

Media's made criminality: the construction of moral panic over gypsies and immigrants

Silvia Gomes and Helena Machado

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the discourses provided in the Portuguese daily newspapers when covering criminality perpetrated by immigrants and minority ethnic groups. The aim is to understand how the narratives circulated in the press convey visions about social order which promote consensus and social control through the overemphasis on risk of victimization and the construction of so-called 'moral panic'.

The media coverage of crime produces widely shared visions and consensus in different communities, while feeding, in general public, stereotypes about the "criminals", and linking the crime to socially excluded groups and ethnic minorities, such as gypsies and immigrants. These stereotypes can convert these groups as potential threats to the prevailing interests and values of society, by producing a moral crusade that, through the disproportionate and excessive emotional reaction that awakens audiences, represents the spokesmen of morality and their diagnoses and solutions.

This paper discusses the Portuguese press coverage of criminality perpetrated by gypsies and immigrants as a paradigmatic example of a *product* of a cultural industry. These media narratives are nourished by global logics of commodification of the public sphere based on criminalization of poverty and the fear of 'troublesome' populations, whose purpose is to raise emotional attachment by the public and thus leading to moral crusades.

Keywords: Immigrants and gypsies, moral panic, Portuguese crime news, social control.

1. Introduction:

The public perceptions of crime and the criminals reflect dominant and taken-for-granted assumptions circulated by the media. Thus, it is important to study the discourses and representations conveyed about crime committed by minority ethnic groups, to understand how social representations about those social groups (their behaviour and lifestyles) are constructed and disseminated to large sections of population.

The media themselves also manufacture morality, i.e., they portray images of reality which are influenced by the cultural and economic structures that support them. The media's representations of crime are necessarily linked to ideology as a set of commonly shared beliefs that might

be adaptable to various audiences. Thus, the media tend to reproduce the established order, while representing it¹.

Moral panic has been extensively studied in the field of the media studies since Cohen's initial work, and in a broad sense the term moral panic refers to a social phenomenon by which an individual or a group of individuals are defined as a threat to the values and interests of a society. The media largely construct this cultural message and give rise to reactions from spokesmen of morality by exposing their diagnoses and solutions. Often it is a "disproportionate" and "excessive" reaction towards something new, or pre-existing, which suddenly becomes the focus of attention, as mentioned by Machado and Santos² for the context of high profile mediatised criminal cases in Portugal, and, in our perspective, can be durable in time under certain circumstances.

From the observation and collection of all the online news published by the four Portuguese national daily newspapers in a period of two years - from 1st January 2008 to 31th December 2009 -, we intend to analyze the discourses provided by the press when covering criminality perpetrated by immigrants and minority ethnic groups – especially gypsies, immigrants from the Eastern Europe and immigrants from the Portuguese-speaking African countries. The aim is to understand how those narratives convey visions of social order to promote consensus and social control through the overemphasis on risk of victimization and the construction of so-called 'moral panic'³.

3. Understanding crime news in Portugal

The media's sources selected for carrying on a critical understanding about the construction of moral panic targeted to gypsies and other ethnic minorities were the articles published online by the daily Portuguese press. It was possible to collect 114 press articles published during a period of two years. We selected daily newspapers with different journalistic styles: two 'popular' newspapers – *Correio da Manhã* (CM) and *Jornal de Notícias* (JN) – and two 'quality' newspapers – *Diário de Notícias* (DN) and *Público* (PL)⁴.

In a first approach to these data we have focused our analysis on the positions occupied by immigrants and ethnic groups in the story (offender or victim), the social profiles they had (gender, age, occupation, nationality or ethnicity), which crimes were described and what sort of information sources supported the news. Furthermore, we carried out a detailed analysis of the narrative plot drama in order to understand its potential for the development of moral panic.

Regarding the profile reported in the news about crime perpetrated by gypsies, immigrants from the Eastern Europe and immigrants from the

Portuguese-speaking African countries, in most cases the individuals who were described as alleged perpetrators of crime were between of 25 and 34 years old (50%) or, if we apply a wider age group range, between 15 and 44 (81.4%)⁵. Considering sex, individuals are mostly men (84.8%). The social groups most often mentioned in the analyzed Portuguese newspapers are gypsies, Cape Verdeans and Africans⁶.

