

Youth Crime & Media

**A study into the news coverage of youth crime in a
changing media landscape**

Summary

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Summary

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English Summary

After an increase during the period 2000-2007 we see a clear decline in registered youth crime. The question remains whether this positive development is reflected in the public and political debate on this topic. One indicator for this is the amount of attention media paid to the topic and the way they reported about the topic. In this study this is researched along the following research question:

1. *How do media cover youth crime and its development?*

The production of news is a complex process in which the availability of information, the types of sources and journalistic choices together lead to the end product: a news item. During this process a bias can occur with respect to the actual developments, in this research operationalized as a bias towards the actual figures with respect to youth crime. We focus on three levels of bias in news coverage: the selection of news, the sources in the news and the choice of perspective, in other words, the framing of the news. Besides these forms of bias we also look at stereotyping: the associations between youth crime in terms of ‘street terror’ and the ethnic origin of the persons involved. Moreover, the political debate about youth crime is an important source of information for the media. Therefore we include the role of politics in all aforementioned aspects.

A possible discrepancy between media coverage and real world developments can be explained by analyzing the processes in which the news coverage originate. These analyses will be guided by the following research questions:

If the news coverage is not in accordance with the facts/shows a bias;

2. *What are the processes that lead to the found discrepancies?*

3. *What measures can be taken in order to make the news coverage more in accordance with the actual facts?*

In order to find an answer to these research questions, the outcome of the content analysis will be interpreted in the light of in-depth interviews that are held with journalists covering the topic and people responsible at the press office of the ministry of Security and Justice.

Data collection

A comparison of the news coverage in 2007 and 2011 is at the heart of this study. We choose these years because in 2007 the youth crime rate was much higher than in 2011. Finally for 2011 we also analysed the differences in the news coverage found in the paper versions of newspapers and their respective digital versions.

In the study a distinction is made between ‘quality’ newspapers (*de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, and *Trouw*), popular newspapers (*Algemeen Dagblad* and *De Telegraaf*) free newspapers (*Spits en Metro*), broadcasted news (*NOS 20:00h*), current affairs programs (*Knevel en Van den Brink*, *Pauw en Witteman*, *De Wereld Draait Door*, *Netwerk*, *Nova/Nieuwsuur*, *EenVandaag* and *Buitenhof*), new media (*Fok.nl* en *GeenStijl.nl*) and digital versions of the following newspapers: *Algemeen Dagblad*, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* en *Trouw*. Besides these media we also include the Parliamentary Questions on youth crime as well as the official figures about the development of juvenile crime as published in *Criminaliteit en rechtshandhaving 2012* (Kalidien & De Heer-de Lange 2013).

Methodology

In order to answer the research questions a qualitative and quantitative content analysis are combined with semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative content analysis: The qualitative content analysis, including in total 263 documents, is conducted to provide input for the codebook used in the quantitative content analysis. Moreover, through this analysis the episodic, thematic, repressive and prevention frames were operationalized and subsequently measured in the quantitative content analysis.

Quantitative analysis: The quantitative content analysis included all news items on youth crime published between 2000 and 2012 (N=7824) and the parliamentary questions (N=211). For 2007 and 2011, the documents (N=1529) were also coded using a codebook focusing on the following aspects: type of crime, the sources mentioned, episodic versus thematic framing, prevention versus repressive framing and the mentioning of origins of persons involved.

In-depth interviews: To analyse the production process of the news coverage on youth crime semi-structured interviews are held. In total twelve journalists and two persons involved in the press contacts of the ministry of Security and Justice are interviewed. These interviews are analysed systematically on the following aspects: news selection, mentioning of sources, frames used, stereotyping and the role of politics.

Results

The results will be discussed on the basis of the three research questions:

1. How do media cover youth crime and its development?

This question is answered on four aspects: news selection, source use, frame use, and stereotyping.

News selection: media coverage of youth crime

Media are biased in their coverage of youth crime. Although youth crime in reality declined with 44% in 2011 relative to 2007, the amount of news coverage went down only 13%. Coverage in quality newspapers, NOS television news, current affairs shows and the free dailies declines during this period in line with the actual development, so no selection bias is found in these groups of media. This bias is seen in popular newspaper coverage, which remained stable, and even more so in new media where the amount of coverage on youth crime increased in 2011 relative to 2007. The web sites of national dailies also pay more attention to youth crime relative to the paper versions of the newspapers. Besides this bias there is a bias with respect to crimes against property such as theft and robbery. Except for the quality newspapers all media groups increased their coverage of this form of youth crime between 2007 and 2011, which does not match the actual developments.

