

Melbourne's 'African Gangs' and Media Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the racialised media coverage of so-called 'African Gang' Crime in Melbourne, Australia. It argues that we can usefully examine such media coverage as a risk communication where relevance and authority comes from experiential rather than expert media voices. In the case of the Australian television program *A Current Affair's* coverage of this issue, when examined through the theoretical lens of parrhesia, experiential knowledge was found to be dominant. It was found that expert voices, such as those of the Victorian police were problematised by this media coverage. It is concluded that in this case, attempts by expert voices to undermine experiential media narratives were unsuccessful.

Keywords: African gangs, Risk, Parrhesia, Crime, Experts.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years so-called gang violence in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia has become a frequent topic of both local and national news reports. The nebulous set of crimes that the media frames as "gang' crime' are those that possess an element of violence, occurring in the public sphere or 'on the street', involve several potential offenders, involve young offenders, and are sometimes carried out by an identifiable and recognisable group.

Media reporting of this issue has framed gang violence as a racial crime (Majavu, 2018; Nolan, Burgin, Farquharson, & Marjoribanks,

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2016). With Melbourne gang violence, the media identify the gang members as 'African' or some iteration of that label. From this, the crimes are classified as 'African' crime, constituting a racialisation of these crimes by the media (Majavu, 2018).

As with other examples of racialised crime coverage (see Martin, 2015; Poynting, Noble, & Tabar, 2001; Tufail & Poynting, 2013), a moral panic seems to be taking place (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson & Clarke, 2013). A key difference, and one that differentiates the coverage of this issue, is the role of the Victorian police. While the terms 'African' and 'gang' gained popularity with the media, the Victorian police maintained an alternate public position, stating they would not label these crimes as 'gang' or 'African' related (Wahlquist, 2018). As expert voices and what Hall *et al* (2013) would consider primary definers of deviance as part of a moral panic, the Victorian police have rejected the media narrative. A question remains however, about how effective this has been in shifting related media narratives.

This paper provides an analysis and critical discussion of some recent media coverage concerning 'African crime gangs' in Melbourne, Australia. While this coverage has been extensive, this paper examines the television program *A Current Affair (ACA)*. Race remains a central issue in this coverage and an important point of analysis, however this analysis uses a model of 'parrhesia' to focus on a separate issue, the authority of experiential knowledge when utilised in media coverage of crime. Parrhesia refers to rhetorical speech acts where judgements about the truth of information are informed by who the speaker is rather than the validity of the information provided (Foucault & Pearson, 2001). The term experiential knowledge here refers to the use of non-experts as the perspective-favoured voice of the media. Media coverage of crime may often incite the perspective of the victim, however, here experiential knowledge refers to information provided by a range of voices who are sharing their experiences, even when this is not a direct experience of crime victimisation.

This paper utilises the above approach to examine recent media narratives about gang violence in Melbourne and assesses if and how

experiential rather than expert discourse is used to frame gang violence as a type of risk. A further aim of this paper is to ascertain how the role of the police is presented by the media regarding ‘gang’ violence when the media narrative is constructed in a risk context.

CRIME IN THE MEDIA AS ‘EVERYDAY’ RISK

News programs that present more in-depth coverage and “current affairs”, such as *ACA* are not required to include the voice of experts, nor information delivered by experts. Rather, a more familiar presentation is one where someone with a particular experience provides the bulk of information to the audience. This is not limited to information about crime or victimisation, however this is one way programs such as *ACA* present such stories to their audience. When presented this way, the character can be understood as presenting experiential information about a risk, which may include some information about how to manage or negotiate that risk.

Over the past two or three decades, it has been widely argued that risk is becoming increasingly central to the management of our lives. In particular, this period which Beck (1992) has called “late modernity”, is a time where ‘one is no longer concerned with attaining something good but rather preventing the worst’ (Beck, 1992, p. 49). It is argued that the need to avoid negative outcomes has become a central and necessary mode of late-modern living (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1990).

