

THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN PUBLIC SECURITY

Copyright © 2007
Associação Brasileira
de Pesquisadores em
Jornalismo / **SBPJor**

ROBSON SÁVIO REIS SOUZA

Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Brazil

ABSTRACT The sensational increase in violent criminality in recent years has placed the question of public security on the social agenda. Formerly a matter restricted to a few actors, now the topic of public security has become the center of discussion in an afflicted society in the midst of a notorious increase in violence and criminality. The result of the referendum on the prohibition of the sale of firearms and ammunition amplified an obvious popular clamor demanding consistent, lasting and clear measures in the combating and prevention of crime. The media, perceiving the importance of this historic moment (and mainly the power to vocalize this demand of the middle class – their major consumer – has deepened the discussion on this issue, organizing in an increasingly more constant way coverage of public security.

KEY-WORDS Freedom of expression, Freedom of the press, Human Rights, Regulation, Content analysis.

The media “when they take over, disseminate, turn into a spectacle, sensationalize or make banal acts of violence, they are attributing to them a meaning which, on circulating socially, induces practices referring to violence. If violence is language – a way to communicate something – the media on reporting acts of violence emerge as amplifiers of this primary language, that of violence” (RONDELLI, E. Images of violence: discursive practices. Tempo Social, São Paulo, v. 10, n. 2, 1998:145-157).”

Violence (and its perverse effects) makes social institutions more fragile. This is without mentioning corruption – which affects all levels of public administration producing a generalized lack of credibility and confidence in the authorities. These two explosive ingredients have motivated many individuals to advocate the thesis of self-resolution of conflicts, by illegal means, and more serious, to want to take justice into their own hands.

When dealing with public security we are referring to the forms of combating and prevention of violence: a topic which has always caused

much controversy. Some believe violence has to be attacked “at its roots”: misery, social exclusion, bad income distribution, unemployment. On the other hand, the chorus is growing of those who request the adoption of efficient public security policies which take into account the specific problems of each reality and not less important, the need for profound reforms in the criminal court system.

Nevertheless, all those who deal with the phenomenon of violence should understand its complexity and the difficulty in mastering all its variables. Another problem is the reliability of the data produced on crimes. It is difficult to construct representative, reliable statistical indicators. Thus it can be understood why public security researchers and operators have called attention to the need for producing reliable statistics and for guaranteeing transparency in the disclosure of data on violence.

Furthermore, the representation of violence in the media alters our perception of the phenomenon, since the coverage is not always representative of the universe of crimes but rather of extraordinary and often isolated events.

In this context, the media can become one of the most harmful ways of propagating and, up to a certain point, exalting violence.

The multiple facets of violence

As spectators, readers, listeners, citizens and public security operators we must understand that the coverage of day-to-day violence in big cities is not an easy task. Behind violent events other issues lie hidden, which can hardly be covered in each news story or report which involves the media’s approach to the topic.

In addition, we must understand that in the analysis of the issue there is no absolute truth, nor any unquestionable, irrefutable viewpoint. In this connection, public security operators, specialists and journalists should take into consideration a series of issues. After all, all these professionals have made efforts to seek logical explanations for a multiple, complex phenomenon. However, the difficulties in approaching it do not justify simplifications and gross and often tendentious generalizations.

We present, by way of illustration, a synthesis of the complex structure of factors which influence the phenomenon of violence and criminality. For this purpose, we are using the model proposed by the French scientist Jean-Claude Chesnais, a respected demographer and specialist in urban

violence. He outlined a study of criminal violence in Brazil, indicating six causes as factors responsible for the present situation:

- 1 ■ Socio-economic factors: misery, aggravation of inequalities, heritage of hyperinflation;
- 2 ■ Institutional factors: insufficiency and incompetence of the State, crisis involving the family model, decrease in the power of the Church;
- 3 ■ Cultural factors: problems of racial integration and moral disorder;
- 4 ■ Urban demography: the generations coming from the period in which the birth rate exploded in Brazil reaching adulthood without many ethnic references, and the emergence of metropolises without a minimum infrastructure which have received extremely high immigration in recent decades;
- 5 ■ The media, with their power, which collaborate in the defense of violence;
- 6 ■ Worldwide globalization, with the contesting of the idea of borders; and organized crime (drug traffic, possession and use of firearms, etc.).

