



# MEDIA & CRIME

# 2

## The Construction of Crime News

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## OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 provides:

- An analysis of how crime news is 'manufactured' along ideological lines.
- An understanding of the ways in which the demands and constraints of news production intertwine with the perceived interests of the target audience to produce a set of organizational 'news values'.
- An overview of 12 key news values that are prominent in the construction of crime news at the beginning of the 21st century.
- Discussion of the ways in which the construction of news sets the agenda for public and political debate.
- Two case studies of archetypal newsworthy stories.
- An examination of how new technologies are changing the ways in which news is produced and consumed.

## KEY TERMS

- |                      |                                  |
|----------------------|----------------------------------|
| ■ agenda-setting     | ■ ideology                       |
| ■ audience           | ■ moral majority                 |
| ■ binary oppositions | ■ newsworthiness                 |
| ■ celebrity          | ■ news values                    |
| ■ citizen journalist | ■ populism/populist/punitiveness |
| ■ crime              | ■ public appeal                  |
| ■ crime news         | ■ public interest                |
| ■ ethnocentrism      | ■ social constructionism         |
| ■ folk devils        | ■ user-generated content         |
| ■ framing            |                                  |

The diversity of theoretical approaches discussed in the previous chapter will have alerted you to the fact that the influence of the media can be conceptualized both negatively and positively, depending on the perspective adopted. Those who have attempted to demonstrate a link between media content and crime or deviance have employed numerous theoretical models in order to establish alternative, and frequently oppositional, views, ranging from the idea that the media industry is responsible for much of the crime that blights our society, to the idea that media perform a public service in educating us about *crime* and thus aid crime prevention. Some have even argued that media are redefining and making obsolete traditional notions of crime and deviance altogether. It is clear from these divergent viewpoints that the media's role in representing reality is highly contested and subject to interpretation. Although accounts of criminal activities in film, television drama, music lyrics, computer games and websites are arguably

of greatest salience in discussions of media influence, the reporting of *crime news* is also of importance and is no less shaped by the mission to entertain. Indeed, while it might be expected that the news simply reports the 'facts' of an event and is an accurate representation of the overall picture of crime, this is not the case. Even the most cursory investigation of crime reporting demonstrates that crime news follows markedly different patterns to both the 'reality' of crime and its representation in official statistics. Thus, despite often being described as a 'window on the world' or a mirror reflecting 'real life', the media might be more accurately thought of as a prism, subtly bending and distorting the view of the world it projects.

Whether we adhere to the 'effects' theory of media influence, the hegemonic understanding of media power as an expression of elite interests, the pluralist idea of an open media marketplace, or notions of a postmodernist mediascape, we have to conclude that media images are *not* reality; they are a *version* of reality that is culturally determined and dependent on two related factors. First, the mediated picture of 'reality' is shaped by the production processes of news organizations and the structural determinants of news-making, any or all of which may influence the image of crime, criminals and the criminal justice system in the minds of the public. These factors include the over-reporting of crimes that have been 'solved' and resulted in a conviction; the deployment of reporters at institutional settings, such as courts, where they are likely to come across interesting stories; the need to produce stories which fit the time schedules of news production; the concentration on specific crimes at the expense of causal explanations, the consideration of personal safety, which results in camera operators covering incidents of public disorder from behind police lines; and an overreliance on 'official', accredited sources for information. The second factor that shapes news production concerns the assumptions media professionals make about their *audience*. They sift and select news items and – in a process known as *agenda-setting* – will prioritize some stories over others. Then they edit words, adopt a particular tone (some stories will be treated seriously, others might get a humorous or ironic treatment) and decide on the visual images that will accompany the story; all of which constitutes the *framing* of a story. It is in these ways that those who work in the media select a handful of events from the unfathomable number of possibilities that occur around the world every day, and turn them into stories that convey meanings, offer solutions, associate certain groups of people with particular kinds of behaviour, and provide 'pictures of the world' which help to structure our frames of reference.

Far from being a random or personal process, editors and journalists select, produce and present news according to a range of professional criteria that are used as benchmarks to determine a story's *newsworthiness*. This is not to say that alternative definitions do not exist or that other non-mediated influences are at least as important. But if a story does not contain at least some of the

characteristics deemed newsworthy, it will not appear on the news agenda. *News values*, then, are the value judgments that journalists and editors make about the *public appeal* of a story and also whether it is in the *public interest*. The former can be measured quantitatively: put simply, lack of public appeal will be reflected in poor sales figures or ratings and is frequently used to justify the growing dependence on stories with a dramatic, sensationalist or *celebrity* component. The issue of public interest is rather more complicated and may involve external interference, such as corporate or, more commonly, political pressures. Although the press are hampered by very few limitations regarding what they may print, the main television channels in the UK, and particularly the public service BBC, are subject to a range of restrictions which are framed by notions of 'impartiality'. Intervention may be coercive, ranging from the control of information to an outright ban on publication or broadcast of material on the grounds that it is not in the public interest – often a euphemism for disclosure of information that is not in the government's interest.