The risk society theory of Beck (1992, 2006, 2009) suggests the management of everyday risks is a central part of ‘reflexive modernity’. It is important to note at this stage of reflexive modernity we are inherently risk-averse. From this “reflexive” standpoint everything is a possible risk. Even the need to avoid risk becomes a risk demanding to be managed. We manage these risks in an environment where the information guiding the management of everyday life is removed from traditional social structures (Beck, 1992; Beck, Bonss, & Lau, 2003; Beck et al., 1994). Individuals are concerned with living a prudent, risk-averse life—what sort of job

should I get, who should I marry, what sort of washing machine powder will make my clothes the brightest, who do I vote for to keep me safe from terrorism? Broader risk-focussed questions may concern the late-modern individual as well—am I safe from crime, are the police doing a good job? According to this older risk society position, late modernity leaves us to navigate these risks and the questions they raise with little certainty and without recourse to expert knowledge (Beck, 1992).

Examinations of risk and everyday life by theorists drawing on governmentality theory provides a further conceptual framework. These theorists draw on the theoretical legacy of Foucault (see Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1988; Foucault, Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; O'Malley, 2009, 2012). Unlike the risk society view of risk, governmentality theorists view expert knowledge as part of a discourse system which affords a continuing source of certainty and is still relevant for managing risk (O'Malley, 2009, 2012). Proponents of the governmentality position argue that the self-disciplining and—due to neoliberalism—increasingly self-responsible subject manages risk according to expert and state-produced discourse (Dean, 1999; O'Malley, 2009, 2012).

The management of everyday risk, including keeping safe from crime, may not qualify as a “large-scale” risk; however, such behaviour can highlight how self-disciplining subjects manage everyday risks. Further, when presented as an everyday risk, the threat of crimes including the gang violence presented by the media examined here may transform this crime from exigent threat to be feared by the audience to everyday risk with little certainty in how it should be ‘managed’.

Regardless of form, the media has often been conceived of, and analysed as, an institution that can reveal something about the reproduction of cultural and social knowledge. In this sense the media, and in particular the “mass” media, has been examined as a mediator of various social/cultural artefacts and presumed necessities including ideology, social reality, cultural forms and discourse, to name a few (Holmes, 2005). A starting point for examining risk communication considers the role of

the media in terms of its ability to influence individual understandings of social phenomena.

MEDIA RISK NARRATIVES – EXPERIENCE VERSUS EXPERTISE

There have been significant shifts in news formats and distribution mediums, with the rapid growth of online news and the distribution of news through social media (Newman, Levy, & Nielsen, 2015; Watkins et al., 2015). Some suggest that this change provides some possibility for democratised risk information and that expert knowledge may no longer hold sole dominance among debated opinion (Bruns, 2015; Carlsson & Nilsson, 2016; Ceron, 2015; Hermida, Witschge, Anderson, Domingo, & Hermida, 2016). The position of this paper is that this is not a new phenomenon, despite the rapid expansion of information flowing through non-traditional media channels.

Traditional media formats, such as the television sources like *ACA*, can still be understood as reflecting this move away from certainty and expert knowledge. The late modern subject remains ‘set adrift’ among competing and debated information sources, forced to fend for themselves to navigate an increasingly risky world. Narrative news information uses experiential proxies in answer to reflexive audiences actively seeking non-expert information sources. Missing from this picture of the individual wading through a sea of information about risks, which take the form of competing discourses, is a way to conceptualise how this type of information gains authority.

Expert opinion has been a trusted source that helps form an individual’s sense of the world. However, at different moments in history, the relationship between the self-constituting subject and games of truth telling as an activity has shifted, as evident in Foucault’s example of the earliest mentioned parrhesiastic act in classical Greek literature. Here, ‘parrhesia’ is understood as a speech act, or conveyance of information, where the status or position of the speaker influences the perceived

validity, or truth, of the information. There have been historical changes that have led to a shift in truth telling as an activity which has the self-constituting subject as central through truth telling activities focussed on the care of the self. The self-constituting subject, so central to the workings of governmentality, pre-dated the governmental and liberal revolutions of the 16th and 17th centuries. It was this self-constituting subject that was laid siege to by expert discourse or knowledge throughout modernity (Foucault, 1988). It is the status of the speaker (expert) rather than the logical validity of the information provided that grants the information some authority.

