The influence of newspaper presentations upon the growth of crime and other antisocial activity

Fenton Frances
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

(1) STATEMENT OF PROBLEM; (2) EXPLANATION OF STAND-POINT; (3) PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

1. The present study is an attempt to investigate the question, How and to what extent do newspaper presentations of crime and other anti-social activities influence the growth of crime and other types of anti-social activity? That is, do people get the idea of, or the impulse to, committing criminal and other anti-social acts from the reading of such acts or similar acts in the newspapers? It is not necessary at this point to define criminal acts any further than to say that, although they vary somewhat in different states and at different times, penal codes adequately define them as "an act or omission to act forbidden by law and punishable upon conviction." The expression, "other anti-social acts" refers to activities not technically criminal, but perhaps immoral in character, and detrimental to group life, which have not yet, and may never, become incorporated in penal codes.

It is not possible, of course, to make a catalogue of these acts here. The following definitions of the term anti-social will make its meaning, as here used, clearer. *The Century Dictionary and Encyclopedia*, quoting Giddings,1 defines anti-social as, "Specifically in sociology, pertaining to a class of persons devoid of normal social instincts and showing criminal tendencies," and also, anti-sociality as "A quality, act, or habit of an individual, class, or group which is antagonistic to social feeling, habit, or interest. Extreme anti-sociality is criminality."2 In a later chapter the relations as above suggested

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1 Principles of Sociology (Macmillan, 1896), 72.

2 The definition of anti-sociality quoted by the dictionary is taken from the Amer. Jour. Psych., XIII, 586. It is a serious defect in Bliss's Encyclopaedia of Social Reform that it contains no definition of anti-social or anti-sociality.
of anti-social to technically criminal acts will be discussed, and what is meant by "news of crime and other anti-social activities" will be worked out in detail.

The causal relationship implied in the question proposed above, "Do people get the idea of, or the impulse to, committing criminal and other anti-social acts from the reading of such acts or similar acts in the newspapers?" is intended to include in general all the influences of newspapers upon anti-social activity, both conscious and unconscious on the part of the person so influenced, and more specifically those influences coming from the general-news section, to a consideration of which this study is mainly limited. That is, it includes (1) cases of so-called pure suggestion in which the person affected is unaware, in part or wholly, of the part the newspaper account has had in influencing his activity; (2) cases in which the person consciously models his act upon a similar act related or described in the newspaper; and (3) cases in which newspaper accounts have had an influence in the gradual building-up of standards, ideals, images, which are partial, even if only remote, causes of anti-social activity.

The aspect of the newspaper question here dealt with has been distinctly limited to the problem as above stated, and to the attempt to get actual evidence for or against the assumption made so generally today, that the newspaper has an influence, through suggestion, upon the growth of crime and other anti-social activity. Many other phases of newspaper influence as a social factor of immense importance need scientific investigation. But in this particular study no attempt is made to deal with them, nor is any attempt here made to discover what is the chief difficulty with the newspaper, nor the causes of the difficulty or difficulties.

Various aspects of the newspaper problem have been receiving a large share of attention recently in the magazines. There is a widespread conviction that something is wrong with the newspaper, but a great variety of opinion as to what the core of the trouble is. The newspaper is charged with being "com-

*Cf. chap. iv.*
mercial," "sensational," "dishonest," "trivial," "impertinent," "vulgar," "suggestive," etc. Theodore Roosevelt (quoted by J. E. Rogers in *The American Newspaper*, Pref., p. ix) has said that newspapers "habitually and continually and as a matter of business practice every form of mendacity known to man, from the suppression of the truth and the suggestion of the false to the lie direct." Some writers bring all of these indictments mentioned above against the newspaper, while others limit their charges against it to some one of them, such as that it does not give the news, that it is commercially dishonest, etc.\(^4\)

Professor Ross has recently written:

Most of the criticism launched at our daily newspapers hits the wrong party. Granted they sensationalize vice and crime, "play up" trivialities, exploit the private affairs of prominent people, embroider facts, and offend good taste with screech, blare, and color. But all this may be only the means of meeting the demand of "giving the public what it wants." The newspaper cannot be expected to remain dignified and serious now that it caters to the common millions, instead of, as formerly, to the professional and business classes. To interest errand-boy and factory girl and raw immigrant, it had to become spicy, amusing, emotional, and chromatic. For these, blame then, the American people.