Immigrants and minority ethnic groups are mentioned as being offenders in 65.8% of the news; they are the villains, the culprits in the crime stories. The crime that is more often reported in the news is the crime against people and every newspaper analyzed has the same trend. The CM alone has 77% of the news about crimes related to drugs. In the total of the collected news articles there is a prevalence of reporting violent crimes against people (murder, assault and threats) and crimes related to drugs (possession or trafficking of drugs, or even theft and robbery that arise as a result of the condition of the individual as a dealer or a consumer of drugs). Indeed, as has already been discussed in other studies, violent crime has become increasingly a topic very tempting for the media coverage⁷.

It is interesting to notice that violent crimes are not those ones which occur more often in Portugal. When comparing the trend of national newspapers in what concerns the sort of reported crime with the official statistics of crime⁸, we see that there is a significant difference. The crime that is by far the most recorded by the police is the crime against property. Comparing with the records of crime against people, we see that this represents a value well below, less than half of registrations in relation to crime against property. Katz has argued that comparisons of crime news and crime statistics have produced consistent findings and that the content of crime news has been found to diverge widely from the patterns available in official statistics⁹. Furthermore, it is noted that the main source of information that is referred in the crime news, and that checks the veracity and credibility to the events reported, is the police, followed immediately by the testimony provided by citizens.

We can state that the crime reported by newspapers – the crime against person – is chosen for being the most unusual or most extraordinary, making violent crime, particularly murder, more newsworthy¹⁰. The use of police's information as a source for producing news emerges as a way to legitimize the discourse produced by media before the public¹¹ and the voice of the ordinary citizens appears as a way to print emotions to report the content, especially when the citizen is himself or herself a witness or the victim of the situation described¹². Just turns out that this distortion in the media, as studies on the impact of media on the perceptions of crime seem to confirm, affects crucially – more than official statistics or personal

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experiences of victimization – the public perceptions about crime and the criminals, developing collective feelings of insecurity, which are enablers for the adoption of increasingly severe criminal policies¹³. Hall has argued in a work published in the 70's that moral panics is typically originated in statements by members of the police and the judiciary, which were then amplified by the media¹⁴. This idea still makes sense in contemporary societies. The media does not 'create' the news so much as 'reproduce and sustain' the dominant interpretations of it, and can thus be said to function, intentionally or not, as an instrument of state control¹⁵.

If we cross the type of crime reported to the social groups which are appointed as perpetrators of crime, we notice several differences. Gypsies are mostly reported as committing crimes against property with the use of violence (e.g. robbery or extortion); immigrants from the Portuguese-speaking African countries are associated with drug-related offenses (possession or trafficking); and Eastern Europe immigrants are connected with the crime against values and interests of society (e.g. human trafficking, counterfeit currency or documents, criminal association, etc.).

The legal status of individuals reported as well as their professional status was not reported in 88.6% and 83.3% of cases, respectively. Therefore, the newspapers when mentioning the immigrants provide incomplete information. The issues that are explored in crime news are not so much details about the person who allegedly committed the crime, unless it can be catalogued in a particular social group (e.g. immigrant, black, gypsy, eastern immigrant), nor does it matter if he/she had illegal residence in the country or not, under what conditions he/she lived, what job he/she held holds (in case of having one), or even what were the causes that led to allegedly committing crime. There is an erasure of the profile of the subject, as has been suggested in some studies about the Portuguese press¹⁶. What matters is to scrutinize the details of the crime, how it was done, where, who was his/her victim and describe only the story from the point of view of literary drama. This dramatic speech that is present in the media discourse is what we will analyse below.

4. The construction of moral panic in narrative plot

To simplify the speech, the journalists themselves rely upon pre-concepts or taken-for-granted assumptions so that their readers can read the news in a quick and easy way. The labelling, as already shown, is present in crime news. Even without specifying the nationality of the individuals, the newspapers often refer to their ethnic origins through broad concepts as "African" or "Eastern Europe immigrants". If we consider that most of the crime news shows immigrants and gypsies as transgressors, we can say that,

in general, news suggests that these social groups are a threat to society. One of the many contributions of moral panic is to delineate further the process by which individuals are 'constructed' and given social labels commensurate with 'folk devils', with the additional emphasis that the nature and cause of the particular problem have major implications, including the destruction of the moral and social order¹⁷. Indeed, the media play an important role in constructing and demonizing the behaviour and individuals¹⁸.