Recent trends in social theory suggest that the relationship between expert knowledge and perceptions of truth has become problematised. As discussed above, the theoretical position of those such as Beck and Giddens, who discuss a late modern self-constituting subject, remain somewhat blind to the problem of truth telling from a Foucauldian point of view.

While there is confusion as to the role of experts in late modern discourse in the work of Beck (Mythen, 2004), these theorists agree that the late modern subject is a reflexive one who is assumed free to build their own life biography by choosing from a variety of information sources. This freedom is due to the evolution of late-capitalist societies and a resulting loss of trust in expert or scientific discourse. This expert discourse, if we look to the earlier work of Foucault, was instrumental in guiding our view of the world and provided a paradigm for the self-constituting subject to 'care for the self'. When considering this change and risk, O'Malley argues:

Governmental studies and analyses have been overwhelmingly concerned with risk and its encroachment into contemporary governance, and have rarely examined 'uncertainty' in detail. In part, this aversion to analysing uncertainty as a way of governing is based on the general hostility to the grand theoretical character of the risk society theorists for whom

uncertainty is a central concept. This takes its most specific form in a rejection of the idea of a rigid binary between calculable (risk) and ‘incalculable’ (uncertain) technologies of governance (O'Malley, 2012, p. 14).

This leaves the question of truth claims “hanging” in late modernity. Contemporary risk theorists such as Beck and Giddens identify what they considered disenchantment with expert knowledge, due in-part to its unintended consequences. The above extends this analysis if we consider this not as disenchantment but more precisely a problematisation of that parrhesiastic truth game, diminishing the validity of expert voices. This suggests that it is the contemporary negotiation of risk and uncertainty that promotes a lack of trust in expert knowledge.

It is useful to apply the above lens when considering how an audience comes to understand media information about crime. Positioning the characters as experiential proxies creates relevance for the viewer. When the viewer can relate to the victim, there may be heightened relevance. It will be seen as important to the viewer for reasons that go beyond simple heuristics, and this should be considered as driving relevance for the audience separate to sensationalised presentation, though this content is often sensationalised. It is important to the audience’s everyday lives because it applies to their navigation and management of risks. Through positioning the characters of these stories as a victim, there is a discourse of self-responsibility being drawn on.

MELBOURNE’S ‘AFRICAN’ GANGS AND THE ROLE OF THE POLICE

Media coverage of assumed ‘African’ gang crime in Melbourne has adopted familiar forms, using familiar framing techniques. The images shown are often not related to the direct experiences of the victim though these would be present when available. CCTV footage of street level altercations, burglaries, muggings and shoplifting are common elements.

ACA coverage of gang crime presents other crimes, with no clear link to gang crime, as evidence of an out-of-control crime problem. An example of this aired on *ACA* on the 20th July 2016 in a story titled “Enough is enough!: Now, the desperate families forced to arm themselves after a spate of violent home invasions.” The introduction to this story went as follows:

Now, the desperate families forced to arm themselves after a spate of violent home invasions. Tonight why they bought baseball bats and other weapons, fearful of Apex Gang attacks. These families they mean business. (“Enough is Enough!” 2016)

There is a further introduction by reporter, Reid Butler, which situates this story within a crime risk management narrative. Butler adds to the story introduction by highlighting that “these families’ will protect themselves even if it means breaking the law. They are not afraid of taking the law into their own hands if it means keeping everybody safe” (“Enough is Enough!” 2016)”

There is a distinction made throughout this story between the information provided via the voice of the police as compared to the information provided through the voice of community members. An opening scene comes from a Victoria Police media conference where the viewers are told that police appreciate that people are scared. This is then cut between street corner interviews of community members that focus on perceived failures of the justice system. The common theme presented is one of a failing justice system evidenced through quotes such as ‘everyone can get away with everything now’ and “there definitely has been an increase in crime” (“Enough is Enough!” 2016)