There is just one [italics here are mine] deadly, damning count against the daily newspaper as it is coming to be, namely, *It does not give the news*. For all its pretensions, many a daily newspaper is not "giving the public what it wants." . . . . As usual, no one is to blame.\(^5\)

In making this statement, the author of *Social Control* takes a vulnerable position, both sociologically and factually. On the one hand, he falls into the rather common and uncritical popular error of stating that the character of the newspaper of today is the result of a response to popular demand and at the same time contradicts himself by declaring that the one essential criticism of the newspaper is that it does not give the news which the public demands. It is mere conjecture to pick out certain characteristics of newspapers and to assert that they are what the public wants. The public buys the paper as it is. It is no more possible to show that the public does not

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want absence of news than to show that it does want sensationalism. Speculation as to what the public wants does not offer a good social criterion of what to give the public.⁶

The suggestive power of the newspaper through its accounts of anti-social activities, through its comic supplements, through its possible influence on children, on the weak and unstable, on women, etc., has been emphasized by a number of writers.⁷ The psychology of suggestion has been mentioned in this connection and explained in a popular way.⁸ Also on this assumption, various practical steps have been taken to protect certain classes of people mentioned above from the effects of newspaper suggestion to anti-social activity. An example of this is to be found in the following statement from a letter written by Mr. F. G. Pettigrove, President Massachusetts Prison Commission, that “no daily papers are given to prisoners in the state prison or reformatories” of Massachusetts, and also “it is the general policy of penal institutions in America not to admit a daily newspaper.”

Mrs. Isabel C. Barrows, in an article entitled “Papers and Magazines in Prisons and Reformatories,” says that at first no newspapers were allowed in prisons.

In old times this was considered a deserved part of his [the prisoner’s] punishment. Afterward religious reading was allowed in prisons. Still later some prisons permitted the ordinary newspapers to come within the walls, though the better-managed institutions limited them to the county papers. The sensational yellow journals with their exaggerated delineations of crime, their atrocious stories appealing to scandal-mongers, are not allowed in any well-conducted prison. By their harmful influence they


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help to fill the prisons, but the abnormal taste for such reading is never gratified while men are behind the bars.9

She says also, that stories of crime are not included in the papers printed in these institutions.

The present problem is a phase of the general problem of the control of stimuli to activity for the purpose of diminishing crime. It is scarcely necessary to point out the importance of this problem. However, a few general statements will indicate how important it is, as well as emphasize its connection with the present study.

We know very little as yet about the way in which habits grow up in the individual. Orthodox psychology, while it has given us many conclusions which are of value for social practice, has centered its attention almost exclusively on conscious processes in the individual and, with the exception of the studies of certain French and American writers10 who have definitely treated suggestion and hypnotism, but who in only a few cases may be classed as orthodox psychologists, has dealt very slightly with the unconscious and only slightly conscious activities which form so large a part of our conduct.11 Any valid control of conduct, individual or social, must be based on a knowledge of this unconscious source of our stimuli to activity, as well as on a knowledge of conscious processes.

Little as we know in detail of the way in which habits are unconsciously acquired or grow up in the individual (because we know so little of what the individual starts out in life with), we do know the general fact that habits are unconsciously as well as consciously acquired, and that a part, at any,


10 Notably Binet, Janet, Ribot, LeBon and Sidis, Ross, James, Morton Prince.

rate, of the material out of which they grow are the social stimuli with which individuals come in contact—other people's activities, the drama, literature, art, newspapers, etc. We have enough evidence, certainly, to be sure that social control, the control of conduct, is in large part the control of unperceived stimuli to conduct, especially early in the lives of individuals. We are just beginning to evaluate our education, our drama, our novels, and our other forms of art and social stimuli on an objectively social basis and thus on a functional basis. The really preventive and constructive work of the juvenile court and of juvenile protective associations, as well as that of other ameliorative and preventive organizations, such as the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, is really based on this principle, that of pushing preventive measures as far back in the environment as possible, and thus of controlling the conscious and unconscious formation of habits.

