The relationship between crime and the media has long been the subject of intense debate as it is multidimensional and complex. From Johannes Gutenberg’s 15th-century invention of the movable type printing press to modern day media platforms such as ‘Facebook’, there have been persistent concerns and dangers about the harmful criminogenic effects of the media. However, at the same time the media can be a platform in which awareness is raised of crime in our world, making the public attentive to making change. In this essay I am going to discuss the relationship between crime and the media by focussing on the way that social media interrelates with criminal justice policy. I will use social media as a synecdoche for the media as the invention of social media and the proliferation of its use has both been defining moments *in our time.* The usage of social media around the world is ever-increasing and is one of the most popular online activities that users engage in. There are 3.5 billion social media users worldwide, 2.3 billion being registered users for the ten most popular media platforms and this number is only growing[[1]](#footnote-1). Criminal justice policy is defined by Owen as ‘a law or practice that is used to provide guidance to criminal justice officials.’ [[2]](#footnote-2) Michael Salter states that ‘social media is not just a place where crime and justice is discussed; it’s a place where crime happens and so does justice seeking’[[3]](#footnote-3). This captures how social media has the ability to create, control and facilitate criminal justice policy as well as offer a space where new crimes can form. With this in mind, this essay will argue that social media has considerable influence over criminal justice policy.

The first way in which social media influences criminal justice policy is through allowing people to partake in online activism with the motivation for social change. It allows marginalized speakers to use online accounts as a way of confrontation by drawing on its emancipatory potential[[4]](#footnote-4); hashtag activism is an example of this. This is seen predominantly on Twitter and has recently grown into an important part of social movements. An example of social media activism which have led to creation of criminal justice policy include the #metoo movement and their work towards making ‘upskirting’ illegal. The Voyeurism Bill known as the ‘upskirting bill’ received Royal Assent on February 12th, 2019 following an 18-month campaign by Gina Martin. After Martin’s Facebook post about her experience with ‘upskirting’ went viral, she launched an e-petition to get her case reopened with police and called for upskirting to be made part of the Sexual offenders Act 2003. Within days, her petition received 50,000 signatures. This campaign undeniably highlights that social media can have a huge influence on criminal justice policy. However, these movements that campaign for new laws can only be pushed so far by the people behind the social media posts. It is down to the MP’s to change the policy and make a change. Social media allows campaigners to tell their story and push for change however, without individuals in the position to actually make changes to policies, social media is powerless. Therefore, while social media cannot change policies directly, it most certainly has the power to put pressure on the government and allows the public to actively participate in democracy through e-petitions resulting in influencing criminal justice policy as illustrated by Gina Martin.

Another way in which social media continues to influence criminal justice policy is through its ability to influence the overturning of miscarriages of justice. Social media platforms offer a space for campaigners to challenge the decisions made by the justice system, protesting the innocence of the wrongly convicted but also to focus on the notion that the criminal justice system has wronged the victim by failing to bring the perpetrators to justice. A significant example that proves social media helps with overturning miscarriages of justice is that of Amanda Knox and her Italian co-defendant Raffaele Sollecito’s online innocence campaign in 2011[[5]](#footnote-5). The supporters of this innocence campaign were able to hold the Italian criminal justice system up to a level of inspection that would have never been possible before social media was around. This involved managing to recruit on an international scale to fundraise and to study crime and forensics in minute detail as a collective. This case emphasizes the influence social media can have on criminal justice policy due to the two defendants being acquitted of their murder convictions in 2015 as a result of the online campaign.

As discussed, social media can influence criminal justice policy in a positive way, but social media can also result in corruption of society as it gives people new opportunities to commit new crimes like online grooming. Police in England and Wales recorded 1,944 incidents of sexual communication with children in six months. This means that updated criminal justice policies need to be created and laws need to be made to incorporate such criminal acts. This was illustrated in 2017 when it became illegal for anyone over 18 to intentionally communicate online with a child under 16 where the person acts for a sexual purpose and the communication is sexual or intended to elicit a sexual response[[6]](#footnote-6). Whilst there is nothing primarily threatening in the technology itself, the way it can be used can have undesirable criminal consequences highlighting the need for better policing of social media sites[[7]](#footnote-7). However, it is not the case that if the internet did not exist, neither would violent and sexual crimes, it’s a matter of social media facilitating crime meaning new laws need to be formulated. Therefore, social media has an influence on criminal justice policy due to its scale and reach extending beyond the capabilities offline. It allows for both anonymity that would not be possible if it were offline and easy collaboration between people around the world; this should be reflected in criminal justice policy.

As well as facilitating new crimes, social media has caused a recent upsurge in video content highlighting misconduct of public officials. This has a huge influence over criminal justice policy. The overall aim of sharing videos online for the world to observe is to bring people to justice through evidence of ‘the real story’. For example, the killing of George Floyd. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest. Through footage of the arrest, it was clear that he was being mistreated by a police officer, Derek Chauvin, by kneeling on Mr Floyd's neck while he was pinned to the floor. This footage was spread across the internet on social network sites within hours causing the world to stand together and push for change and justice. The former Minneapolis police officer was charged with murder and manslaughter with the charges being a combined maximum 35-year sentence. Undoubtedly, social media can successfully spread awareness making the public attentive to making change however, it is a possibility that video footage posted on social media can be easily decontextualized and thus, unhelpful to the cause of promoting criminal justice policy adjustment. Nevertheless, it is clear that without social media, the footage would not be seen by large audiences and therefore, despite the footage not being created by the social networking sites themselves, social media has the capacity to propel such footage worldwide resulting in influencing criminal justice policy.

