



News media and crime perceptions: Evidence from a natural experiment☆

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ABSTRACT

In democracies, voters rely on media outlets to learn about politically salient issues. This raises an important question: how strongly can media affect public perceptions? This paper uses a natural experiment – the staggered introduction of the Digital TV signal in Italy – to measure the effect of media persuasion on the perceptions individuals hold. We focus on crime perceptions and, combining channel-specific viewership and content data, we show that the reduced exposure to channels characterized by high levels of crime reporting decreases individual concerns about crime. The effect is driven by individuals aged 50 and over, who turn out to be more exposed to television while using other sources of information less frequently. Finally, we provide evidence about the effect of the digital introduction on public policies closely related to crime perceptions and on voting behaviour.

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1. Introduction

A recent body of empirical literature suggests that media have a significant impact on political and public policy outcomes (see, among others: Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2007; Gerber et al., 2009; Enikolopov et al., 2011; Barone et al., 2015). Yet, little is known about the mechanisms through which media concretely manage to

influence collective decisions and policies. In this paper, we explore one possible channel: influencing individuals' perceptions about topics that are salient in the political debate. More specifically, this paper argues that understanding the role of information provided by the media on the formation of beliefs and attitudes is crucial. As Della Vigna and Gentzkow (2010) posit, the efficiency of democratic and economic systems ultimately depends on the accuracy of individual beliefs. One potential threat to the accuracy of perceptions stems from the fact that, although people base their beliefs partly on direct observation, a large share of information is provided by intermediaries – such as television, newspapers, or Internet – who might themselves have some interest in the behaviour of the receivers.¹ In this paper, we investigate the influence of news media on beliefs and perceptions individuals have about crime.

We focus on perceptions about crime for a number of reasons. First, crime is at the top of people's concerns in many countries. For instance, in the Eurobarometer survey, crime ranks consistently among the first five (out of 15) most important perceived problems in several European countries (see Appendix Fig. A1). Being crime such a central issue, crime perceptions, have been proven to be relevant for several

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¹ In these cases, communication is defined as persuasive (Della Vigna and Gentzkow, 2010) and its effect on the receiver is uncertain.

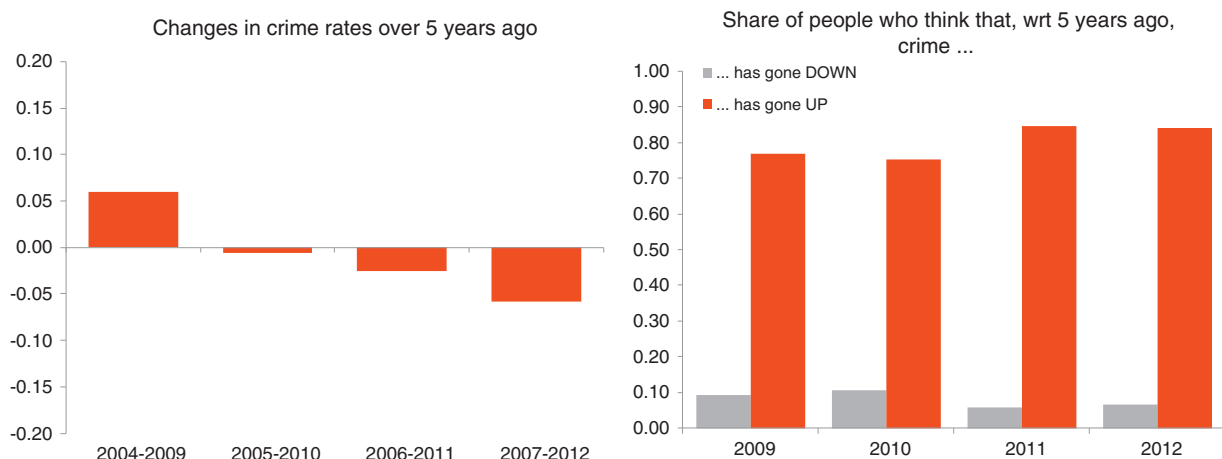


Fig. 1. Actual crime vs crime perceptions in Italy: 2004–2012. *Note.* The left panel of the figure reports changes in crime rates between 2004 and 2012. Source: Authors' elaboration on Italian Home Office Data. The right panel reports the share of people by answer to the question “Do you think that, with respect to five years ago, crime has gone up/gone down/stayed the same/do not know” from 2009 to 2012. The shares referring to the answers “stayed the same” and “do not know” are not reported. Source: Eurostat (left panel) and UNIPOLLIS Foundation (right panel).

