

USING MASS MEDIA TO FIGHT ORGANISED CRIME

1. Introduction on media sociology

It is commonly said that we live in an information society. A society which is mainly based on services and where information of all kinds is the key to well-being and power.

Modern societies are increasingly dependent on complex communication systems, in which there is enormous interest and which play a considerable role in political, social and economic life.

It should also be said, however, that increasingly complex social structures, both at national and international level, have provided the media with new tasks and challenges. The decline of traditional social authorities (political parties, the Church, the family, the community, etc.) should increase the need for effective public-institutions which can compensate for this loss. Moreover, public demand has expanded due to the trend towards globalisation, which affects all aspects of everyday life, while individualism, relativism and precariousness make most people more dependent and vulnerable and, therefore, increase their need for information.

Among the many changes in modern society, the mass media clearly have a pivotal role.

One important aspect of the problem is the role the media can play in the fight against crime and, in particular, organised crime. The issue has been widely studied and can be summarised in terms of three basic theoretical concepts:

- The first is Albert Bandura's theory of social learning, whereby individuals learn from the media what behaviour will be punished and what behaviour rewarded;
- The second is Berkowitz's priming effect, whereby people's observation of crime leads them to think along similar lines and make comparable judgments, which predisposes them to violence in interpersonal situations;
- Finally comes Huesman's script theory, according to which social behaviour is controlled by a script which indicates how one should behave in different circumstances according to a model provided by the media.

As well as such theories, there is also the widespread belief that being exposed to violent crime can lead one to become desensitised to and, therefore, more tolerant of violence.

It is, however, utterly true that the media can play a crucial role in the prevention and control of crime.

It may be perceived to be generally associated with the latest trends, but it has never been particularly open to radical change. People have been talking for years about the imminent death of the mass media. The new interactive media should have made it look outdated, but they have had almost no impact on the absolute supremacy of the traditional media.

It may be that several characteristics of the media are simply irreplaceable. Technology and form can change, but only mass communication can meet the demands of stable political, economical and social systems. National and international politics cannot, for the moment, do without effective communication methods and mass information.

Although these ideas are shared by many, the question still remains as to what type of state-media relationship might most effectively combat organised crime.

2. Characteristics of organised crime in the new millenium

It should also be emphasised that organised crime has altered considerably in modern society.

Things have changed in two main ways: criminal groups have become more international and, as they have gradually adopted a business-like approach, they are more likely to be copied.

In our global society, even crime has taken on transnational features, with cross-border crimes becoming increasingly frequent. First there was drug trafficking, then smuggling of foreign tobacco, prostitution, trafficking in persons, counterfeit industrial goods and so on; all requiring the transfer of goods, persons and capital from one part of the world to another. This led inevitably to a gradual grouping together of organised crime gangs controlling particular areas, the adoption of common modes of operation and the possibility of exploiting differing legislation and the varying levels of effectiveness of crime prevention in different countries. Things greatly improved for organised crime when Europe's eastern borders were opened up after the fall of the Berlin Wall and whole new territories and potential markets became available.

As a result, criminal organisations must nowadays carry out their illegal activities across a greater number of countries, targeting richer markets.

The second effect follows on directly from the first. If we look at cross-border crime we see that they adhere to the principle of maximum profit for minimum legal risk which is characteristic of criminal businesses. They are also generally offences which completely overturn any traditional aggressor-victim relationship.

Cross-border crimes committed by organised criminals usually involve providing illegal goods or services to consenting persons. Drug trafficking, tobacco smuggling, prostitution and the trafficking in persons are all businesses run by criminal gangs who are willing and able to satisfy demand for illegal services in rich western markets with the flexibility associated with traditional business activity.

This makes things considerably difficult for national police forces who rarely receive testimonies or complaints and who, above all, no longer come across extreme displays of violence. Rather, they are faced with complex criminal systems operating in the impenetrable world of the underground economy. The way in which organised crime is fought clearly needs to change and focus on both prevention and control.

How can the fight against smuggling and prostitution be said to be effective while thousands of people are still buying smuggled cigarettes or obtaining the services of prostitutes?

Tens of thousands of people are arrested in Europe every year for crimes related to drug trafficking and many tons of illegal drugs are seized, yet the use of illegal drugs has not decreased; it has, on the contrary, become more widespread with currently unacceptable numbers of deaths from overdoses.

That is why any new crackdown on crime will not work without getting people actively involved and putting direct pressure on potential new clients. It is necessary to convince people that buying a packet of smuggled cigarettes is tantamount to financing a criminal gang, that prostitution is the last link in the unspeakable crimes of trafficking in human beings, that the use of drugs ruins one's health, etc.

The role of the media in this issue is absolutely clear.

3. Using media to prevent and fight crime

In the modern information society, people should have as much information as possible on public institutions to ensure that democratic values are upheld.

In this connection, the provision of information on the activities of police forces and the Public Prosecutor in the fight against organised crime could be essential.

It is evident that the focus of criminal proceedings has changed in recent decades, from gathering, presenting and evaluating evidence for and against the defendant to becoming, through mass-media coverage and globalisation, more of a reflection of public opinion on important news items and issues of political and social interest (as, for example, in government corruption cases).

Criminal proceedings have thus become a means of influencing public opinion through the mass media, and they, in turn, can be influenced by media requirements and dominant political groups.

In our particular field, the effectiveness of criminal proceedings and control of the mass media can be excellent ways for us to gain people's trust in government institutions and even to prevent crime being committed.

The broadcasting of news items about the effectiveness of police forces or about the speed and timeliness of deterrent sentences certainly discourages potential offenders and may even force them to abandon crime altogether.

It is well known that one of the functions of sentencing is to serve as a deterrent to crime.

It is particularly important to gain people's trust in the fight against organised crime as this can help break the conspiracy of silence imposed by criminal gangs and encourage people to give evidence or make a complaint against a crime.

Positive examples publicised by the mass media can be particularly effective in geographical and social groups which have been forced into silence by criminal organisations.

The most decisive part, however, of the mass media's role in the fight against organised crime could and should be providing people with examples of social behaviour that are perhaps not collectively considered particularly alarming but which are big-business opportunities for organised crime.

Buying smuggled cigarettes or counterfeit clothes is not considered by most people as particularly serious anti-social behaviour; it is almost universally tolerated and there is even a certain satisfaction in paying less tax or less money for big, monopolistic brand names. However, if the mass media can make people all over the European Union conscious of the fact that buying smuggled cigarettes or counterfeit clothes will actually mean giving significant financial support to organised criminal gangs, helping them to commit violent crime, engage in large-scale drug trafficking and put many people's lives at risk, sales of such goods would probably fall.

Information on criminal investigations could also be extremely useful for people to help them avoid buying counterfeit products or becoming a victim of the large-scale fraud currently perpetrated by organised criminal gangs in the European Union.

We are therefore faced with the decisive challenge of guaranteeing freedom, security and justice in Europe, a challenge which, in the new millenium, will necessarily involve a much closer relationship between government and the mass media in the fight against organised crime.

It is worth recalling one of Pope Pius XII's teachings, expounded in his speech of 17 February 1950: "It would not be an exaggeration to say that the future of modern society and

its internal stability depend to a large extent on the balance between the strength of communications technology and the ability of individuals to react.”