Source use: number and type of sources in the news

With source use we investigated the mentioning of sources in the coverage: how often do journalists explicitly mention sources and if so, which parties are explicitly mentioned?

In most news items no or only one explicit source is mentioned. This is contrary to the journalistic norm of covering both sides of a story. Quality newspapers, current affairs programs and to a lesser degree the NOS television news base their coverage on cited sources more often than other media groups. Even so, the web versions of quality newspapers use fewer sources than the paper version.

A bias with respect to the selection of sources differs per media group. A bias with respect to 'authorities' on the area of your crimes, such as professors, is found in current affairs shows and quality newspapers. Free dailies and popular newspapers are more biased towards 'societal actors' such as interest groups and citizens.

A form of bias shown by all media groups is a focus on 'powerful' sources. Particularly striking is a shift towards the ministry of Safety and Justice as a news source. In all media groups the ministry of Security and Justice is found as a source more often in 2011 than in 2007, while opposition parties get less attention in 2011.

Framing of the news

News coverage of youth crimes is framed episodically. This means that there is a strong focus on concrete incidents and there is less attention for the economic, political, or social context. Although thematic coverage, which does have attention for context, is used more often in quality newspapers and current affairs shows, these media groups pay less attention to youth crime overall. Especially those media with a strong episodic focus are increasing their coverage of youth crime. On the web sites of quality newspapers we also find stronger episodic framing than in the paper versions of these newspapers.

Besides the focus on episodic framing repressive framing is also increasing. Repressive frames stress harsh measures as a way of dealing with youth crime. This increase is found especially in the coverage of the NOS television news and, to a lesser degree, in the other media groups. Preventive framing, which stresses education and aid to reduce youth crime, is used less in 2011 than in 2007. Only current affairs programs focus more on preventive framing in 2011.

The coverage based on cited sources is also focused on repression. Except for societal actors all sources use more repressive framing in 2011 compared to 2007. The political roles are also shifted: where in 2007 political parties were most responsible for the use of repressive framing, in 2011 this role was played by governmental actors, especially the ministry of Safety and Justice.

Stereotyping in the news

Stereotyping in the news deals with the association of youth crime with the cultural or ethnic origins of the involved parties. We additionally considered the way in which youth crime is described as 'street terror' or similar terms. The role of the PVV is explicitly investigated. In their communication, this party frequently makes an explicit connection between youth crime and (Moroccan) 'street terrorists'.

In 2011 there is a strong decline in mentioning the origin of suspects compared to 2007. This holds for almost all media, only the free dailies show an increase. We do find a stronger focus on Moroccan suspects in all media types. This strengthens the association between youth crime and Moroccan origins. Additionally, there is an increased association between Moroccan origins and terms related

to 'street terror'. These associations are strongest in parliamentary questions by the PVV and in coverage that mentions the PVV, but it is also found in coverage that does not mention the PVV. Although ethnic origin is mentioned less frequently in the coverage in 2011 compared to 2007, this association is stronger in 2011. This contributes to a stereotypical image of the juvenile criminal as a Moroccan-Dutch person.

2. If the news coverage is not in accordance with the facts/shows a bias; What are the processes that lead to the found discrepancies?

The causes of the different forms of bias that were found were determined by analysing the literature on news production and by in-depth interviews held with twelve journalists and two persons involved in PR at the ministry of Security and Justice. This analysis shows that the causes lie in the interaction between media, politics, and citizens in a mediatised society in which media logic is dominant. Concretely, the causes are connected to news production routines, commercial pressure, and a focus on political sources.

News production: Youth crime as a newsworthy issue

The bias in the media coverage of youth crime can be explained by their news selection choices. For journalists, youth crime events are news worthy because 'they could happen to all of us'. This is increased by a focus on property crimes such as theft and robbery. Such 'high impact crimes' allow people to identify with the victims, which is an important news value. For this reason, violence is overrepresented in youth crime coverage. In addition, if there is a general sense of insecurity in society, research that shows that youth crime is dropping is less news worthy because it is difficult to square with dominant public opinion. Reality is often complicated and difficult to fit into a simplified story structure, contrary to a police report about a violent incident. Research and statistical developments are being reported, and there is media attention for reports that show that youth crime is dropping, but these reports are vastly outnumbered by stories about violent incidents. This supports the existing image of insecurity, even if that does not match the changing reality.