The opposition between criminal (usually violent) and victim (innocent and defenceless) is clear in the newspapers under review. Moreover, like a drama, journalists use binary oppositions and associations so that the reader can understand who is on the right side and on wrong side of storytelling, who is the the victim or the villain¹⁹.

Beyond the binary opposition between victim and offender, and the violent tension that is suggested by adjectives used like "savagely beaten" or "punched the military with a stump", it is noteworthy that the normal scenario of daily life is usually transfigured into a crime scene. This occurs in much crime news. The unexpected act not only highlights the villainous nature of the crime committed, but also enhances the feelings of sympathy and pity for the victim and hatred and repulsion for the offender.

The distinction between right and wrong in the construction of the narrative plot is visible. So, the media give the public a "distant suffering" in which they can express sympathy for the victims at the same time that fuel feelings of moral revulsion against criminals²⁰.

Plus, as a consequence of this "distant suffering", readers are encouraged in their ability to victimization; real victimization or potential victimization. The closer the person is the area in which some criminal event happens, more easily people feel a real fear of what might happen to them²¹. On the other hand, when this experience is still far, victimization becomes a potential feeling, that could be translated into the expression "any day can happen to you to". It would be a *reference fear*, while the former would be a *belonging fear*. As suggested by Lee²², the fear of crime is not a pre-discursive 'social fact' but a contingent category born of a set of very particular discursive arrangements and shifts.

To help the provocation of the feelings and possible victimization, crime news emphasize in their speeches the tragedy, chaos and subversion, through the use of certain words or expressions that are shocking and show the event as a drama: "savagely beaten on the head", "was a blood trail left by two wounded", "armed invasion of a east gang", "victim attacked by a stranger", "the knife was stuck in his neck and cable, with an inch long, was in sight". The fear narrative plays an important part in the success of moral

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panic. The major impact of the discourse of fear is to promote a sense of disorder and a belief that 'things are out of control'²³.

Many articles lead us to think of crime as something that is out of reach of people with "normal" lives, and these are the people who end up feeling potentially victimized²⁴. Even without anyone being beaten, the panic and helplessness towards the scenes of violence, led to be claimed measures. By taking into consideration that the transgressors are provoking reactions from the spokesmen of morality, who expose their own diagnoses and solutions, we may argue that this fact illustrates a case of moral panic. Citizens are claiming something to be done so that incidents of violence in public places may no longer exist, responding in this way to acts that are excessively boosted by the national press.

In our sample of press news crime is often linked to urban spaces, particularly those ghettos neighbourhoods. The association of African Portuguese-speaking immigrants and gypsies to troubled neighbourhoods in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto is recurrent. The criminals are seen not as part of the world in which rules, values and considerations of justice are applied - because they live in these urban areas that are often the target of police intervention - and are generally associated with lower classes²⁵, and being guilty for the existence of violence in the streets²⁶.

5. Conclusion

All the newspapers' articles that we have analyzed produce some concern about the possible criminal behaviour of immigrants and gypsies in Portuguese society and believe there are consequences of their dangerous conduct. Newspapers reproduce the idea that these social groups are a real social problem and that they pose a threat to society, and that something should be done about it, inclusively putting citizens demanding for more social control. We also observed that there is disproportionality and exaggeration in the reported crime. In fact, journalists tend to emphasise a sort of crime - violent crime - that is not recurrent in society and by doing that the press promotes feelings and potential and real victimization.

Moral panic over gypsies and immigrants are not new in Portuguese society. We may argue that the moral panic over Eastern Europe immigrants is recent, as this group's presence is recent in the country²⁷. But the newspapers have this attitude towards gypsies since their existence in Portuguese²⁸ society and towards Africans since the emergence of second generation, in the 80s²⁹. The idea of the creation of a "closed circle" held by Hall et al. can be applied to the cultural meanings about crime and criminals that circulate in some Portuguese press, because of the use of sources of information proceeding from the police (primary definers) which tends to

overemphasize violence and risk against those defined as responsible for the 'threat'. The vision of social order constructed by these moral entrepreneurs is therefore converted in public opinion³⁰. This closed circle feeds the moral panic in a way that it makes the stereotypical representations of crime of gypsies and immigrants in national daily press be more durable. That is why we argue in this paper that, unlike the major moral panic studies in which moral panic subsides, in the Portuguese case it seems to be a continued development of this phenomenon for some social groups. Therefore, moral panic is not just a fad; it can be durable in time.