economic outcomes such as mental health (Dustmann and Fasani, 2016), daily routines and behaviours (Braakmann, 2012), as well as house prices (Buonanno et al., 2013). Other disciplines (such as criminology and sociology) have dedicated much attention to the consequences of the so called “*fear of crime*”, which is believed to potentially undermine the quality of community life and to lead to adverse societal outcomes (Larsen and Olsen, 2018), as for example lower levels of social trust (see Gaaney et al., 2011 and Hale, 1996, for a review). Moreover, individuals' beliefs about crime are a fascinating topic to study because it exists a puzzling mismatch between individual perceptions and actual data when it comes to crime rates. Fig. 1 provides evidence of such mismatch for Italy, where despite a decreasing (or if anything stable) trend in actual crime rates over the period considered (left panel), about 80% of respondents believe that crime is on the rise (right panel).²

We study the influence of news media on crime perceptions in the context of Italy, a country where, for over a decade, a relevant share of traditional analogue TV channels has been under the influence of Mr. Silvio Berlusconi in his dual role of media tycoon and Prime Minister.³ We analyse whether and to what extent individuals revise their perceptions once exposure to news provided by this group of channels is reduced. Obviously, estimating the causal effect of the exposure to specific media on individuals' perceptions poses difficult identification issues, as people self-select into news media according to their news content (see Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010 and Durante and Knight, 2012). Similarly to Barone et al. (2015), we identify causal effects by exploiting the introduction of digital TV signal in Italy. We exploit the staggered introduction of the policy to extend the design

² “The famous line, ‘*If it bleeds, it leads*,’ is a well-known maxim for what determines newsworthiness of crime. In fact, this gap between actual crime rates and people's perceptions is a feature common to other countries as well. Indeed, while crime levels have been decreasing in many western countries during the last decade (see for example “The curious case of falling crime” in *The Economist*, July 20th, 2013) a surprisingly large share of the population believes that crime is actually increasing. Dustmann and Fasani, 2016 provide similar evidence for the UK. For an interesting review: Emanuelsson and Mele (2010). Misperception of crime has indeed been documented for other countries as well. For instance, in England (Office for National Statistics, 2017); Denmark (Fuglsang, 2017) and the United States (Gallup, 2017).

³ As we will describe in details later on, of the 6 main TV channels holding about 85% of viewing shares up until year 2007, three channels – Rai1, Rai2 and Rai3 – constituted the bulk of the Italian public broadcasting system, which has a long tradition of alignment with the parties in government (Larcinese, 2008) while other three channels – Rete4, Canale5 and Italia1 – were privately owned by Berlusconi through his media conglomerate Mediaset.

to all Italian regions and complement it with detailed channel-specific viewership and news content data.⁴

Between 2008 and 2012, Italy has gradually shifted from analogue to digital TV transmission: on specific dates, which varied by region, the analogue signal was switched off and substituted with the digital one. Around the digital switchover dates, the number of nationally available free TV channels increased from about 7 to >50 within days. Such a supply shock was accompanied by a drastic drop in the viewing shares of the six main traditional analogue channels (Rai and Mediaset) from 82% in June 2008 to 60% in June 2012, mostly in favour of the newly available digital channels.⁵ We exploit the exogenous shift in viewing shares described above to study if and to what extent individuals revise their perceptions about crime when exposure to potentially biased news is reduced. In particular, for identification we rely on a specific feature of digital introduction in Italy: the fact that deadlines at which the signal switched from analogue to digital varied across regions and did so for plausibly exogenous reasons.

In the first part of the paper, we document how a specific group of traditional TV channels seem to systematically over-represent crime news compared to others. We then test if individuals revise their perceptions about crime when exposure to news programs broadcast by such specific group of channels is reduced. We find that the increase in the number of available TV channels – and the consequent lower exposure to crime news – led individuals to revise downward their perceptions about crime. Estimated negative effects on crime concern are larger for individuals who spend more time watching television while using less frequently other media such as internet, radio and newspapers. These individuals, by gathering information mainly through TV and placing high weight to information coming from it, were likely to be more exposed to the potential pre-reform bias, thus responded more to changes in TV content. Older individuals turn out to spend more time watching TV and have much less frequent access to other media than their younger counterpart. In fact, individuals aged 50 and above drive most of our estimated effect. For them, the probability of mentioning crime as among the three priority problems in the country drops with the introduction of the digital signal by about 8.3%. The decrease in crime concerns materialises already during

⁴ Barone et al. (2015) have been the first to use the introduction of digital TV signal in Italy within the literature. They exploit, in particular, the case of Piedmont region where some provinces introduced the digital TV signal before 2010 regional elections and some after. They thus compare voting outcomes for municipalities on either side of such provincial boundaries in a regression discontinuity design setting.

⁵ Source: AUDITEL data. <http://www.auditel.it>

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