Alternatively, pressure might be so abstrusely exerted as to appear as self-censorship on the part of editors and producers. But as Fowler (1991) notes, the news values that set the media agenda rarely amount to a journalistic conspiracy – they are much more subtle than that. Nowhere in a newsroom will you find a list pinned to the wall reminding reporters and editors what their 'angle' on a story should be. Rather, the commercial, legislative and technical pressures that characterize journalism, together with a range of occupational conventions – which are often expressed in terms of 'having a good nose for a story', but which are actually more to do with journalists sharing the same *ideological* values as the majority of their audience – results in a normalization of particular interests and values (Wykes, 2001). This shared ethos enables those who work in news organizations to systematically sort, grade and select potential news stories, and discard those which are of no perceived interest or relevance to the audience.

While agenda-setting is usually guided by pragmatic concerns, framing is an ideological process. As one US journalist (Scott London) has described, the informational content of a news report is less important than the interpretive commentary that attends it:

This is especially evident in television news which is replete with metaphors, catchphrases, and other symbolic devices that provide a shorthand way of suggesting the underlying storyline. These devices provide the rhetorical bridge by which discrete bits of information are given a context and relationship to one another... The frames for a given story are seldom conscientiously chosen but represent instead the effort of the journalist or sponsor to convey a story in a direct and meaningful way. As such, news frames are frequently drawn from, and reflective of, shared cultural narratives and myths and resonate with the larger social themes to which journalists tend to be acutely sensitive. ([www.scottlondon.com/reports/frames.html](http://www.scottlondon.com/reports/frames.html))

Arguably even more important than metaphor, catchphrases and other linguistic forms of framing are the visual images that accompany news reports (in the press as well as on television), which will be discussed below.

The first people to attempt to systematically identify and categorize the news values that commonly determine and structure reported events were Galtung and Ruge (1965/1973). Their concern was with news reporting generally, rather than crime news *per se*, and they studied only a limited range of publications (broadcast news was still in its infancy) from the perspective of Norwegian academics writing for the *Journal of International Peace Studies*. Nevertheless, their findings that incidents and events were more likely to be reported if they were, for example, unexpected, close to home, of a significant threshold in terms of dramatic impact, and negative in essence, clearly made them relevant to crime reporting and their research continues to be a touchstone for students of crime news today. Following their classic analysis, another important study was published in 1977 by Steve Chibnall. Despite it being more than 30 years old, and being concerned with journalistic priorities in the post-war period from 1945 to 1975, *Law and Order News* remains an influential study of news values relating to crime reporting and has led to numerous applications of the concept of news values in a myriad of different contexts.

However, Britain is a very different place now than it was half a century ago. The prison population has more than doubled since the 1970s and contemporary news reports contain references to crimes – road rage, air rage, identity theft, online grooming, trolling, revenge porn – not even heard of 25 years ago. Conversely, non-violent crimes such as house burglaries which, in the post-war period constituted nearly a quarter of stories in *The Times* (Reiner, 2001; Reiner et al., 2001) became so commonplace in the 1980s and 1990s that they were rarely considered worth mentioning in the national media; and then, conversely, as the cost of electronic goods plummeted because of cheap imports from China, became so rare in the 'noughties' that they did not warrant much attention in that decade either. The media landscape has itself changed almost beyond recognition. In 1977 there were just three television channels, a fraction of the newspaper and magazine titles, email was used only by a handful of academics sitting in computer labs, and media outlets were far less market-driven or dictated by constant, pressing deadlines. British politics is not as polarized as it was in the 1970s and contemporary audiences are arguably more knowledgeable, more sophisticated and more sceptical than at any time previously. What is more, some critics argue that the pressure on media professionals to produce the ordinary as extraordinary shades into the post-modern, and that what was historically described as news-gathering has, in the new millennium, begun to take on the same "constructed-for-television" quality that postmodernists refer to as "simulation" (Osborne, 2002: 131). The time seems right, then, for a reassessment of the criteria that structure the

news that we read, hear, watch and browse online at the beginning of the 21st century. So what constitutes 'newsworthiness' in 2015?

Of course, some of the criteria identified by Galtung and Ruge in 1973 and Chibnall in 1977 still broadly hold true and will be drawn on in the analysis that follows. It is also important to remember that different values may determine the selection and presentation of events by different news media (and, for that matter, by different or competing organizations), and that the broadcast media tend to follow the news agenda of the press in deciding which stories are newsworthy. Not surprisingly, the news values of the *Sun* are likely to be somewhat different from those of *The Independent* and different again from those of the BBC – not to mention the *New York Times*, *Canberra Times* or *Ming Pao*. Even among news organizations which appear to be very similar, such as the British tabloid press, there may be differences in news reporting which are largely accounted for by the house-style of the title in question. For example, some stress the 'human interest' angle of a crime story (with first-hand accounts from victims and witnesses, an emphasis on tragedy, sentimentality and so on) and may be primarily designed to appeal to a female readership, while others sensationalize crime news, emphasizing sex and sleaze, but simultaneously adopting a scandalized and prurient tone.

