

“The Media, Crime and Race”

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RESPONDENT

Pippa Green

Journalist and former head of SABC radio news

Good evening everyone. I'm going to try and pick up on some of Ian's points, and then talk a little about gaps in reporting. Ian has raised an intriguing question: why is there under-reporting of crime? And if there is, how do we address that?

My sense is that a further question needs to be asked, and that is about the 'why and the how' of crime, and the context of crime reporting. What is it about crime that both fascinates and repels us? About ten years ago, I did a bit of research on the driving forces and conflicting forces operating in the context of crime, and I set out to find people who had cases and stories about crime and the police, that might be useful to my research.

I came across a Bramley couple who had been the victims of crime, but perhaps even more so, victims of the police. The husband had been asleep in the lounge when three men broke in and smashed his head with a brick so that he was seriously injured, thereafter stealing a lot of electronic equipment.

The wife called their security company, and while they waited, the police wandered in. When the wife asked if she could make a statement, the police said they couldn't take the statement then as they didn't have any foolscap paper with them. The wife said she had ordinary computer paper in the house – but the police declined, saying it had to be foolscap.

After having sent her husband to hospital, the wife went to the police station to make her statement there. While she was doing so, the police told her she was writing too much and that she must write down only the value of the goods stolen, and not bother with descriptions of the violence or any other details. She said afterwards that the greater part of her trauma was caused by her treatment at the hands of the police, rather than by the actual crime. That story, like hundreds of others, was never reported.

At about the same time in Richmond, Kwa-Zulu Natal, there was a lot of political unrest and numerous arms were being smuggled into the area. One night, three men walked into a certain police station and tipped off the police that arms were being smuggled in, at a certain place and time. That very night, those three men were killed. Coincidence? Or the result of police collusion with political agitators?

It gradually became clear to me that what was happening in the episodic way we report crime is that we're not combining it with the reportage of what happens in the police force itself. The country went through a huge social transition during the early and mid 1990s, and that transition had a massive effect on the police force itself.

Suddenly, the traditionally favoured police tools, such as torture, detention without trial and so on, are out of bounds. At the same time, there is what Ian referred to as a culture of moral panic growing within the population, and a police force, which is corrupt, bureaucratic and slow. It is not really possible for us to get a grasp on the nature of the problem of crime unless we also have reporters that are trained on reporting what a police force in the midst of a social transition does and is doing. Perhaps Brink is not far wrong – crime looks like a tsunami because everyone just gives up on the police.

So, Ian is correct in the sense that crime is under-reported, and he's right to capture the dichotomy between the crying-wolf phenomenon on the one hand, and the rising crime stats contrasted with under-reporting on the other hand. But I feel that what we must do in local media is to understand the patterns of crime. I live in Pretoria and in the Pretoria news, there will be some gory crime story three days out of five – but these don't help me to understand the patterns of what's going on, because they're too episodic.

So there's no geographical sense of where crime is happening. The other point is how you understand the crime statistics that come out. I know government has disputed these figures and intellectuals have questioned them too. As an example, in the latest 2007 statistics, attempted murder was down but murder was up. What is the meaning of this? Are people just getting better at murder? There's no real explanation for this, and I think Ian is right that the media is not doing its job, in the sense that it could be doing a lot more to explain crime statistics, and to convey a greater understanding of the geographical and social patterns of crime.

What we need to equip our reporters with is the capacity to ask and answer questions like: what is the big picture? What are the real stats about crime? What is the picture of how the police are managing it? Just as you have specialist economics reporters, you should have specialists reporting on what the police are doing.

I just want to say a word on TV and radio, because it's something that is very puzzling to me. The radio stations are all driven by the same news values – if those values are being promoted across the country, you shouldn't get the racial balkanization that Ian was talking about. I think that the balkanization that we do see is more often the result of differing intellectual capacities and sophistication, and less the result simply of racial dynamics.

With national footprint stations, it's very hard to do local stories and that's a challenge. To some extent on television, as opposed to radio, it might be that there's a 'pro-government' line – but again, I think it's largely a matter of gaps in editorial skills and imagination, and that applies to a number of media not

only electronic. I don't want to hammer this or give it too much emphasis, but I want to make the point.

So the challenge for the media in covering crime is more than reporting numbers and incidents, but looking more at why and how and how police are working.

I'd like to finish off with another anecdote, this time a success story. The brother of Frank Chikane had had his house broken into, and almost everything cleaned out. He returned home and asked his domestic worker what had happened. She told him that they'd approached the house, asked for him by a specific name that he was called in undergrad, and that they had driven a white van.

By a process of elimination, Chikane managed to identify these men. He then telephoned the police, and when they arrived, he insisted that they take him with them to Soweto to pick the guys up. To make a long story short, they tracked down all the men involved and retrieved all the stolen goods, that same day. The police in question told Chikane that it was the first time they had ever been involved in the successful resolution of a crime.

The key lesson from that anecdote is that what the police have not been able to do successfully, and what the media should be focusing on, is how you use information and intelligence to solve crimes.