I would add another factor, characteristic of and specific for the large Brazilian cities: the organization of the drug traffic (disputes over the expansion of territory and power, war between gangs) and its connections with other kinds of crimes (smuggling, money laundering, corruption of public agents, etc.)

Thus, the complexity involving the phenomenon of violence is obvious, as is consequently the difficulty, or almost impossibility, of the communication professional covering momentary events, in approaching all these issues in the presentation of every news item on the subject. This is without taking into account other difficulties in approach, such as the reduced space or time to present the news; pressures coming from publishers and editors-in-chief; the not always admissible interests of the telecommunication companies, among others. Furthermore, we cannot forget the newsrooms' annoying routine, which does not permit the improvement and continuous learning on the part of the communication professionals.

Breaking down prejudices and instituting a new practice

There is a deeply rooted tradition in newsrooms that the coverage of topics involving violence and criminality is "police" coverage. With

the growing process of more profound discussion of public security problems, this type of posture needs to be revised. In this endeavor all the actors involved in the matter (journalists, public security operators and researchers) should free themselves from the “absolute truths” which surround them, moving toward a new relation between the parties, based mainly on everybody’s right to qualified, transparent and ethical information about matters which involve the phenomena de violence and criminality.

Police journalism is still a “marginal” area in the communication media. The professionals who cover this area form a kind of caste, viewed with reservations. The presumption exists that this is not a very lofty area (the class of journalists gives more importance to matters linked to politics and to the economy). Many of those who perform “police” coverage are novice reporters or older ones who have not adapted to the modernization of the communication processes.

The police desks continue to be, with extremely rare exceptions, the nurseries and the graveyards of the newsrooms. Media owners and operators need to understand once and for all that the time when crimes were “police matters” has passed. They are events that impact the public security sphere and therefore influence the citizens’ quality of life, and as such deserve qualified treatment, as lofty as that given other matters.

A revealing research work

Taking into consideration the decisive role of the communication media in democracies for the agenda-setting of public policies, the Center for Security and Citizenship Studies (CESEC) of the Candido Mendes University decided to perform a diagnosis of how newspapers cover violence in Brazil in January 2004.

The research coordinators, Silvia Ramos and Anabela Paiva, pointed out some results of the diagnosis which analyzed texts circulated by the newspapers *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Estado de S. Paulo*, *Agora São Paulo*, *O Globo*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *O Dia*, *Estado de Minas*, *Diário da Tarde* and *Hoje em Dia* during 35 days, spread throughout five months of the year 2004 (May to September). On the average, the total daily circulation of the nine papers is 1.2 million copies. The study and other research data are available on the CESEC site.

On analyzing 2,514 texts, the researchers perceived that “the newspapers do not cover violence with the same intensity. The profile of the texts analyzed also indicated that the newspapers had refrained

from enriching the coverage of violence and security with some types of approach. The spaces which the papers analyzed devoted to opinionative texts on these topics were very reduced during the period of the research. There were extremely few editorials (1.4%), articles (1.2%) and columns (.3%) on the topic. More than a quarter (27%) of the coverage was composed of short informative notes, without any type of contextualization”.

Regarding the main subjects dealt with by the newsrooms, the researchers concluded that “the security forces – among which are included several police organizations (Federal, State militarized, detective and technical bodies), the Armed Forces and the municipal guards – are the protagonists of the news, being the subject of 40.5% of the texts. The other dominant topic was the violent act in itself, the subject of 21% of the news stories. The consequences and repercussions of these acts added up to 16.2% - that is, 37.2% of the coverage was focused on crimes. But the analysis of the news stories should be considered not only because of what was covered but also because of what was not. Important topics such as violence as a socio-cultural-political phenomenon (3.3%) and human rights (2.4%) appeared very seldom. Also the small number of news reports and articles based on statistics and research drew our attention”.

Nevertheless, according to the researchers, “it is important to recognize that in some Brazilian states, such as Rio de Janeiro, the media are an almost solitary source for external control of police action, taking into consideration that the Complaints Department is virtually non-existent and the internal inspection services are extremely fragile. In synthesis, it can be concluded that there are simultaneous trends underway. On one hand, the volume of news about the topics of violence and public security is significant, indicating the recognition of the importance of the matter, especially in the Rio de Janeiro newspapers. All indications are that most of the newspapers analyzed have ceased to practice the merely *criminal* coverage typical of the former police sections and have begun to deal with violence and public security. In addition, not even the newspapers sold at newsstands have exaggerated in the sensationalism or the appeal for *toughness* against crime in the classic and frequently recurring form of the past. News items which advocate harsher treatment of criminals or restriction of their rights are very rare (.4%) and the number of news stories that try to emphasize society’s feeling of fear in the face of the urban violence phenomenon is small (5.6%)”. Finally, the texts which

allow expression of the idea that it is possible to take justice into one's own hands are negligible”.