News values are also subject to subtle changes over time, and a story does not have to conform to all the criteria in order to make the news – although events that score highly on the newsworthiness scale (that is, conform to several of the news values) are more likely to be reported. Newsworthiness criteria vary across different countries and cultures, and it should be noted that the list that follows has been devised primarily with the UK media in mind. Readers in, or with knowledge of, other countries might like to consider how notions of newsworthiness differ across geographical boundaries and perhaps construct their own list of news values pertinent to the area they are most familiar with. The list that follows is, then, by no means exhaustive, but it considers a total of 12 features that are evident in the output of most contemporary media institutions, and are of particular significance when examining the reporting of crime.

One other point that should be borne in mind is that while 'crime' could in itself be classified as a news value, it goes without saying that in a study of crime news, all the news values outlined in this chapter pertain explicitly to *crime*. It is also taken for granted that the vast majority of crime stories are *negative* in essence, and that news must contain an element of 'newness' or *novelty*; the news has to tell us things we did not already know (McNair, 1998). Crime, negativity and novelty do not therefore appear in the list below as discrete news values, but are themes that underpin all the criteria discussed. It is understood that *any* crime has the potential to be a news story, that it will contain negative features (even if the outcome is positive and it is presented as an essentially 'good news' story), and that it will contain new or novel elements

(even if it has been composed with other, similar stories to reinforce a particular agenda or to create the impression of a 'crime wave'). This list of news values is concerned, therefore, with how previously unreported, negative stories about crime – already potentially of interest – are determined even more newsworthy by their interplay with other features of news reporting.

## News values for a new millennium

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The 12 news structures and news values that shape crime news listed below are discussed in the rest of this chapter:

- Threshold
- Predictability
- Simplification
- Individualism
- Risk
- Sex
- Celebrity or high-status persons
- Proximity
- Violence or conflict
- Visual spectacle or graphic imagery
- Children
- Conservative ideology and political diversion

### Threshold

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Events have to meet a certain level of perceived importance or drama in order to be considered newsworthy. The threshold of a potential story varies according to whether the news reporters and editors in question work within a local, national or global medium. In other words, petty crimes such as vandalism and street robberies are likely to feature in the local press (and will probably be front page news in rural or low-crime areas) but it takes offences of a greater magnitude to meet the threshold of national or international media. In addition, once a story has reached the required threshold to make the news, it may then have to meet further criteria in order to stay on the news agenda, and the media frequently keep a crime wave or particular crime story alive by creating new thresholds. For example, a perennial staple of crime news reporting is attacks on the elderly in their homes but, although serious such assaults might in themselves initially be deemed newsworthy, journalists will soon look for a new angle to keep the story 'fresh' and give it a novelty factor. This



might simply involve an escalation of the level of drama attached to the story, or it might require the implementation of other news structures and news values in order to sustain the life of the story. In 2002 the British news media introduced several supplementary thresholds to the story by adding thresholds of *escalating drama* and *risk* ('Attacker of elderly "could kill" next time', *BBC News Online*, 1 August 2002); *celebrity* ('Robbers raid [Bruce] Forsyth's home', *Observer*, 21 July 2002); a *sexual* component ('A 93-year-old woman has spoken of her bewilderment after a man conned his way into her home and raped her elderly daughter', *BBC News Online*, 9 May 2002); the *macabre* ('A teenager obsessed with vampires stabbed to death an elderly neighbour before cutting out her heart and drinking her blood', *Guardian*, 3 August 2002); an *ironic* angle ('Pensioners fight off bogus callers with poker and walking stick', *BBC News Online*, 9 November 2002); and the *counter-story* ('Man, 76, stabs 21-year-old neighbour to death for singing too loudly', *BBC News Online*, 12 November 2002). These additional thresholds may, then, take many forms (we might add to the above list any number of other factors including the 'whimsical', the 'humorous', the 'bizarre', the 'grotesque', the 'nostalgic', the 'sentimental' and so on; see Roshier, 1973; Hall et al., 1978/2013). After several months of press hysteria over the entry into the UK of political refugees and illegal immigrants, the *Daily Star* (21 August 2003) filled their front page on a quiet news day in midsummer with the headline 'Asylum seekers eat our donkeys'. This illustrates the point well: the addition of new thresholds introduce a novel element to a familiar theme and may revive a flagging news story.

### **Predictability**

As the introduction to this chapter suggested, it goes without saying that an event that is rare, extraordinary or unexpected will be considered newsworthy. Like the thresholds outlined above, unpredictability gives a story novelty value. In particular the media's 'discovery' of a 'new' crime is often sufficient to give it prominence. But equally, a story that is *predictable* may be deemed newsworthy because news organizations can plan their coverage in advance and deploy their resources (e.g. reporters and photographers) accordingly. Crime itself is frequently spontaneous and sporadic, but news media will know in advance if a government minister is to announce a new initiative to combat crime or the Home Office is due to release its annual crime statistics and will plan their coverage before the event has actually occurred. This is also true of criminal trials, which can contain an element of predictability. Media organizations can estimate the time that a criminal case will remain in court and, having deployed personnel and equipment, they are likely to retain them there until the end of the trial. Hence a degree of continuity of coverage is also assured.