Commerce: the market logic of the news

The media market is strongly commercialized over recent years. The emergence of a large number of (digital) media has increased competition and enlarged the choice for news consumers. At the same time, there are less financial resources for high quality reporting. Stories on youth crime incidents are easy to tell without expensive research. The commercial pressure on journalists also forces them to rely on press releases, especially if these releases are from the ministry or from research organisations, which journalists generally consider trustworthy.

The audience has a strong demand for (youth) crime coverage and the media work to supply this. With a strong focus on incidents and little context information, such coverage will consolidate the existing feeling of insecurity rather than provide insights into the causes of and possible remedies for youth crime. This is strengthened by the influence of media on each other: other media are an important source of information for journalists.

Focus on political sources

The current cabinet members at the ministry of Security and Justice take advantage of the journalistic preference for citing powerful sources. Opposition parties and also the PVV are cited less often in 2011 relative to 2007. The current cabinet members, both members of VVD, favour tough policy towards youth crime that also emerges from the media coverage. With the PVV as junior partner,

who also prefer a tough stance, political interests take precedence over facts and media statements generally use repressive framing. In their 'watch dog' role, journalists could be more critical about this, but this is made difficult because of their dependency on political sources and precarious professional situation. A journalist that is overly critical does not get any scoops.

Besides the ministry, a special role is played by the PVV. In the parliamentary questions that this party has asked about youth crime since 2007, the problems are consistently framed in terms of 'street terror' conducted by 'Moroccan street scum'. This association can also be found in the media coverage. Although the amount of coverage about youth crime mentioning Moroccans has decreased in 2011 relative to 2007, the association between Moroccan origins and terms such as 'street terror' and 'street scum' has slightly increased. This has consequences for public perception. If a certain frame becomes dominant in the public perception, details that are left out such as ethnic origin are automatically filled in with information that matches that frame.

3. If the news coverage is not in accordance with the facts/shows a bias: What measures can be taken in order to make the news coverage more in accordance with the actual facts?

The ministry of Security and Justice cannot influence all causes of bias as discussed above. The mediatization of society and the dominance of the media logic is a given fact. However, it is not impossible for the ministry of Security and Justice to influence the journalistic process in order to make the news coverage in accordance with the actual developments concerning youth crime.

Making use of media logic and news selection

By delivering the relevant facts, including the most relevant and interesting interpretation of those facts, to the media, the probability increases that background information and figures about youth crime become newsworthy for journalists. Ministers and high ranked civil servants can play a dominant role here. They are newsworthy as source of information for the journalists, providing them the opportunity to provide the media with the factual figures about youth crime including their own interpretations of the development.

A lot of news coverage is focused on incidents with the ministry unable to react because of privacy issues for the people involved. Nevertheless, journalist want a reaction from the ministry on every single event. Especially the television needs 'talking heads' and journalists are eager to quote the minister or other powerful politicians. They can use this opportunity to provide a wider context and discuss statistical developments while commenting on an incident. Not only can this alleviate a feeling of insecurity and urgency within society, a repetition of more contextual information can also make such contexts more newsworthy for journalists.

Public interest versus political interest

The realization of the public logic within the ministry is another point of interest. It is in the public interest to provide a truthful picture of youth crime, but this picture can be in conflict with the political interests of that moment. With press officers looking after the interests of a minister who benefits from strong policies with respect to youth crime, positive news concerning the development of youth crime will only be used when it is politically opportune.

For this reason it is important that ministers and their press officers are aware of the the long-term effects of their messages to the public. Politicians of opposition parties, especially the PVV, have a

major influence on the repressive frames in which youth crime is reported in the news. Obviously, the ministry cannot influence these opposition parties, but if other other politicians and especially ministers join the framing in terms of repression, it is more difficult for journalists to use counter-frames. In order to make news coverage more in accordance with the actual facts it is therefore of major importance to pay attention to the goals and strategy of an active press policy at the Ministry of Security and Justice.