**Sex Crime and the Media:
Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society**

by Chris Greer

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Reviewed by Claire Lawrence

The title of the book is slightly misleading in that it suggests that the book will cover the media (print, television, and possibly the Internet) representations and portrayals of sex crimes in general. However, the ‘divided society’ in the title refers to the fact that this book is an examination of sex crime and the print media in Northern Ireland. As such this limits the scope of the book somewhat, but nevertheless there are some excellent points to be made about the nature of print journalism and the portrayal of sex crime in general. Reading this book gave me a real insight into the workings of the press and the reasons why events are portrayed in the ways they are: the demands of the market, the role of the proprietor, the editor and journalists are all examined here in a clear and informative manner. However, the book is also somewhat contradictory, and some of the early chapters, while interesting, do not seem to sit very well with the discussions following in the rest of the text.

Greer begins by outlining the book’s wide scope. It aims to examine: the influences on news production (social, political, economic, organisational and cultural); the nature and significance of the relationships between journalists and sources; the images of sex crime which inform the press narratives; and the impact of wider changes in late modernity. Such extensive aims pose a challenge, and I am uncertain of the extent to which these aims are achieved.

In Chapter 1, Greer gives a useful discussion of the news press in Northern Ireland, together with a useful and potted history of the troubles there and the prevailing Nationalist and Unionist positions. This is an interesting and well written examination of the context for the study, and together with Chapters 2 and 3—a discussion of the determinants of news production (economic, organisational, journalistic, source availability)—gives an interesting examination of the way the news works. These chapters were very thought-provoking in terms of where the ‘story’ is. From a security perspective, it is clear that often the message we want to be put ‘out there’ is not the message the media want to tell. Media cries for ‘more bobbies on the beat’ as a solution to crime can be contrasted with research on crime reduction which suggests a more complex reality. These early chapters offer a good deal of insight as to why this may occur, from a range of standpoints. However, the book then changes its direction quite markedly. The following chapters give a more specific and focused analysis of a study of sex crime reporting in Northern Ireland, mainly contrasting the tabloid versus broadsheet treatment of the issues, and the themes opened up in the early chapters are rarely returned to again.

The book’s abiding message is that all parties involved in the reporting of sex crimes and related stories are under pressure (organisational, economic, cultural) and suffer from limited resources (time, access to sources, etc). As a consequence, it is argued that the reporting of sex crimes is becoming more sensationalised and salacious. However, towards the final chapters, Greer makes the case that groups working with both victims (eg social services) and offenders in sex-crimes (eg probation services) need to make their voice heard in the media more strongly to ensure that

the information being printed in the press is accurate and informative. Greer suggests that the lack of commentary in the print media from these groups within reported cases of sex-crimes (with Belfast Rape Crisis being an exception) is due to their lack of proactiveness in forming relationships with the media, and with individual journalists in particular. However, the practitioners he interviews point out that they are dissuaded from approaching journalists for fear of their message being reported in a salacious manner. Given that Greer's own conclusions point to the increase in sensationalism in media reporting of sex-crimes, the criticism of practitioner groups appears a little harsh.

That said, this is an interesting book, which although limited to discussing sex crimes in Northern Ireland offers insight into the broader issues of how we deal with the notion of crime in society in general. One triumph of the book is a discussion of how those committing sex crimes are reported in the media as being homogenous and unlike the rest of the population. This view is highlighted as not only wrong but also dangerously misleading. The lesson is clear for all types of crime. Put simply, crime is committed by those we know as well as those we do not.

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