Another aspect of predictability is that, for the most part, the media agenda is structured in an ordered and predictable fashion. Having set the moral framework of a debate, those who work in the media will rarely do a U-turn and refashion it according to a different set of principles. Put simply, if the media expect something to happen it will happen, and journalists will usually have decided on the angle they are going to report a story from before they even arrive at the scene. One of the first examples of this tendency was the media coverage of anti-Vietnam demonstrations in London in 1968 (Halloran et al., 1970). The media anticipated violence and were going to report the event as a violent occasion, whatever the reality on the day. Consequently, one isolated incident of anti-police violence dominated coverage of the demonstration and deflected attention from its general peacefulness and, indeed, its anti-war message. Another regular event that illustrates this tendency is the Notting Hill Carnival held in London every August Bank Holiday which attracts in excess of 1.5 million people. Crime rates at the carnival remain relatively low compared with those at other musical events attended by far fewer people, but since riots marred the event in 1976 and occurred less seriously in 1977, the media has consistently reported the event within a framework which emphasizes racism, crime and violence, often overshadowing the many positive and joyous aspects of the parade. For example, in 1991, following an isolated stabbing, *Daily Mail* columnist Lynda Lee-Potter described the carnival as 'a sordid, sleazy nightmare that has become synonymous with death' (quoted in Younge, 2002). The broadsheets are as culpable as the tabloids: under the headline 'Police cameras ring Notting Hill' the *Guardian* reports that 'more than 70 closed circuit television cameras were deployed by police at Notting Hill carnival yesterday to help cut crime' but somewhat contradictorily goes on to say that 'the first day of Europe's biggest street party saw just six arrests for minor offences' (*Guardian*, 30 August 1999). In recent years, anti-capitalism and anti-globalization demonstrations around the world (most notably at the annual summit meetings of government leaders) have received similar treatment, leading many to conclude that the media tend to report events in the ways they have previously reported them.

### **Simplification**

Events do not have to be simple in order to make the news (although it helps), but they must be reducible to a minimum number of parts or themes. This process of simplification has several aspects. First, news reporting is marked by brevity in order that it should not strain the attention span of the audience. Second, the range of possible meanings inherent in the story must be restricted. Unlike other textual discourses – novels, poems, films and so on – where the capacity of a story to generate multiple and diverse meanings is celebrated,

news discourse is generally not open to interpretation and audiences are invited to come to consensual conclusions about a story (Galtung and Ruge, 1965/1973). Immediate or sudden events, such as the discovery of a body or an armed robbery, are likely to be reported because their 'meaning' can be arrived at very quickly, but crime trends, which are more complex and may take a long time to unfold, are difficult to report unless they can be marked by means of devices such as the release of a report or official statistics. In other words, a 'hook' is required on which to hang such stories in order that they fit with the daily or hourly time-span of most media.

Not only does news reporting privilege brevity, clarity and unambiguity in its presentation, but also it encourages the reader, viewer and listener to suspend their skills of critical interpretation and respond in unanimous accord. As far as crime news is concerned, this usually amounts to moral indignation and censure directed at anyone who transgresses the legal or moral codes of society. In the aftermath of high-profile criminal and terrorism cases, notions of potential 'dangerousness' have come to be applied indiscriminately to whole sections of society. In popular journalism's oversimplified worldview, sufferers of mental illness can be portrayed as potential murderers; asylum seekers as potential terrorists; gun club members become potential spree killers and, most insidiously, children and young people come to be seen as 'evil monsters' with no hope of rehabilitation. Such reproach is particularly evident in the tabloid press, who have arguably taken to heart the words of former Prime Minister John Major, said in the context of the Bulger case, that we should seek to 'condemn a little more and understand a little less'.

Simplification of news can boil down to partiality; an accusation sometimes levelled at broadcasters in the UK and USA said to be pro-Israeli in their coverage of the conflict in the Gaza strip. At other times, simplification takes the form of an unquestioning patriotism; particularly in relation to acts of terrorism. American journalist-turned-media critic Danny Schechter (2003) has observed a sudden early change of focus in news reporting in the aftermath of 9/11. He describes what he sees as a manipulation by the US Government (perpetuated faithfully by the mainstream media) to turn around the initial introspective and disbelieving tone of coverage to an emphatically robust style of nationalism. This easily transmutes into a situation where anyone who opposes the 'War on Terror' is regarded as 'unpatriotic' or treacherously 'anti-American'. At the same time, those who perpetrate acts of terror on the USA and her allies become constructed as cartoon baddies or evil automatons, with little or no discussion of their histories and motivations. Mythen and Walklate (2006) similarly argue that, following terrorist attacks in New York, Washington, Madrid and London by groups claiming allegiance to al Qaeda, the creation of common enemies in these countries and their allies has resulted in a simplification of complex issues and personalities, and a separation of cause and effect, both of which add to the public's perceptions of the terrorist as an

irrational 'other' whose motivations are greedy or fanatical rather than socio-economic or geo-political. The experiences of marginalization that such individuals commonly experience are underplayed by politicians and the media who continue to discuss individual moral responsibility as if it exists in a vacuum, somehow detached from the circumstances in which people find themselves. As Mythen and Walklate observe, this leaves little room for rational attempts to understand the values, objectives and grievances of these individuals and instead reduces them to simplified inhuman objects of hate.

