



The  
**Crime and Deviance Channel**  
**Updates: The Role of the Mass Media**

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## The Role of the Media

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, news vendor Ian Tomlinson collapsed and died on a London street - an event that, in itself, would not ordinarily have attracted any national media attention. On this occasion, however, Tomlinson's death occurred during a protest demonstration, aimed at the G20 talks in London, and covered by every UK national news media.



Given the number of news, radio and television reporters present at the demonstration it would be surprising if readers, listeners and viewers were not given a full and clear explanation of the incident – as indeed, after a fashion, they were. However, the way the incident was initially and subsequently reported and explained raises a number of interesting questions of the sociology of crime and deviance we can address here in terms of two areas:

### 1. The Role of the Media in Contemporary Society

Postmodern criminology, when elaborating the role played by the media in the creation of our knowledge and understanding of crime and deviance, looks at the way our perception is shaped by media discourses. For postmodern criminology the crucial point is not whether media discourses are 'true or false', nor whether they 'accurately or inaccurately' reflect the 'reality of crime'; rather, it's how such discourses affect our *perception* of these things. The difference is subtle but significant since it changes the way we understand and explain concepts like 'crime' and 'deviance'. In terms of the Tomlinson incident, two particular forms of media discourse – domination and democratic – can be usefully applied here.

a. **Domination discourses** involve the media mapping out its role as part of the overall 'locus of social control' in society. In other words the 'media machine' is closely and tightly integrated into society's overall mechanisms of formal and informal social control – a level of integration that is mediated, so to speak, by the nature of the political regime within which the media operates:

In totalitarian regimes, for example, the media is likely to be tightly integrated into the locus of control, such that it becomes a largely willing mouthpiece for official propaganda; the discourse of domination is, in this particular context, particularly strong and the classic example here is Germany under National Socialist (Nazi) control in the 1930s



In democratic regimes the role of the media is more ambivalent and, to some extent, ambiguous. In such regimes, the media is both a witting and unwitting mouthpiece for control expression; at times it may willingly co-operate with the demands of control agencies while, at others, it may simply be exploited by control agencies as a means of getting a desired message across to the general population (so-called "spin-doctoring" might be an example here). Media cooperation can be expressed in terms of things like calling for new, *tougher* punishments and criticising 'soft on crime, soft on the causes of crime' approaches. The domination discourse in democratic societies can be characterised as being at the weaker end of the spectrum and a classic example might be the relationship between some aspects of the media and control agencies in contemporary Britain.

Domination discourses, of both the strong and weak varieties, weave a variety of narratives that draw on both traditional forms of punishment (prisons, for example) and newer forms of technological surveillance (CCTV, biometric identity cards and the like) to create a discourse that locates 'criminals' and 'non-criminals' in different physical and moral universes.

In the Tomlinson case there is evidence to suggest that the media – at least in the immediate aftermath of the incident – generally employed a (weak) domination discourse to explain his death, as the following excerpts, taken from a range of newspaper reports (the tabloid “Sun”, the mid-market “Mail”, the up-market “Telegraph” and “Times” and the free London paper “Metro”) on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, suggest:



“Scotland Yard revealed today that Mr Tomlinson was on his way home from work at a newsagents when he collapsed.

*“A Permanent Undersecretary at the Foreign Office, is said to have once remarked to a journalist, You think we lie to you. But we don't lie, really we don't. However, when you discover that, you make an even greater error. You think we tell you the truth”:*

Steve Chibnall “Law and Order News”, 1977.

Officers have said they were pelted with missiles believed to include bottles as they tried to save his life.

Now G20 campaigners have demanded an inquiry into the incident”.

“Ian Tomlinson, 47, a City resident, was on his way home from work at a newsagent's when he collapsed near the Bank of England just before 7.30pm yesterday.



A Metropolitan Police spokesman said officers had to move the casualty away for urgent treatment after bottles were thrown at them by protesters. He was later pronounced dead at hospital.

It has now been referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission for investigation”.

## The Daily Telegraph

“The protester was understood to have been close to the police cordon at the Bank of England when he stopped breathing just before 7.30pm.

Another protester raised the alarm and police crossed over to help him, but were targeted by missiles and forced to move him to a clear area in front of the Royal Exchange where they gave him CPR. Ambulance crews took him to hospital, but he was pronounced dead at 8pm. “The officers took the decision to move him as during this time a number of missiles – believed to be bottles – were being thrown at them.”

According to one protester at the scene the man was in his 30s and died of natural causes.

The Directorate of Professional Standards at both the Metropolitan Police and City of London Police have been informed. The Independent Police Complaints Commission will also be notified”.



“A man who died at a G20 summit protest suffered a fatal heart attack, police have said.

Ian Tomlinson, 47, collapsed on Wednesday evening as scores of protesters were gathered near the Bank of England in the City of London. The City resident was returning home from his work at a nearby newsagents at the time. Despite receiving treatment at the scene, medics were unable to save him and Mr Tomlinson was pronounced dead later that day in hospital.

The City of London Police said: “A post-mortem examination found he died of natural causes. (He) suffered a sudden heart attack while on his way home from work. A Metropolitan Police spokesman said officers treating Mr Tomlinson had bottles thrown at them by protesters.

The Independent Police Complaints Commission is looking into Mr Tomlinson's death”.

## THE TIMES

“The death of a man during yesterday's protests at the Bank of England is being investigated by the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

The matter was referred to them by both the City of London Police and the Metropolitan Police service. The victim, wearing a T-shirt over a football top, was found by a member of the public unconscious near to St Michael's Alley off Cornhill near the Bank of England just before 7.30pm yesterday.

Police were called over and the officers, wearing helmets and protective clothing, formed a barrier around the man as police medics tried to resuscitate him. The Independent Police Complaints Commission are to examine circumstances of a man's death at G20 protests in City

The Met said that as the officers tried to revive the man they came under attack from protesters who threw bottles at them”.

What is perhaps most interesting about the reports is the extent to which they not only say much the same sort of

thing (which *could* be, but actually isn't, explained by the presence of their reporters on the scene), but also the extent to which the descriptions, observations and language used are remarkably similar. In other words, although different newspapers with quite different demographics (in terms of, for example, the class background of their readers) report the event in slightly different ways (the Times and Telegraph provide more detail than the Sun, for example) they all seem to have drawn the main elements of their stories from the same (official) sources. In reading the reports, for example, there is a clear consensus about the:

- Location of the incident.
- Police going to Tomlinson's assistance.
- Police being "pelted with missiles" by protestors as they tried to provide medical assistance.
- Investigation of the incident by a body "independent" of the police involved in the incident.

These initial reports suggest a willingness on the part of reporters and news editors to uncritically accept and publish explanations provided by official sources (in this instance the Metropolitan Police). Whether this willingness reflects a simple desire on the part of news media to "side" with "the authorities" or a set of operational constraints that leads reporters to use official sources that are only too willing to provide their interpretation of a story (rather than go to the time, trouble and expense of researching an incident for themselves) is a matter for debate. As **Chibnall** (\*1977) suggests, the reality is likely to be a combination of these two processes; where news reporters use official sources because it makes their job quicker, easier and less expensive they come to rely on such sources and, in consequence, are less inclined to do anything that might upset their relationship with these sources (since the threat of withdrawing "official cooperation" is a powerful sanction control agencies are able to use to keep the media "onside").

b. **Democratic discourses** involve the media acting as a *watchdog* on the activities of the powerful – the ability to expose political and economic corruption, for example, or, as in the case of the Iraq war in 2003, to act as a focal point for oppositional ideas. Given the above version of events (printed in the majority of national newspapers and reported on the majority of television news channels) this type of discourse in this particular context may seem out of place; however, the emergence of video footage – shot by a passer-by and subsequently published by The Guardian on their web site ([www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)) - changed the media focus towards a democratic discourse that actively questioned the official version of events and, by extension, the role of the police and the mass media itself in those events.



Click picture to play video

In terms of thinking about the role of the mass media in postmodern society this particular incident provides an interesting example of the way different media discourses may develop and provides an opportunity to discuss the role of the media in terms of the way it handles concepts of crime and deviance. In particular the development of the incident, over a period of days, as new evidence emerged, demonstrates that in "normal situations" the media generally interpret their role as one of supporting the status quo as it relates to crime and deviance – a position that allows, as **Chibnall** (1977) has suggested, control agencies to exploit news management techniques to ensure that "official versions" receive due prominence in the media.



However, the incident also demonstrates that the mass media are not simply instruments of government control; although they tend, for whatever reason, to go first to official sources for information they are clearly open to opposing perspectives and positions – as the critical reaction to the role of the police (and the behaviour of some officers from the Tactical Support Group in particular) clearly shows. In this respect, therefore, the role of mass media can be ambivalent in the sense that although they are broadly supportive of control structures and agencies they can, at times, be highly also be critical of those agencies and the structures that underpin them.

## 2. Surveillance and Sousveillance

The concept of “surveillance” (literally “observation from above”) should be a familiar one to A2 students and the events surrounding the G20 protest demonstrations offer a range of opportunities to show examples of how State surveillance operates in both “normal situations” (the use of CCTV, for example, to watch the behaviour of people going about their everyday lives) and “abnormal situations” (such as a political demonstration where protesters are routinely photographed and videotaped). The Tomlinson incident, however, serves to illustrate two further aspects of “surveillance” in contemporary Britain:

Firstly, what **Mann** (2002) has called “sousveillance” (or “observation from below”). Although one significant feature of late / post modern society (as writers such as **Foucault** have argued) is the increase in population surveillance by social control agencies (a practice that has been facilitated by the rapid development of digital technologies), one important **paradox** of surveillance technology is that it is something that is no-longer monopolised by government agencies and private corporations. On the contrary, developments in digital technology - and in particular the embedding of digital video capabilities into mobile phones – has led to a situation where, in some situations at least, “the observer” can be observed by those they are observing. The Panopticon of control – where the observer could see but not be seen by those being observed - no-longer necessarily operates as it once did. In this respect, the answer to the question “Who watches the watchman?” is now “Potentially anyone who knows how to use a digital camera and can upload video and pictures to the web”.



[Click picture to play video](#)

Sousveillance involves a certain role reversal in the relationship between control agencies (who, historically, have been the Watchmen) and the objects of their attention; where *surveillance* involves control agencies watching citizens, *sousveillance* involves individual citizens watching the activities and behaviour of control agencies (whether official public agencies, as in the Tomlinson case, or “unofficial” private agencies such as supermarkets, car park operators or whoever).

For **Reiner** (2009) the significance of sousveillance in relation to crime and deviance reflects the idea that: “The spread of video and other recording equipment has created an informal means of opening police malpractice to public scrutiny. New surveillance technology has prompted fears of the realisation of the Benthamite dream / Foucauldian nightmare of the ever-seeing Panopticon policing the population. But the spread of video and digital cameras provides a small counter-trend, the recording of official wrongdoing by citizens, dubbed “Synopticon” by Thomas **Mathiesen**...offers a fragile check on Panopticon”.

Secondly, although we’ve suggested that the role of the mass media is one of “surveillance” this, as we’ve also seen, can be a double-edged sword – not only do the media co-operate with control agencies in identifying and stigmatising “control problems” (such as, at various times, illegal immigrants, street beggars, unruly youth (of both the knife and gun-wielding type) and so forth) they also, at times, turn their surveillance gaze on control groups – in this instance the activities of the police and, by extension, the role of political authorities in both giving the police particular powers and failing to ensure control agents and agencies act within the limits of the law.

[Click picture to play video](#)

While sousveillance tends to be (positively) seen as a potential corrective to overwhelming forms of state surveillance, just as the role of the media in contemporary societies can be an ambivalent one, the same is also true of sousveillance; although it is a technique that can be used by ordinary citizens to “reverse the controlling gaze” it can also be used to extend social control in many different ways – the most obvious, perhaps, being the observation of citizens by other citizens. Just as surveillance can be used to protect or pry (or, if you prefer, protect by prying), the same is true of sousveillance – it can be used as an object of liberation (the ability to check the behaviour of control agencies) and oppression (being watched in ways and situations that agencies such as the police can currently only dream of doing).



Linking Material

The material outlined here can be used to illustrate / link into a range of materials and ideas:

**Crime and Deviance Channel:** This material can be used in combination with:



- **Foucault on Surveillance:** Podcast and Audio PowerPoint
- **Consensual Control:** Podcast

• **Textbook: Power and Control** (page 6): **Cohen's** (1979) observations about the new penology and the extension of social controls in contemporary society can be illustrated by using the concept of sousveillance (in particular, the idea of "spreading the surveillance net").

• **Textbook: Power and Control** (page 7): **Shearing** and **Stenning's** (1985) observations about surveillance in postmodern society are relevant here when they talk about four key aspects of surveillance (how it is: **Pervasive, Invisible, Embedded** and **Seamless**).



**Theory and Methods:** The relationship between crime, deviance and methodology can be illustrated using the idea of:

• **Breaching experiments:** Sousveillance experiments (where the "observers are observed" and asked to justify their observation) can be used to give more up-to-date twist on **Garfinkel's** classic (ethnomethodological) breaching experiments – situations where the accepted rules of everyday life are deliberately disturbed (or breached).