Lastly, social media has a sizeable influence on criminal justice policy due to its ability to manipulate public opinion and lead to moral panic which in turn, can prompt change in criminal justice policy. In order to achieve high engagement, social media headlines seen on platforms such as ‘Snapchat’ or ‘Facebook’ are often shocking, attention-grabbing and exaggerated to make their content ‘newsworthy’[[8]](#footnote-8). In addition, stories that cannot be spun to be newsworthy do not get reported to the same extent. This gives consumers a distorted reality of crime in society. As a result of the focus on newsworthiness, the stories published and shared through social media often stigmatise a particular person, group of people or crime. As Cohen argued in his study on the ‘mods and rockers’, when the media reports on deviant behaviour, they construct a narrative which features a clear villain: the ‘folk devil’[[9]](#footnote-9). This creation subsequently leads to a moral panic which can both amplify deviance and spread fear about that particular group of people leading to more stringent criminal justice policy. As such, policy is then based on peoples often-mediated perceptions and fears rather than actual behaviour. Thus, it is evident that social media and its users’ focus on creating newsworthy content has a large impact on criminal justice policy. Politicians can subsequently tap into these sensationalised stories and ‘widespread fear of crime to justify the introduction of punitive crime policy measures that might, in turn, fundamentally alter the way the criminal justice system operates’[[10]](#footnote-10).

In addition, Jewkes contends that the media and social media by extension ‘inject values, ideas and information directly into a passive receiver’[[11]](#footnote-11) which subsequently leads to ‘negative influences on thoughts and actions’ that spiral towards often unnecessary criminal policy review and increases in criminal activity. Jewkes also illuminates the ‘culture of fear’[[12]](#footnote-12) caused by media reportage that has recently moved online to social media sites. This fear created by social media leads to public opinion ‘crystallizing in forms which underpin and support the viewpoints already in circulation, which help to close the consensual circle, providing the lynch-pin of legitimation’[[13]](#footnote-13). Thus, it is clear that social media, just as traditional media used to, influences public opinion which in turn has an impact upon criminal justice policy. However, this media effects theory is quite rightly criticised for assuming that audiences passively receive and accept any information that social media broadcasts. For example, it is important to recognise the human agency and emotionality of people that either decided to riot (and consequently break criminal laws) in London in 2011 or not[[14]](#footnote-14) after being overwhelmed with images and calls to action through Twitter. Whilst the social media platform enabled aggrieved users to become connected, not all users consuming the content created in 2011 decided to take part[[15]](#footnote-15). Nonetheless, users that did want to take part in the riots, were able to do so through connecting with others on Twitter. These users further contributed to the bombardment of images and hashtags that could potentially be received by additional people leading to an overall increase in rioters[[16]](#footnote-16). Therefore, whilst not all users passively accept the information given to them through social media, the platforms still give them access to the content. Thus, social media still has a large influence on criminal policy as it allows for users to consume information that encourages them to break the law.

Therefore, it is clear that social media - a defining characteristic of *our time* - has a considerable influence on criminal justice policy. The way in which social media interacts with crime and politics is multifaceted. It has the capability to both define what crime is considered to be and to facilitate new crimes that need to be controlled through new criminal policy. Social media also has the potential to change public perceptions of crime which subsequently has to be reflected – whether accurate or not – in criminal justice policy. Whilst social media can neither make criminal justice policy without individuals with the power to champion the formation of it nor avoid the offline biases that are reflected on social media sites, it is undeniable that social media can influence criminal justice policy on multiple levels.

1. Brooks, 2015. *Does personal social media usage affect efficiency and well-being?. Computers in Human Behavior*, pp.26-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Owen, 2017, *Foundations of Criminal Justice*, pp130. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Salter, 2016, *Crime Justice and Social Media*, pp5 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin, 2018, *Crime media and culture,* pp88 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gies, 2016, *Miscarriages of justice in the age of social media: the Amanda Knox and Rafaelle Sollecito innocence campaign*, pp8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kierkegaard, 2008, *Cybering, online grooming and ageplay*, pp.41-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Greer, 2003, *Media Representations of Dangerousness*, pp4 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cohen, 1972, *‘Folk Devils and Moral Panics’* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Martin, 2018, *crime media and culture* pp293 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jewkes, 2007, *Crime Online*, pp6 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Altheide, 1997, *The news media, the problem frame and the production of fear,* pp647 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Garland, 2008, ‘*On the Concept of Moral Panic’*, pp24 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Martin, 2018, *Crime media and culture,* pp260 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Martin, 2018, *Crime media and culture,* pp261 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Martin, 2018, *Crime media and culture,* pp261 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)