufficient to create a moral panic, but rather must involve active involvement of politicians, social scientists and special interest advocacy groups in maintaining public fear.

As such, news media appears to have more potential to influence viewer attitudes and beliefs about crime, overall. Nonetheless effects are not necessarily monolithic.

4.6 Race and the News Media

One issue that gets much attention is that of portrayals of race in news coverage of crimes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, entertainment media unrealistically focuses on high-SES, white and even female perpetrators of violent crime, despite the fact that men, low-SES individuals, and minorities tend to be overrepresented in actual crime data. Although minorities are overrepresented among criminal populations, news coverage of minorities as criminal perpetrators appears to be even greater and out of proportion with real differences (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Research suggests that news coverage of racial minorities as perpetrators of crime may influence racial stereotypes of minority groups, particularly blacks and Latinos as crime perpetrators (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Valentino, 1999). These effects generally appear to be weak however, with inconsistent results and a somewhat concerning tendency of some authors to explain away null findings that do not support their hypotheses (e.g. Dixon & Azocar, 2007). These results are also somewhat difficult to tease apart from real discrepancies in minority representation in real-world crime data. Is stereotyping of minorities as perpetrators of crime due to the overrepresentation of minorities in news reports or is it due to actual overrepresentation of some minority groups among criminal populations? Though evidence does suggest that the news media overrepresents minority crimes, is this the source of minority stereotyping, or is stereotyping due to the "real state of affairs?" Thus, the evidence available thus far remains insufficient to determine whether news media are a prime cause of racial stereotypes in society (Ferguson, 2008b).

4.7 Portrayals of Adolescents in News Media

Compared to racial issues relatively little scholarship has examined the issue of misrepresentations of adolescents in the media. As described earlier in the book, Finkelhor (2010) has described the phenomenon of juvenoia, including a tendency

for news media to focus on worst case scenarios of youth, or globalizing specific incidents of youth misbehavior while ignoring the broader context of general youth behavioral health. For instance, at the time of this writing I have seen recent headlines proclaim alarm over supposed involvement of teen girls in group sex, and the notion that one-third of youth have been arrested, both claims that conflict with general youth trends regarding sexual and criminal behavior. Of course the USA has millions of teens (and millions more live in Europe and elsewhere) so it is never hard to find a handful of cases of teens acting badly. However, these can come to represent adult attitudes toward youth more generally.

Adam Thierer (2011) has written eloquently on this topic where he notes this tendency to "sell short" the next generation stretches back through history. We tend to whitewash over the foibles of our own generation's past, while refusing to credit the current generation. Further we tend to assume that the current generation of youth is far more fragile than we were at a similar age. Thierer postulates this may have something to do with parenting. As youth ourselves we perceive ourselves as in control and are aware of media influences (or lack thereof) on our behavior. By contrast as parents we invest mightily on our youth and take a defensive posture which is understandable. Having less control over our children's behavior, we may perceive what influence we have as fragile and thus are more likely to respond with hostility toward other sources of influence, whether real or imagined.

The news media has considerable appetite for news stories which portray teens as inferior to adults, particularly behaviorally or cognitively news. At the time of this writing fMRI studies have been particularly popular in the brain. fMRI is an imaging tool which uses heavy magnets to take pictures of the brain in real time which are able to reveal the activity of the brain by monitoring blood flow. Such studies have typically given differing groups of individuals a task while imaging their brain activities to see which areas are functioning. Differences between two groups purport to highlight differences in thinking between those groups (Steinberg, 2007). Although MRI and fMRI are of use in medicine, their use in research has sometimes been controversial (Vul et al., 2009). The statistics employed in such studies are not always of certain validity and scholars' interpretation of what differences in functional utility may mean behaviorally often illuminates as much about what the scholars expected to find as it does human behavior. For instance, we see lower activation of the prefrontal cortext in individuals who have damage to this region, damage which may put individuals at higher risk for aggression and poor impulse control. We also see less activation of this region in people who are simply bored. Thus, differences in activity in this regions can be interpreted alarmingly ("these people are disinhibited toward acting aggressively") or non-alarmingly ("these people are bored") depending, essentially, on the whim of the scholar.

Thus, it is not uncommon to see misuse of brain imaging data in the news media and by some scholars, proclaiming alarmist brain related findings about youth that are not appropriate (Males, 2009). The popular notion that youths are essentially programmed to be riskier probably falls within this category. For example one pediatrician claimed in a news interview that adults "need to

understand that teenagers are neurologically programmed to do dumb things" (Huffington Post, 2011). Whimsically, this exaggerated and nonsensical claim invites one to wonder whether some pediatricians are programmed to say dumb things. Nonetheless such exaggerated claims are music to the ears of journalists. They also fall well within perennial cycles of older adults' eagerness to disparage youth. This does not mean that fMRI studies are without value. However, it does argue for greater care and conservativeness among scholars communicating their results to the press. Although journalists are often the source of misinformation on science, I have seen plenty of press releases from scholars that made exaggerated claims of their own findings that would never have survived peer-review (unlike original manuscripts that are published, press releases on those publications are not peer-reviewed).

4.8 Concluding Statements

As noted in this chapter, the news media does tend to present a biased sample of real-life crime news events. In particular, news media focuses on violent crimes, sensational crimes, and crimes involving high-status and attractive women as victims. There is some evidence that news media consumption may affect the crime beliefs of some, although not all, individuals. Individuals who are previous crime victims as well as women and the unemployed are particular susceptible to news reports changing their beliefs. There is some evidence to suggest that news portrayals of minorities as perpetrators of crime may influence stereotypes of minorities, although these effects are weak and inconsistent. It is also difficult to separate the influence of news media from actual demographic trends in crime perpetration.

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