So, given all this, in this particular case, we may say that gypsies, immigrants from the Eastern Europe and immigrants from the Portuguese-speaking African countries are presented by the national press as groups that threaten the values and interests of Portuguese society, from the moment they are reported mostly as offenders, causing excessive reactions. These reactions are denoted either upstream or downstream of news production. The news tends to emphasize feelings of insecurity, victimization and fear of crime through reporting the reactions and opinions of authorities and common citizens. This trend might denote an overreaction which has the potential to reproduce stigmatization of gypsies and other minor ethnic groups and which might be more visible in periods of political, economic and social tension.

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¹ D Altheide and K Devriese, 'Perps in the News: A Research Note on Stigma', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 3 (3), 2007, pp. 382-389; Y Jewkes, *Crime & Media*, Sage Publications, London, 2004; R Surette, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice*, West/Wadsworth, Belmont, 1998.

² H Machado and F Santos, 'The disappearance of Madeleine McCann: Public drama and trial by media in the Portuguese press', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 5, 2009, pp. 146-167.

³ See E Goode and N Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994; A Hunt, 'Moral Panic and Moral Language in the Media', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 48(4), 1997, pp. 629-648; S Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, St Alban's, Paladin, 1972; S Hier, 'Conceptualizing Moral Panic through a Moral Economy of

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Harm', *Critical Sociology*, vol. 28, 2002, pp. 311-334; M Welch, E Price and N Yankey, 'Moral Panic Over Youth Violence: Wilding and the Manufacture of Menace in the Media', *Youth Society*, vol. 34(1), 2002, pp. 3-30; J L Cyr, 'The Folk Devils Reacts: Gangs and Moral Panic', *Criminal Justice Review*, vol. 28(1), 2003, pp. 25-46; N Doran, 'Decoding 'encoding': Moral panics, media practices and Marxist presuppositions', *Theoretical Criminology*, 12 (2), 2008, pp. 191-221; C Critcher, 'Moral Panic Analysis: Past, Present and Future', *Sociology Compass*, vol. 2(4), 2008, 1127-1144; D Garland, 'On the Concept of Moral Panic', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 4(1), 2008, pp. 9-30; R C Mawby and W Gisby, 'Crime, Media and Moral Panic in an Expanding European Union', *The Howard Journal*, vol. 48(1), 2009, pp. 37-51; D Altheide and K Devriese, 'Perps in the News: A Research Note on Stigma', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 3 (3), 2007, pp. 382-389; A Rohloff and S Wright, 'Moral Panic and Social Theory: Beyond the Heuristic', *Current Sociology*, vol. 58(3), 2010, pp. 403-419.

⁴ The concepts of quality newspaper and popular newspapers are from Bourdieu, in his book: P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1984/1979.

⁵ These values were recalculated for an *n* of 70 instead of 114, given that 44 (38.6%) of the news does not identify the individual's age.

⁶ The designations used in the table were the ones mentioned in news under analysis. It is why, therefore, appears the designation "African" and "Eastern Immigrants" and, at the same time, several countries belonging to these groups, respectively, in the same table.

⁷ R Surette, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice*, West/ Wadsworth, Belmont, 1998; M Peelo, 'Framing Homicide Narratives in Newspapers: Mediated Witness and the Construction of Virtual Victimhood', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 2(2), 2006, pp. 159-175; V Wieskamp, 'Bias in News Reporting of Immigrant Crime'. Conference Paper - *International Communication Association Annual Meeting*, 2007.

⁸ Data from the site of the Directorate General for Justice Policy: <http://www.dgpj.mj.pt/sections/estatisticas-da-justica/index/>.

⁹ J Katz, 'What makes crime 'news'?', *Media Culture Society*, vol. 9, 1987, p. 57.

¹⁰ Surette, op. cit.

¹¹ C C Penedo, *O Crime nos Media: o que nos dizem as notícias quando nos falam de crime*, Livros Horizonte, Lisboa, 2007, p. 42.