The discussion about simplification of news alerts us to the fact the mass media are inclined to deal in *binary oppositions*. Thus, stories involving crime and criminals, including terrorists, are frequently presented within a context that emphasizes good versus evil, folk heroes and folk devils, black against white, guilty or innocent, 'normal' as opposed to 'sick', 'deviant' or 'dangerous' and so on. Such polarized frameworks of understanding result in the construction of mutually exclusive categories; for example, parents cannot also be paedophiles; individuals driven to carry out suicide bombings and other terrorist acts are entirely evil and have no 'good' qualities to redeem them. All these processes of simplification add up to a mediated vision of crime in which shades of grey are absent and a complex reality is substituted for a simple, incontestable and preferably bite-sized message.

### Individualism

The news value *individualism* connects *simplification* and *risk* (see below). Individual definitions of crime, and rationalizations which highlight individual responses to crime, are preferred to more complex cultural and political explanations. The media engage in a process of personalization in order to simplify stories and give them a 'human interest' appeal, which results in events being viewed as the actions and reactions of people. Consequently, social, political and economic issues tend only to be reported as the conflict of interests between individuals (the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, for example), while the complex interrelationship between political ideology and policy may be embodied in a single figure, such as the 'Drug Tsar'. The effect of this is that 'the social origins of events are lost, and individual motivation is assumed to be the origin of all action' (Fiske, 1987: 294).

Both offenders and those who are *potentially offended against* are constructed within an individualist framework. Put simply, the criminal is usually described as being 'impulsive, a loner, maladjusted, irrational, animal-like, aggressive and violent' (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001: 6) – all qualities which allude to the offender's autonomous status and lack of normative social ties (see Chapter 6). The media coverage of 'lone wolf' Anders Breivik, discussed below, was framed in this way, despite his terrorist attacks clearly

being inspired by well-known and long-standing political rhetoric (Berntzen and Sandberg, 2014) and by other mass shootings (Sandberg et al., 2014). Furthermore, news reporting frequently encourages the public to see themselves as vigilantes and positions those who are offended against (or who fear being the victims of crime) as vulnerable and isolated, let down by an ineffective social system and at risk from dangerous predators. Those who try and protect themselves from victimization are frequently portrayed as 'have-a-go-heroes' and, when killed in the commission of an offence, are constructed as 'tragic innocents' (see Chapter 6).

Meanwhile, as discussed in the previous chapter, institutions, corporations and governments may be literally getting away with murder. Even when an offence that occurs within a large organization actually makes the news, it may once again be explained by recourse to individual pathology. The collapse of the British merchant bank Barings in 1995 and a similar case in 2008 involving French bank Société Générale were two such complicated, technical cases which might have seemed somewhat abstract to the general public. To avoid complex explanations, and despite the fact that Parisian trader Jerome Kerviel defrauded the French bank to the tune of 4.9 billion euros (that is, £3.7bn or \$7.1bn) the British media constructed *both* stories around the figure of Barings employee, Nick Leeson, the 'rogue trader' who was single-handedly held responsible for the loss of £869 million in the 1995 case, and who became sufficiently famous to have a movie made about him (*Rogue Trader*, 1999). Similarly, a case that gripped the United States in 2009 was a fraudulent investment scheme that paid investors from money contributed by other investors rather than from real profits to the tune of \$65 billion (£40bn). Media coverage of this crime focused on the charismatic figure at the centre of the fraud, Bernard Madoff who – unusually for a white-collar criminal – was described by his trial judge as 'extraordinarily evil' (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8124838.stm>).

For Reiner et al. (2001) individualism is a consequence of the increasing tendency to view society as being obsessed with 'risk' and all its attendant notions, including risk assessment, risk management and risk avoidance (see 'Risk' below). The new vocabulary surrounding this 'foxy but evocative term' (Leacock and Sparks, 2002: 199) highlights a shift in perceptions of how risk should best be dealt with. As social problems have come to be seen as the product of chance or of individual action, and solutions are sought at the level of individual self-help strategies – such as insurance or personal protection – a 'winner–loser' casino culture is created (Reiner et al., 2001: 177). Individuals are held responsible for their fates and the media devalue any styles of life other than spectacular consumerism (Reiner et al., 2001: 178). The outcome of individualism in criminal justice is that deviants are defined in terms of their 'difference' and isolated via policies of containment, incapacitation and surveillance. Popularly conceived as a 'breed apart', many offenders are judged

within a moral framework which constructs them as morally deficient malcontents who must be dealt with punitively and taught the lesson of individual responsibility (Surette, 1994).

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## Risk

Given that the notion of modern life being characterized by *risk* has become such a widespread and taken-for-granted assumption, it is surprising to find that the media devote little attention to crime avoidance, crime prevention or personal safety. The exception to this is if a message about prevention can be incorporated into an ongoing narrative about a serious offender 'at large', in which case the story will be imbued with a sense of urgency and drama (Greer, 2003). The vast majority of serious offences, including murder, rape and sexual assault, are committed by people known to the victim. There are also clearly discernible patterns of victimization in certain socio-economic groups and geographical locations. Yet the media persist in presenting a picture of serious crime as random, meaningless, unpredictable and ready to strike anyone at any time (Chermak, 1994: 125). Such discourse as exists in the media regarding prevention and personal safety invariably relates to offences committed by strangers, thus implicitly promoting stereotypes of dangerous criminals prepared to strike indiscriminately (Soothill and Walby, 1991; Greer, 2003; see also Chapter 6).

The idea that we are all potential victims is a relatively new phenomenon. After the Second World War, news stories encouraged compassion for offenders by providing details designed to elicit sympathy for their circumstances, thus endorsing the rehabilitative ideal that dominated penal policy at that time (Reiner, 2001). In today's more risk-obsessed and retributive times, crime stories have become increasingly victim-centred. Perceived vulnerability is emphasized over actual victimization so that fear of crime might be more accurately conceived as a fear for personal safety. Sometimes, the media exploit public concerns by exaggerating potential risks in order to play into people's wider fears and anxieties. Following the September 11th terrorist attacks in America, the British media fuelled a vision of apocalyptic meltdown with a series of stories ranging from terrorist plots to target the UK, to warnings about falling meteorites heading for earth. Yet it must be remembered that audiences are not passive or indiscriminating. Many crime scares and moral panics simply never get off the ground (Jenkins, 2008), and while it might be argued that the media fail to provide the public with the resources to independently construct alternative definitions and frameworks, people's sense of personal risk will usually correspond to their past personal experiences and a realistic assessment of the likelihood of future victimization above and beyond anything they see or hear in the media.



## Sex

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One of the most salient news values – especially in the tabloid press, but also to a significant degree in the broadsheets and other media – is that of sex. Studies of the press by Ditton and Duffy (1983) in Strathclyde, by Smith (1984) in Birmingham, and by Greer (2003) in Northern Ireland, reveal that newspapers over-report crimes of a sexual nature, thus distorting the overall picture of crime that the public receives, and instilling exaggerated fears among women regarding their likelihood of being victims of such crimes. Ditton and Duffy (1983) found that when reporting assaults against women, the press frequently relate sex and violence, so that the two become virtually indistinguishable. Furthermore, the over-reporting of such crimes was so significant that in Strathclyde in March 1981, crimes involving sex and violence accounted for only 2.4 per cent of recorded incidents, yet occupied 45.8 per cent of newspaper coverage. So interlinked are the themes of sex and violence, and so powerfully do they combine to illustrate the value of 'risk', that the prime example of newsworthiness is arguably the figure of the compulsive male lone hunter, driven by a sexual desire which finds its outlet in the murder of 'innocent' victims (Cameron and Frazer, 1987). As such, sexually motivated murders by someone unknown to the victim invariably receive substantial, often sensational, attention. On the other hand, sexual crimes against women where violence is not an overriding component of the story (bluntly, sex crimes that are non-fatal) and sexual assaults by someone known or related to the victim are generally regarded as routine and 'pedestrian' and may contain only limited analysis (Carter, 1998; Naylor, 2001). Moreover, the sexually motivated murder of prostitutes – who do not conform to media constructions of 'innocent' victims – also invariably receive considerably less coverage than those of other women.

Bronwyn Naylor (2001) argues that the frequency with which articles appear about apparently random stranger violence against 'ordinary' women and girls not only indicates that such stories fulfil key news values, but also that they permit highly sexualized, even pornographic representations of women. At the same time, these narratives tend to be highly individualized so that offences involving females – whether as victims or perpetrators – are rarely reported by the popular media without reference, often sustained and explicit, to their sexualities and sexual histories. Victims are frequently eroticized: for example, the conviction of Stuart Campbell in December 2002 for the sexually-motivated murder of his 15-year-old niece, Danielle Jones, was accompanied by media reports of their 'inappropriate', that is, abusive, sexual relationship, and photographs of a pair of blood-stained, white lace-topped stockings belonging to the girl found at Campbell's home. Meanwhile, female offenders are often portrayed as sexual predators – even if their crimes have no sexual element (see Chapter 5). This narrative is so widely used that it leads

Naylor to question the purpose of such stories and how readers consume them:

These stories draw on narratives about particular kinds of masculinity and about violent pornography, reiterating a discourse about masculine violence as a 'natural force', both random and inevitable. They normalize this violence, drawing on and repeating the narrative that all men are potentially violent and that all women are potentially and 'naturally' victims of male violence (Naylor, 2001: 186).

She goes on to suggest that not only does the media's obsession with 'stranger-danger' give a (statistically false) impression that the public sphere is unsafe and the private sphere is safe, but also that it influences government decisions about the prioritization of resources, resulting in the allocation of funding towards very visible preventative measures (such as street lighting and CCTV cameras) and away from refuges, 'or indeed from any broader structural analysis of violence' (Naylor, 2001: 186).

### **Celebrity or high-status persons**

The obsession with *celebrity* is evident everywhere in the media and a story is always more likely to make the news if it has a well-known name attached to it. Put simply, the level of deviance required to attract media attention is significantly lower than for offences committed by 'ordinary' citizens because a certain threshold of meaningfulness has already been achieved. As such, a 'personality' will frequently be the recipient of media attention even if involved in a fairly mundane or routine crime that would not be deemed newsworthy if it concerned an 'ordinary' member of the public. Whether they are victims or perpetrators of crime, celebrities, their lives, and their experiences are deemed intrinsically interesting to the audience. Even otherwise under-represented categories of crime such as libel, perjury and embezzlement are guaranteed widespread media attention if they have a 'name' associated with them. However, it is sexual deviance that dominates the news agenda of the tabloids, and a celebrity or high-status person who unexpectedly takes personal and professional risks by engaging in a sexually deviant act is an enduring feature of news in the postmodern mediascape, providing a titillating juxtaposition of high life and low life for an audience who, it is assumed, lead conventional and law-abiding 'mid lives' (Barak, 1994b).

So elevated has celebrity status become that it even blinds the populace to crimes that may have been taking place quite publicly over several decades and/or been covered up by numerous individuals and institutions who could have intervened. For example, two highly newsworthy cases that came to light in 2012 which, in hindsight, were seemingly obvious to many observers, are the doping scandal perpetrated by American cyclist and seven-time winner of the Tour de France, Lance Armstrong (who subsequently was stripped of his titles),



and the Jimmy Savile case, involving an unprecedented number of victims of sexual assault by the former BBC TV and radio presenter. The latter case is one of the most shocking in living memory. Leading to a major criminal inquiry involving 28 police forces, three internal BBC inquiries and the resignation of a BBC Director General, the Savile case has been described by the Metropolitan Police as a watershed moment in child abuse investigations. While the media have, for several years, reported other prolific sexual predators and alleged high-level cover-ups by institutions including schools, care homes and the Catholic church, it seems that it was Savile's celebrity status that allowed him to abuse on a massive scale – police estimate that he may actually have abused well over one thousand victims, most of whom were children and young people.

The star's fall from grace was all the more dramatic for the fact that it was a very long drop from the elevated position he had occupied for five decades. Jimmy Savile wasn't any ordinary celebrity. He was a cultural icon from the earliest days of popular radio and television; part of the cultural fabric of British life. The BBC show *Top of the Pops*, which he presented from the very first edition in 1964 was, in its heyday, watched by 15 million viewers and his other main vehicle, the BBC TV show *Jim'll Fix It*, broadcast between 1975 and 1994, was watched by up to 20 million people. He rose to fame at a time when there were only three (and latterly four) TV channels and his programmes were points of commonality and connection among people of a certain generation (or generations because they ran for so long). On top of this he had a high-profile career as a charity fund-raiser; it is estimated that he raised over £40 million for good causes. He was awarded a knighthood, a papal knighthood, and counted members of the royal family among his friends. He even reportedly acted as some kind of broker in Prince Charles and Princess Diana's failing marriage. Many of Savile's crimes were carried out in places he had privileged physical access to (it has been reported that staff, including senior managers, at Broadmoor Hospital called him 'Doctor' and afforded him free access to the entire site). Meanwhile, Britain's tabloids and TV executives promoted him as a 'secular saint' (Cross, 2013; Furedi, 2013). When rumours of his offences first started to circulate, it was hard to imagine just how far the star would descend. Two years into the police investigation Operation Yewtree, over 500 victims had come forward and, every time we, the audience, thought that the story had reached new depths, it just got worse, with reports that Savile abused paralysed children in spine injury wards, children who were wheelchair bound and had no speech, and even reports that he was a necrophiliac who enjoyed access to hospital mortuaries. Underlining the widespread belief that Savile's celebrity status made him 'untouchable', fellow BBC presenter Jeremy Paxman (whose programme, *Newsnight*, dropped a documentary investigating allegations about Savile's behaviour, much to Paxman's chagrin) asked, 'What was the BBC doing promoting... this absurd and malign

figure? They have never felt comfortable with popular culture and they have therefore given those who claim to perpetrate it too much licence' ([www.theguardian.com/media/2013/feb/22/jeremy-paxman-on-jimmy-savile](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/feb/22/jeremy-paxman-on-jimmy-savile)).

Further underlining the fact that celebrity status is so powerful that it can give individually powerful men (and it is nearly always men) a sense of invincibility while acting immorally and illegally towards relatively powerless and/or vulnerable victims, in May 2014, publicity agent Max Clifford was sentenced to eight years custody for sexual offences against young women and girls. Summing up at the end of the trial, the presiding judge commented that Clifford's dominant character and position in the world of entertainment meant that his victims believed he was untouchable, as did he. The case followed several other unsuccessful prosecution attempts as part of Operation Yewtree, in which well-known celebrities in the UK were tried in court for historic sexual offences. The securing of a conviction in the case of Max Clifford came as a huge relief to the Crown Prosecution Service who had been facing allegations of leading a celebrity witch hunt in the aftermath of the revelations about Jimmy Savile.