Media coverage that draws on the narrative of a failing or dysfunctional justice system has been discussed in research regarding the media and ideal victims (Greer, 2007). Ideal victims of crime are presumed to engender great levels of sympathy and are covered in the media accordingly. These victims often possess certain characteristics that make them ‘ideal’—worthy of broad public sympathy. Greer (2007)

identifies these characteristics as innocent, often young, random, and relatable. An ideal victim is one that shares no blame and is not culpable for the crime. In this story, the narrative does not assess victim culpability in relation to those categories that define whether a victim is deserving or undeserving of our sympathy. There is no focus on characteristics such as race, gender, social demographics, occupation, location, time of the offence. Rather, vigilantism takes on a contemporary risk management dimension where citizens are responsabilised and watchful (Walsh, 2014), while also being presented as a response to a threat to institutional norms (Johnson, 1996). The media examples above reinforce these points with content that does not include racially diverse voices. The experiential voices are presented as representative of the management of ‘everyday’ risk, while constructing Melbourne’s African community as ‘others’.

The broader discourse drawn from coverage of crimes affecting ‘ideal victims’ is one of failure – a failure of the justice system, the state or the community to protect the victim. Agents of the state, such as the police or the courts, are assumed to have failed, or perhaps policy has failed, allowing the offender to be ‘out on bail’ rather than incarcerated. The media coverage of gang crime in Melbourne also draws on a notion of the ideal victim, however the characteristics of the ideal victim here can be understood in a risk management context. Victims are presented as ideal by virtue of the nature of the crime itself – gang violence. It is not, however, accurate to assume that all gang violence or similar crimes would target random strangers. It is the voices of those who may become victims informing audiences of the risk of becoming a victim.

In the case of ‘African’ gang violence in Melbourne there has been a related narrative built around police responses. As discussed earlier, there was a great deal of political debate and finger-pointing leading into the 2018 Victorian state election. More common, and more enduring, is a media narrative focussed on potential failures of the police to deal with these crimes, or managing these risks.

On 22nd May 2017, *ACA* ran a story about a home invasion, suggesting it was carried out by an ‘African gang’. In this story, titled “Apex vigilante: Guilio says he's an ordinary dad forced to go to

extraordinary measures, to protect his family and neighbors [sic] from the notorious Apex gang”, the victim was framed as an ideal victim and the failure of the justice system served as an explanation for the crime. Presented through the experience of the victim, a narrative is developed that frames the crime as a failure of the police and the state/justice system more broadly. The police become emblematic of a problematic justice system.

As seen earlier in the story where the narrative focussed on direct vigilantism, there is an interplay between specifying the victim, or potential victim, must ‘take matters into their own hands’ and implying a failure of the justice system. In this story however, the victim states a need to deal with crime risk themselves as the police not only failed to protect, but have failed in their response (a warning to the viewers). The victim status translates into a layer of authority where the victim’s experience is now presented as authoritative – to be trusted.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND THE POLICE AS BLOCKED RISK NEGOTIATORS

Following the presentation of a failed justice system, and the failure of the police and the state to protect, a new media narrative emerged. This was coverage that included both the above-mentioned victim narratives, contradictory media statements by the police, and an ongoing political debate. There were two shifts in this coverage that deserve attention here.

The first shift occurred in the lead up to the 2018 Victorian state election where law and order political debate refocussed attention towards presumed gang violence. Media coverage increased nationally during 2018 due in-part to comments made by federal politicians including then Home Affairs minister, Peter Dutton, and then Prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull. In a now widely circulated interview broadcast on radio station 2GB in January 2018, Peter Dutton claimed “people are scared to go out to restaurants of a night time because they are followed home by these gangs” (Karp, 2018). A broader attack on Victorian justice administration

and the Victorian Labor government followed: "... the state government's wrapped its police force up in this politically correct conversation - which I think they're trying to break out of and they are trying to do the right thing" (Karp, 2018).

Turnbull, then Prime Minister, in an interview aired on radio 3AW in the days that followed, added "I've heard people, colleagues from Melbourne say there is real anxiety about crime in Melbourne... You'd have to be walking around with your hands over your ears in Melbourne not to hear it" (Remeikis, 2018).

Then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull also stated publicly:

But what it is lacking is the political leadership and the determination on the part of Premier Andrews to make sure the great policemen and women of Victoria have the leadership, the direction and the confidence of the government to get on with the job and tackle this gang problem on the streets of Melbourne and, indeed, throughout other parts of the state (Remeikis, 2018).