In this process of evaluation, the newspaper as a social factor of immense importance must be included. For the reason, then, that the newspaper is far-reaching in its influence, and that it repeats and includes stimuli from other sources as well, from the drama, the novel, etc., and because of the general conviction that newspapers do incite to antisocial activity, this study has been undertaken.

2. The general standpoint from which the investigation is made is that of a study of both conscious and unconscious suggestion and the effect of such suggestion from a constructively social point of view. It is necessary here merely to state the fact which has been pointed out above, that much of our conduct is of an unconscious and but dimly conscious sort, as compared with fully conscious and reasoned activity; that it is stimulated by a great variety of suggestions, over which

32 The number of daily newspapers in the United States reported by Ayer and Sons' Newspaper Annual and Directory, 1910, is 2,467. On the basis of figures for 1905, the Bulletin of the Bureau of the Census, U.S. Depart. of Commerce and Labor, Table 76, gives the average circulation per issue as 21,079,130. This would allow an average of one paper for every four inhabitants or one paper for every family.

33 Cf. p. 1. In chap. iii this general standpoint will be discussed in detail as a basis for the whole treatment.
we have, as yet, very little control. The process of stimulus and response between newspaper and human activity, which goes on sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, is the subject of study here.

3. The definitions of anti-social matter which have been adopted in this study are functional definitions from a social, rather than from a juridical or conventional, standpoint, that is, definitions based upon the objective results of news rather than upon intent. This is the only valid or exact criterion that can be made use of, because, in the first place, the intent of a piece of news cannot be determined with any exactness, and in the second place, no matter what the intent, the fact of social importance is the result of the news, the way it is taken or the effect it has. There is no necessary correspondence between the intent and the result. A bad intent usually has a bad effect, but a good intent (especially if accompanied by ignorance of actual conditions) may also have a bad effect. The effect is both the socially important and the calculable element, and has therefore been adopted as the basis of the definitions here used.

The use of this basis for the definition of anti-social matter though new in connection with the newspaper question, is not so new in other connections. It has legal precedent back of it, as well as decisions handed down by the New York and English Courts. The Report of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (1895) contains the following:

The common law of England and America for more than a century and a half has been that “what tends to corrupt society is indictable” (p. 20).

The Penal Code of the State of New York, by the use of six adjectives, in most positive language, declares that “obscene, lewd, lascivious, indecent, filthy, and disgusting books, pictures, pamphlets, papers, etc., shall not be sold, lent, or given away, nor shall anyone have in possession for such purposes” (p. 20).

The Supreme Court, General Term, for this district (N.Y.) and the Court of Appeals in a case where nine photographs, which were conceded to have been copied from works of art, were sold and the seller convicted, has defined the law clearly. It said:

“The statute makes the selling of an obscene and indecent picture a misdemeanor.

"There is no exception by reason of any special intent in making the sale.

"It would, we conceive, be no answer to an indictment under the statute for the sale of an obscene picture, that it was sold to a person not liable to be injured by it, or that it was a picture, in respect to execution, of distinguished merit.—People vs. Miller, 96 N.Y. 408" (p. 21).

The Lord Chief Justice of England said, in connection with a book alleged by the defendant to be printed in the interests of Protestant religion, "I think the test of obscenity is this: Whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall" (p. 24).

Likewise, Parmelee, in his Sociology and Anthropology in Relation to Criminal Procedure,\(^\text{15}\) says in discussing a basis for the treatment of the criminal:

Thus gradually moral liberty will be replaced by dangerousness to society as a basis for penal responsibility (p. 101). . . . A study of various kinds of crimes reveals that premeditation and intention do not furnish a complete or universal criterion for crime (p. 104). . . . Moral responsibility should be abolished as a fundamental criterion of criminality and should be replaced by the dangerousness of the criminal to society (p. 212).

In other chapters also he brings out the necessity for an objective, scientific basis for treatment of crime, as the only adequately social criterion possible.

A more detailed explanation of the definitions used will be given in chap. iv. Chap ii will be devoted to a discussion of previous treatments of the problem.

\(^\text{15}\) Macmillan, 1908.