The role of the media

The form and content involved in the displaying of the several types of violence by the media should be questioned. Obviously, we are not dealing here with any type of censorship; on the contrary, we are advocating an increasingly more consistent interlocution between communication professionals, researchers of the subject and public security operators.

Nevertheless, we are aware of some exaggerations. For example: a research work by the UNESCO on the displaying of violence in the media and its repercussions on children's lives indicated that the media's function in the perception and practice of aggression is presented in a compensatory context. [UNESCO, 2002. The study sample was formed by an original nucleus of 23 countries in the entire world, in which, according to the size of each one, between 150 and 600 children 12 years old (of both sexes) attending school were studied.]

Depending on personality traits and the children's everyday experiences, violence in the media satisfies different needs: it “compensates” for frustrations and needs amidst problematical environments, at the same time that it offers “emotion” to children who live in less problematical areas. Despite the countless cultural differences, the basic patterns of the implications linked to violence in the media contribute to the development of an aggressive global culture. The “reward characteristics” of aggressiveness are more systematically encouraged than the non-aggressive ways of dealing with life itself, thus making the risk of violence in the media prevail.

Combined with violence in real life, witnessed by many children, there is a high probability that orientations directed toward aggressiveness will be more intensely encouraged than those which encourage peaceful behavior.

Also in areas where the level of aggressiveness is low, the content of violence in the media is presented in a compensatory context. Although children deal with this content in various ways in different cultures, the problem's common cross-cultural line lies in the fact that aggression is interpreted as a good way to solve problems in several situations.

Accordingly, the omnipresence of violence in the media encourages violent actions for resolution of simple everyday conflicts more than peaceful acts respecting others and the actor himself.

And how should this issue be handled?

The media should be the true mirror of the contradictions and conflicts existing in society. It is obvious, therefore, that the issue of public security appears on their agenda as one of the main demands for discussion by Brazilian society today.

Key point: media professionals, public security operators and researchers of the subject should be familiar with the limits and the interests that involve the treatment given to the subject of public security. In this field there is no room for improvisations and amateurisms.

It is also necessary to understand the difficulties in the approaches to such a dense, complex subject, as has been already explained. Therefore, specializing in this type of coverage would be desirable and many press professionals have followed this path (with or without support from the media). The Center for Studies of Criminality and Public Security (CRISP) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), for example, offered in Rio de Janeiro a course for reporters of a national circulation newspaper after the latter's management became convinced of the need for a specialization in the coverage of criminal events in that city. The same path should be followed by communication advisers in criminal court system institutions.

Rigorous evaluation of the dissemination and verification of information regarding crime statistics is also fundamental; whoever produces the news should take into account the scant reporting of several types of occurrences, the political interests which involve the dissemination of news; the obvious biases in analyses performed by operators and specialists.

An irresponsible news item can cause irreparable damage to a community. For example, the simple fact of reporting an increase in crime in a specific district based on the population's perception, without verifying with more perceptiveness what this situation could bring about: reduction in the real estate prices in that place; deterioration of the population's quality of life due to fear and the increased perception of local violence; greater fragility in social relations, among other things. On the other hand, hiding, omitting or disguising information on crime can signify effects as perverse as or even worse than those mentioned above,

including objective risks to people's lives. Therefore, when revealing data, reporting criminal events and approaching certain matters involving violence and criminality, it is necessary to think about the consequences of this type of information.

Finally, the role of the press in public security coverage is of fundamental importance for the improvement of public policies in this area. Despite possible limitations, we have noted that the media have taken great care in the handling of this subject, which has greatly contributed to the improvement in the relations between public security operators, researchers and communication professionals.

Robson Sávio Reis Souza is a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of the State of Minas Gerais (PUC-Minas), Master of Public Administration, specialist in social communication, in studies of criminality and public security; coordinator of Communication and Information at the Center for Studies of Criminality and Public Security (CRISP) at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG).