Media, Fear of Crime, and Authority: Focus Groups in Lima (Perú)

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Abstract. Lima's news agenda focuses on the media's exposure and coverage of crime. This paper aims to analyze the relationship between news consumption, fear of crime, and trust in authority. To this end, twelve focus group discussions were conducted with residents of Lima. The findings revealed significant vicarious fear: respondents admitted to feeling greater fear for their children and other relatives as they remembered recent news reports. Additionally, the focus groups related news consumption to a paucity of trust in authority and evidenced a subjective consonance with their environment.

Keywords: News coverage · Insecurity · Vicarious fear · Legitimacy of authority

1 Introduction

Crime-related violence is the highlight of the information diet of Lima's citizens, and the media's spectacularization of such events serves to increase the citizenry's fear of crime [1]. The extant studies do not agree on the relationship between greater news consumption and increased fear of crime [2, 3]. The appropriate addressal of this complex association demands due consideration of the profound changes visible in the contemporary media [4]. The ways in which the media are perceived may be probed through their productive routines, regular coverage, the credibility of their content and enunciators, and modifications effected in their content formats and approaches.

The perception of insecurity stemming from the fear of crime includes both an emotional state of unease and the belief that one is a probable future victim of a criminal act [5, 6]. Additionally, the concept of vicarious fear is incorporated as a serious concern for family members (children, partners, parents) and is much more evident in women [7]. Quantitatively-oriented criminology studies have privileged variables such as victimization, vulnerability, social disorder and disorganization, and sex [8].

In Latin America, the social consequences of crime range from an increase in the perception of insecurity to the erosion of the legitimacy of institutions charged with law enforcement. Further, the contagion effect spreads the civic distrust of authority to other

institutions fulfilling totally dissimilar functions [9]. The spatial scale in the informative treatment becomes relevant in the public perception of the media. In Latin America, the fear of crime is higher at the national plane than at the regional level [4].

The perception of insecurity due to potential violent crime is significant in Perú: fear of crime was 85.5% from May to October 2019; it dropped to 81.8% in 2020 [10]. Despite the fear, a clear gap exists between actual victimization and imagined suffering in the future. Thus, it is pertinent to probe whether this fear is generated by the media coverage, the impact of witnesses [11], or the influence of natural interpersonal communication. A recent study based on the Peruvian situation established discrete effects resulting from the perception of insecurity triggered by levels of violence, noting that damage to physical or sexual integrity generated greater fear than the mere presence of firearms. That study further reported that the adopted protection practices exerted a scant impact on the reduction of fear [12].

Security practices manifest the perception of insecurity. A qualitative study of the lower-income sectors of Lima found that fear and anger predominated these communities. Conversely, the study also indicated that communal surveillance and neighborhood entrance barriers (bars) represented primary protection practices for these communities [11]. An ethnographic approach highlighted the coincidence between a more significant neighborhood-based commitment to community safety and intense crime news coverage [13]. The institutional legitimacy variable proposed by Hernández [9] should be reconsidered in the context of this relationship between news coverage of crime and public perceptions of insecurity. Thus, the following pages propose to examine the relationship between information habits, perceptions of insecurity, and the legitimacy of the law enforcement authority.

2   Agenda-Setting, Fear of Crime, and Legitimacy of the Authorities

The present study is tethered to three conceptual axes: news consumption, fear of crime, and legitimacy of authority. Agenda-setting vis-à-vis news updates was selected as the apt approach for the first aspect, and the extant literature on sociologically oriented criminology was referenced for the other two facets.

In principle, the agenda-setting theory contends that communication media produce public interest issues in a hierarchical manner, privileging some news items over others and controlling news exposure and consumption. In the current context, such agenda-setting actions by the media are not said to be performed to elicit fear; rather, they position the insecurity sensed by citizens on the public agenda [3, 14]. Thus, three conceptual levels emerge: the relationship between the media and public objectives; the ranking of attributes in terms of actors, narrative styles, and frameworks; and agenda melding [14].

First, the need to orient audiences through the relevance and subsequent uncertainly of the agenda is emphasized [15]. Second, certainties are established about the changes in the attributes and narratives relating to news items that increase the public sense of insecurity. For instance, the media may highlight anecdotal reports and exaggerate events to add to distorted representations and exacerbate imagined victimization [16]. Recent research has evidenced that insecurity and violence influence the autonomy of journalists as they produce information [17] and that the ability of news items to incite fear is a relevant predictor of their informational relevance [18].

Third, agenda melding refers to the configuration of each topic of an agenda network to satisfy individual orientation needs. Agenda melding encompasses the combination of traditional and alternative media agenda networks and personal preferences relating to news items [15]. The notion of subjective consonance is added to this view, denoting that people pay increased attention to news that is congruent with their immediate environment [4].

In terms of the perception of insecurity, the search for predictors such as sex, socioeconomic status, and age has been accomplished by quantitative criminology. In this context, the fear of crime is related to four widely studied concepts: victimization, vulnerability, disorder, and social disorganization. It is recurringly hypothesized that victimization increases the feeling of insecurity; however, conclusions are not definitive [19] [20]. Vulnerability describes the risk of victimization due to the severity of the consequences and the potential of controlling situations. It has been classified as personal or physical (sex, age, health), social (race and socioeconomic level), and situational (residence and neighborhood) [21]. Social disorder denotes dysfunctions of the social and physical environment: for instance, the presence of graffiti, vandalism, annoying noise, or prostitution, among other elements [22]. Finally, social disorganization signifies characteristics that make a community unable to achieve social control and tackle crime. Such communities consequently lack social capital and collective efficacy [23].

The variable of trust in the authorities assumes a certain degree of legitimacy and recognition of the role and effectiveness of administrative agencies. Notably, this study alludes to the authorities as national (National Police) and local (Serenazgo, non-armed district security) officials with direct influence to fight crime. Criminological studies regard the impact of trust in the authorities as a non-tangible or non-economic cost. In this sense, scant literature has managed to measure this effect. However, it should be noted that crime exerts a significant influence on interpersonal or institutional trust. In the latter instance, delegitimization extends to institutions that do not influence public security and thus do not affect the legitimacy of democracy [9].

3   Methodology

This study used empirical evidence obtained from testimonies and opinions articulated under group pressure to examine the fear of crime and evaluate and its association with the news media and trust in authority. To achieve this objective, the general research question was posed as, "What role do news media play in relation to the fear of crime and the legitimacy of authority?" The following specific questions were also asked:

(1) "What is the relationship between news consumption and fear of crime?" This question was included because it was deemed essential to ascertain the roles discharged by the different types of fear contemplated by previous studies in the context of intense shifts in information production routines, regardless of whether the media elicit fear in audiences [5–7].

(2) "What is the relationship between news consumption and trust in authorities?" This query was necessitated to measure the scope of the situation apropos chronically weak democracies [9].

(3) "What is the association between reported news items and personal opinions about the authorities?" The notion of subjective consonance was considered pertinent to determine whether the media confirmed an already weakened legitimacy or whether they actively generated the public distrust of the authorities.

This qualitative study adopted an empirical-analytical methodology, which involved deconstructing participant-generated data into three components, fear of crime, agenda-setting, and trust in the authorities. The categories of victimization, vulnerability, and social disorder were taken into account to assess the fear of crime. The distinctions made between the media, the public, and agenda melding were considered for agenda-setting. Finally, trust in the authorities was ascertained by distinguishing aspects related to public security from other representative state institutions. This approach allowed a broad panorama enabling the perception of insecurity in the communicative environment of the respondents.

The qualitative methodology is based on collecting perceptions and interpretations of everyday life. The selected technique for data collection involved focus groups because they allow the compilation of experiences and compel opinions to be articulated in the context of group pressure [24]. The present study was limited to adults aged between 25 and 50 years who were residents of Lima. The qualitative sampling criteria included sex and socioeconomic status identified through residence locations. In total, 12 focus groups were conducted, three for each indicated variable: AB women, AB men, DE women, and DE men.[1] Each focus group comprised an average of eight participants, and a total of 95 people participated in the study.

The focus groups were administered three instruments: (1) a pre-study sociodemographic questionnaire, (2) a focus group guide, and (3) informed consent. The sociodemographic questionnaire purposed to confirm the characteristics of the focus group participants and used a conventional model to collect data such as age, place of birth, current district of residence, and education level.

Table 1. Variables and indicators

Variables	Indicators
Social agenda	National, city, and neighborhood issues
Habits and consumption	Media and credibility
News agenda	News recall and feelings
Expectation toward authority	Feelings toward the police and Serenazgo

The indicators were taken into account by the focus group guide, which was validated in four sessions conducted with three participants, one for each sampling variable.

[1] Socioeconomic levels (SES) are categories formulated by the Peruvian Association of Market Intelligence Companies (APEIM), an entity that groups together market research and public opinion pollsters in Peru. Socioeconomic levels in Peru encompass five levels: A, B, C, D, E; SES A owns the most resources and the SES E has the least resources.

These sessions measured the duration and effects of group dynamics, phrasing, and comprehension of prompts. The validation was performed in January 2018. The instrument was modified according to observations attained during the validation process.

Participants were recruited by personnel charged with verifying characteristics marked by the sampling criteria (age, residence, sex, and education level). The focus groups were held between February 26 and March 3, 2018, at the University of Lima. All the focus group sessions were conducted by the same researcher, who was aided by an assistant in the discussion room to ensure that the group dynamics followed the same guidelines. The sessions were audio and video recorded and lasted around 90 min on average.

The transcripts of the focus group discussions were subsequently processed via NVivo and programmed in three stages: (1) encoding according to the structure of the instrument, (2) axial coding by sampling variables, and (3) coding by research question. Information demonstrating saturation in three areas was prioritized: by focus group, by sample variable, and by theoretical category. Constant comparison analysis was used, and dissent data were eventually released when they contributed new information to the study objective [25]. Finally, the focus groups were conducted within the framework of a mixed study of greater scope. The obtained results were expected to complement the comprehension of behavior. The technological support was meant to compensate for the limitations of other methods [26] in the context of the contributions offered by quantitative techniques [27].

4   Results

The findings of the study are presented in three sections according to the three conceptual cores of the study: habits, fear, and authority legitimacy. Each section outlines the relevant results, prioritizing those that achieved total saturation in every focus group, then stating outcomes that reached saturation by socioeconomic level, and finally revealing the findings by sex.

4.1   Media and News Consumption

News habits must be ascertained to recognize the impact of the media. The participants indicated that they resorted to more than one medium to inform themselves, and they indistinctly combined traditional media with social networks. No one medium was exclusively utilized.

Facebook and television achieved saturation point in all 12 focus groups. Participants agreed about doubts apropos the credibility of Facebook, warning of the presence of fake news. However, the access to media of their choice or the aggregation of content was asserted as an advantage of this platform.

With respect to print media, the participants differentiated between two types of newspapers: the serious and the *chicha* press (popular newspapers). The DE SES evinced a consensus in opining that serious newspapers were reliable even though they do not have the means to buy them. This viewpoint revealed that the dependability of such newspapers was a belief rather than a proven fact. In addition, participants affirmed the predominance of news related to insecurity and crime in popular newspapers:

> Blood, pure blood. For example, I have a colleague […] who sells newspapers. […] and he says, right? Well, today I am happy because I sold enough newspapers, but my newspapers must be dripping blood. If they don't drip blood, I won't sell, he says. […] Pure death. (Male, 30 years old, high school studies, DE SES)

Online newspapers manifested as a consumer trend for the AB SES. Participants designated in this group pointed out that the online versions were identical to the paper newspapers but more easily accessible. They also carried a variety of information, and the participants valued the freedom to select information of their interest.

The women highlighted the immediacy of online news sources over conventional media. While they acknowledged that Facebook was their major source of information, this social network platform was easily accessible and aggregated news items from varied sources, acting in interaction with other media in the information environment. Television did not escape criticism. The men agreed on the loading of sensational items and censored interests described as corrupt in the news coverage:

> In journalism one realizes how badly they work to ask such bad questions, […] they ask a father who is crying "Excuse me sir, and how do you feel about your daughter crying?" Tell me, is that journalism? (Male, 33 years old, university studies, AB SES)

The AB SES women criticized the news coverage, emphasizing the predominance of celebrity-related news reports. Most agreed that the crimes represented the primary news items on television. However, neither the SES nor the sex achieved saturation with respect to this perception.

Unlike the aforementioned media, radio was generally lauded for its credibility. The men from the DE SES underscored that the information provided on the radio was more professional because there were more specialists who dedicated more time to intensively discuss the offered information. The DE SES women also agreed on the news and permanence of the radio, highlighting the live coverage of events.

4.2 News Consumption and Fear of Crime

The responses obtained from the 12 focus group to the question about how media were related to the fear of crime revealed a semantic relationship between the term fear and words such as death, robbery, cell phone, and children. A pattern was consolidated that the news about the theft of money, wallets, or cell phones was the most frightening.

However, respondents used figures, not facts, to reflect the reasons for their fear. The news fed their vicarious fears by intensely projecting imagined scenarios relating to children or relatives. The twelve groups agreed that they felt the most intense fear when news of insecurity caught their attention was the fear that their children or relatives could suffer from a similar incident (vicarious fear). Stressful situations are created from this worry within families as adults attempt to exercise greater control over their children's activities.

> A: I put as an example, the news about the 16, 17-year-old boy who was killed for his cell phone. I very much identify with that because my son spends all day with

a cell phone, so I always tell him if they rob you, hand it over. Several women:
Sure. (Women, 41 years old, university studies, AB SES).

The comments regarding fear of death were more recurrent in the DE SES. The
participants of DE SES and the majority of the BA thought that the news caused fear
for two reasons: first, because they automatically positioned themselves in the situation
narrated on the news as possible victims and/or because the news report resonated with
personal circumstances of victimization they had previously experienced. Most AB SES
groups highlighted the aggression of such events. The majority of the DE SES groups
registered astonishment or indignation at the features of certain events. Besides the actual
robbery or even sexual attack, it is the ferocity of the act that influences fear. People were
perplexed about the rationales for armed robberies or about the fact that some robberies
that resulted in death involved trivial objects like cell phones. The groups also discussed
additional cruelties that accompanied cases of rape, such as the burning of the body or
the death itself.

A: […] because now they not only rape you, now they kill you. Before they raped
you, now they kill you and dismember you, a[…] B: They burn you and[…] A:
They burn you. B: They burn you, rape you and dis[...] (Women, 47 years old,
high school studies, DE SES)

Vicarious fear manifested more strongly in women. AB SES women's groups were
more vocal in displaying their fears, associated experiences, and the likelihood of being
victims.

The aspects mentioned above match attributes that make an incident more news-
worthy in terms of journalism. The news agenda does not report all criminal events; it
disseminates only those incidents that satisfy the characteristics of attracting the most
attention from the audience.

4.3   News Consumption and Trust in the Authorities

The remarks made during the news recall included critiques on the authorities. In the
instance of Perú, two types of agents are specifically linked to the fight against crime: the
police (national) and the Serenazgo (local). The 12 focus groups negatively appraised
the police authorities as corrupted, highlighting aspects such as bribe-taking and even
asserting that the police were sometimes accomplices to crimes. The participants delved
deeper into descriptions of real or imaginary occurrences once a criminal was caught,
showcasing that the justice system was ineffective and favored criminal elements, while
citizens acting in self-defense or police officers who fulfilled their duties suffered judicial
processes.

The system, right? The entire system is corrupt because many times the police
capture them, take them to jail and before the Judiciary. The criminals already
know how much, how much they ask, 10 thousand soles, right? […] Eh, the judges
demand, "Hey, they're offering 15 thousand soles," ok, so criminals sometimes
have their little savings... (Male, 30 years old, master's degree, AB SES)

The 12 focus groups evinced the same stance for the Serenazgo (local authorities), who do not represent trained personnel. The focus groups alleged that they were former criminals hired to better confront criminality.

The AB SES participants were aligned in adversely evaluating the Serenazgo in comparison to the police. Broadly speaking, the participants indicated that the Serenazgo were more disadvantaged as a unit because their powers were limited, and they did not have adequate authority. Nevertheless, they also pointed out that not everything was negative and that much depended on the district. The Serenazgo were respectful and collaborated with security officers in districts that had more resources. The DE SES men highlighted experiences of abuse of authority by the Serenazgo, either because they were wont to treat people badly or because of their abuse of informal vendors. This perception was summarized as the statement that the Serenazg were abusive with street vendors and fearful of criminals. Although the criticism of the authorities was elicited from the news recall, opinions were linked more to the social experiences of participants than to the content projected in the news.

5   Discussion and Conclusion

The feelings associated with crime news coverage are mixed: they lie somewhere between fear and distrust. To answer the general research question about how the media are related to the fear of crime and the legitimacy of authority, the fear is associated with the future probability of a close family member becoming a victim of a crime, and the distrust of authority is based on experience.

This study also posed a specific research question the relationship between the media and fear of crime. A notable aspect of the obtained results concerns the role of vicarious fear as a particular type of fear of crime that relates to news coverage. The present study's results are congruent with Haynes and Rader's findings of the intensity with which this fear affects women [7]; however, the connection of this fear to journalism and news coverage is relevant. The outcomes of the present study indicate that family circumstances add an element that contributes to the increase of fear regarding crimes, especially in the age group represented by the sample.

Another significant facet involves the linking of news coverage to the public agenda. The findings of this study revealed that news reports generate feelings of uncertainty which are expressed as a part of the public agenda. This finding is aligned with the assertions of McCombs [14] and Rodríguez and Quinde [3]. However, the present study highlighted that participants criticized the media they consumed and censored the claims of plurality and depth in news coverage. The relationship of participants with the media and its agenda was not uncritical, and it did not indicate the satisfaction of the needs of the citizenry.

This study confirmed the transformation in editorial narratives: for example, the emphasis on the anecdotal and the exacerbation of imaginary victimization [17, 18]. The in-depth qualitative analysis revealed an alert that should motivate studies focused on media coverage of gender violence. If their news consumption causes women to believe that they can be sexually assaulted and moreover, suffer even more cruel forms

of violence, the extent to which such coverage of cruelty contributes to the normalization, submission, and consent of women to less aggressive but more quotidian forms of violence is worth probing.

Studies conducted by Killias and Clerici [21] have examined the functioning of different types of vulnerability (personal or physical, social, and situational). The present study's findings reveal some of these vulnerabilities in relation to news coverage. The appearance of vicarious fear as imaginary victimization in recalling news items is intimately linked to the vulnerability of women.

The second specific research question inquired about the media and the legitimacy of authority. According to Kessler and Focás [4], national news reports elicit more fear than local items. The present study corroborated the significance of the geographical scale from the perspective of the legitimacy of the security-related authorities from responses received on their types, local or national. The findings suggest that distrust of authority is greater for local agents than for the National Police authority. This viewpoint was expressed in remarks unconnected to news content but relevant to the participants' experiences of their environment.

The abovementioned distrust is connected to the variable of social and situational vulnerability and indicates the erosion of the legitimacy of institutions as a non-tangible cost, the contagion effects of such feelings, and their impact on the credibility of democracy as indicated by Hernández [9]. From a qualitative standpoint, the findings point to the occasional mention of corruption by the participants in their narratives about insecurity. The results suggest that such narratives transcend citizen insecurity and are transformed into a systemic discourse of delegitimization. Thus, it is important to delve into perceptions of spatial scales.

This study must acknowledge certain limitations, which can serve as opportunities for future research initiatives. First, it must be admitted that the qualitative approach allows room for further study and is limited in its scope and generalizability. In the present instance, the drawback concerns the focal attention on experiences pertaining to the capital city. Although circumscribing the study to the capital offers the advantages of population concentration and is beneficial because Lima is home to the national media, regional experiences must not be underestimated. It is thus suggested that future research endeavors should center on the spatial scale concerning the legitimacy of authority and accord special emphasis on the local authorities and their associations with the citizenry's fear of crime.

A second limitation is found in the qualitative sampling variables, which prioritized SES and gender in the context of the city of Lima in this study; both variables were significant. However, studies incorporating the situational variable in their sampling are necessary for more intensive comparisons between the national versus regional capitals. Finally, the indirect effects of the spectacularization of cruelty or the showcasing of the grotesque may include the normalization of daily violence. This outcome was a non-contemplated element of the present study that points to specific topics of the news coverage and must be probed further by prospective researchers.

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