This first shift then is one where political debate constructs the Victorian police not as "failed" risk negotiators, as seen in the media coverage examined above, but as "blocked" risk negotiators. Media coverage began to imply that the police were the victims of 'political correctness' with the implication that there has been a process of 'hiding the truth' and the allegation that they are 'not allowed to do their job'.

Perhaps the most powerful driver of the shift in media coverage that positions the police as potential victims of 'political correctness gone mad' is the way the ongoing police message concerning 'African gangs' undermined one part of a predictable cycle. Inserting political discourse into the debate reinforced this. The messages of Dutton and Turnbull were important signifiers to both the media and viewers that rather than being a failure of the police to negotiate risk on behalf of the community, the police were instead, themselves, the victims of a larger failure. The constant declarations by the Victorian Police that there was no 'African gang' problem had not interrupted ongoing media coverage that mirrored the

expected features of a more traditional moral panic. Rather than shifting media narratives away from risk-focussed coverage, increased politicisation of the issue allowed the media to present the lack of police support of their chosen narratives as an outcome of external pressure. This reinvigorated media coverage as this new narrative seemed to support the media's earlier position.

Programs such as *ACA* began running stories that implied that the Victorian police were not allowed to deal with the 'African crime gang' problem. In 2018 *ACA* ran multiple stories that highlighted this new narrative. Stories with titles such as "Sickening: Gang attack: Even the debate about gang violence in Melbourne is heated. How bad is it?" and "Proud Australians: It's an issue that's divided the nation - how to deal with violence committed by youths of African descent on the streets of Melbourne" were presented by *ACA* throughout the early stages of 2018. All carried the theme that police were being held back. This culminated in the story "Cops gone soft?: From gang violence and home invasions to smash-and-grab robberies and organised crime police have their work cut out for them" which aired in May 2018. In this story, *ACA* presented the familiar victim experiential narrative and followed this by interviewing a panel of former high ranking Victorian Police officers. One of whom stated "It makes me shake my head... It makes me ashamed, the position the Victorian police have gotten themselves in" ("Cops gone soft?" 2018).

The narrator follows this with:

...he says he greatly respects rank and file members but suggests they're afraid to act on young offenders, particularly African ones because they are worried about repercussions from management ("Cops gone soft?" 2018).

As the public view of a group criminalised by the media becomes increasingly negative, demands for some sort of intervention from the public also increase. In a successful moral panic there would be an official response where the state increases sanctions/interactions against the criminalised group. The media examples detailed above demonstrate that the media reporting met these criteria, but was to some extent forced to

work around the police and their refusal to align publically with the media narrative.

CONCLUSION

This examination of *ACA*'s coverage suggests that while several voices are found in the public debate about 'African' gang crime in Melbourne, particularly when focussing on media narratives, some carry more authority. Of interest is the use of experiential victim narratives as a key element of related media coverage. Victim narratives in this context refer to the recounting of the experience of being a victim of crime or, as was often the case, communities or individuals convinced of their risk without direct experience. The recounting of experience as the main voice in reporting is not confined to coverage of crime, however when privileged by the media, experiential narratives can take on authority for risk averse, self-disciplining audiences. Further, experiential narratives in representations of crime exist in a relationship with other competing voices and competing narratives, including more specific expert voices such as the police.

The creation of relevance is commensurate with acceptance on the behalf of the viewer that they too are at risk of becoming victims or being drawn into a similar position. Thus, through parrhesiastic truth games, the viewer is compelled to accept the subject position of the narrative as a type of self-regulation. It would be deviant and irresponsible to ignore such information. Therefore, this type of information, provided through experiential proxies, can be defined as having governmental authority.

This discussion has explained how both media coverage and public opinion about 'African' gang crime has remained both a sensationalised and racialised topic despite official responses to the contrary. There may have been an expectation on behalf on the Victorian police that their sustained rejection as experts would have stifled the media narrative. However, this rejection gained little traction in the lead up to the 2018 state election. While there has since been a more sustained critique levelled at this coverage, media content between 2016 and 2018, as discussed here,

demonstrates that when negotiating perceived crime risks, experiential knowledge rather than expert knowledge holds significant authority and remains resistant to official attempts to undermine key narratives about risk.

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