¹² M D Carvalho, *A construção da imagem dos imigrantes e das minorias étnicas pela imprensa portuguesa: Uma análise comparativa de dois jornais*

diários, Instituto Superior de Ciências do Trabalho e da Empresa, Lisboa, 2007.

¹³ S Pina, *Media e Leis Penais*. Edições Almedina, Coimbra, 2009, p. 120.

¹⁴ Hall et al, op. cit., p. 69.

¹⁵ Hall in Hunt, op. cit., p. 634.

¹⁶ M J Silveirinha and A T Cristo, 'A construção discursiva dos imigrantes na imprensa', *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, vol. 69, 2004, pp. 117-137; F Cunha et al, *Media, Imigração e Minorias Étnicas*, Alto Comissariado para a Imigração e Minorias Étnicas (ACIME), Lisboa, 2004.

¹⁷ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, op. cit.

¹⁸ Altheide, op. cit., p. 86.

¹⁹ R V Ericson, 'Mass Media, Crime, Law and Justice: An Institutional Approach', *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 31(3), 1991, pp. 219-249.

²⁰ L Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

²¹ M Banks, 'Spaces of (in)security: Media and fear of crime in a local context', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 1(2), 2005, pp. 169-187.

²² M Lee, 'The Genesis of 'fear of crime'', *Theoretical Criminology*, vol. 5 (4), 2001, pp. 467-485.

²³ Altheid, op. cit., p. 95.

²⁴ Y Jewkes, *Crime & Media*, Sage Publications, London, 2004.

²⁵ Machado and Santos, op. cit.

²⁶ F Ramos, H Novo, 'Mídia, violência e alteridade: um estudo de caso', *Estudos de Psicologia*, vol. 8 (3), 2005, pp. 491-497. K Hayward and M Yar, 'The 'chav' phenomenon: Consumption, media and the construction of a new underclass', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2(1), 2006, pp. 9-28.

²⁷ The Eastern European immigrants nowadays start to assert themselves in Portuguese society. According to the Foreigners and Borders Service, between 2001 and 2004, 55% of immigrants legally settled by the Portuguese State were from Eastern Europe, dethroning the traditional immigrants from Portuguese-speaking African countries – in M J Guia, *Imigração e Criminalidade: Caleidoscópio de Imigrantes Reclusos*, Edições Almedina, Coimbra, 2008, p. 46.

²⁸ The presence in the Portuguese territory of ethnic groups identified as Gypsies is dated since the fifteenth century and is one of ethnic groups with which Portuguese people have direct experience of living longer – in M Mendes, *Nós, os Ciganos e os Outros: Etnicidade e Exclusão Social*, Livros Horizonte, Lisboa, 2005, p. 17.

²⁹ The migration of Cape Verdeans families to Lisbon and Porto was initiated in the 1960s and continues today, although the pace has slowed a lot in the decades oh 1990-2000. Many of them were illiterate or had only basic schooling and often incomplete. The highest peaks of the Cape Verdean migration to Portugal were found in the decades of 1970-1980. At first, they were mainly men from rural areas, sometimes with an interim stay in the nearest local towns to acquire the money and knowledge to make the migratory journey successfully. From the 90s, the government took Money from the EU to build "social neighbourhoods" where currently lives most of the families of Cape Verdeans immigrants. The "social neighbourhoods", like the "slums", were constituted as spaces of social isolation and ghettoization of these individuals - L Batalha, "Cabo-verdianos em Portugal: "Comunidade" e Identidade", in Pedro Góis (org.), *Comunidade(s) Cabo-verdiana(s): As Múltiplas Faces da Imigração Cabo-verdiana*, ACIDI, Lisboa, 2009, pp. 25-36.

³⁰ Hall et al, op. cit.

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Silvia Gomes is a PhD Student at the Research Centre for the Social Sciences of the University of Minho (Portugal). Her work is mostly related to issues of criminality, social exclusion and ethnicity, particularly in social representations of ethnic groups and immigrants in the media; social representations of the prison guards on the issues of immigration and crime and also studying the stories and numbers of male and female seclusion.

Helena Machado is Associate Professor (with Habilitation) at the Department of Sociology of the University of Minho (Portugal). Her research interests focus on the area of sociology of forensic genetics; the relationship between justice, media and citizenship (in particular the impacts on social representations of social order rose by media coverage of criminal cases) and social studies of gender.