Convicted criminals can also become media 'celebrities' by virtue of the notoriety of their crimes. Sometimes criminals are cast as *folk devils* by the media, and they are deemed newsworthy long after their convictions because the mass media take a moral stance on public distaste and revulsion towards their crimes. One such example is Peter Sutcliffe, known as the Yorkshire Ripper who, in 1981, was convicted of the murders of 13 women in the north of England. After two decades of confinement in a high-security hospital, he remains something of a media celebrity, with endless newspaper column inches and frequent television documentaries devoted to his crimes and his life since arrest. He has even been revealed to have been a friend of Jimmy Savile's who, reportedly, was questioned as a possible suspect in connection with the police investigation into the murders. However, the fact that Sutcliffe is unlikely ever to be released means that the media are able to treat Sutcliffe as a side-show, an entertaining if somewhat macabre diversion to fill media space when there is little else of importance to report. There are a handful of other criminals who occupy a particular symbolic space in the collective conscience of the British public (the Kray twins, the Great Train Robbers, Denis Nielsen, Fred and Rosemary West, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, Ian Hunter and Maxine Carr, Amanda Knox), but arguably the most notorious figure in the history of the British criminal justice system is Myra Hindley (the 'Moors murderess') who, with her partner, Ian Brady, was convicted in 1966 of her part in the abduction, torture and murders of two children. Until her reported death in November 2002, Hindley was Britain's longest-serving prisoner and was a regular figure in the pages of the popular press, who waged a systematic and profoundly retributive campaign that culminated with front page copy on the day after her death announcing that the 'devil' had gone to

hell 'where she belonged' (see Chapter 5). So successful was the campaign to keep her in prison that it became all but impossible for any Home Secretary – relying on public mandate as they do – to authorize the release of Hindley.

It is not just those who represent showbusiness and notorious crime who are elevated to visibility in the news. High-status individuals in 'ordinary' life (businesspeople, politicians, professionals, the clergy and so on) are also deemed newsworthy and are frequently used to give a 'personal' angle to stories that otherwise might not make the news. This is especially germane when such individuals are defined as deviants: the more clearly and unambiguously the deviant personality can be defined (thus reducing uncertainty and reflecting the underlying news judgement of 'simplification'), the more intrinsically newsworthy the story is assumed to be, especially if it intersects with other news values. This is equally true of local media who report the deviant activities of people from the community they serve. Here, the value of 'proximity' comes into play (see below), but the recipient of news attention will normally be of high-status within the community; for example, a teacher, priest or doctor. Paradoxically, then, despite the media's general tendency to portray crime as a menace wrought by a disaffected underclass on ordinary, respectable folk, it is the middle-class, high-status or celebrity offender who is deemed most newsworthy and will have the greatest number of column inches or hours of airtime devoted to their deviant activities.

### **Proximity**

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Proximity has both spatial and cultural dynamics. Spatial proximity refers to the geographical 'nearness' of an event, while cultural proximity refers to the 'relevance' of an event to an audience. These factors often intertwine so that it is those news stories which are perceived to reflect the recipient's existing framework of values, beliefs and interests and occur within geographical proximity to them that are most likely to be reported. Proximity obviously varies between local and national news. For example, a relatively 'ordinary' crime like mugging or arson may be reported in local media but might not make the national news agenda unless it conforms to other news values, for example, it was especially violent or involved a celebrity. The converse of this trend is that events that occur in regions which are remote from the centralized bases of news organization or in countries that are not explicitly linked (in alliance or in opposition) to the UK or US rarely make national news. Indeed, there are some areas of the world which are unlikely to be prominent on the news agendas of the UK, US and other industrialized nations, however high a threshold is reached by potential news stories. By way of example, in 2009 the charity Oxfam launched a campaign to 'save' world news. Reporting that 'British television is sleepwalking towards a global switch-off', Oxfam is critical of the two main broadcasters:

Only three out of 52 African countries are currently represented in factual TV programming, and even this focuses on wildlife. Latin America and non-Anglophile countries are currently not covered by British public service broadcasters in factual programming. On ITV, meanwhile, just five hours of programming from the developing world were broadcast throughout the whole of 2007. ([www.oxfam.org.uk/get\\_involved/campaign/actions/help\\_save\\_the\\_news.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get_involved/campaign/actions/help_save_the_news.html))

However, it is the United States that is most frequently accused of *ethnocentrism* for its tendency to look inwards for its news coverage. However, while the American news media (and, for that matter, the American public) come in for criticism for their perceived lack of interest in world affairs, it is with some justification that they focus on events that occur within their own boundaries. For example, the extended global coverage of two hijacked passenger jets ploughing into the twin towers of the New York World Trade Center on September 11 2001, like earlier footage taken in Dallas in November 1963 of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, illustrates the degree to which America is regarded a world superpower. Their news is our news in a truly global sense, and both of these crimes cast a long shadow in the collective memory of people with no connection, however tenuous, with the events of those days. But as others have pointed out, for those not of the 'First World', there have been other 'September 11ths' which have received little, if any, media coverage in the West (Carrington and Hogg, 2002).

Cultural proximity also changes according to the political climate and cultural mood of the times. There was little media coverage of the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, but more recently Iraq has rarely been out of the news. In short, there may be a domestication of foreign news whereby events in other areas of the world will receive media attention if they are perceived to impinge on the home culture of the reporter and his or her audience. If there is no discernible relevance to the target audience, a story has to be commensurately bigger and more dramatic in order to be regarded as newsworthy. Novelist Michael Frayn comments facetiously:

The crash survey showed that people were not interested in reading about road crashes unless there were at least 10 dead. A road crash with 10 dead, the majority felt, was slightly less interesting than a rail crash with one dead ... Even a rail crash on the Continent made the grade provided there were at least 5 dead. If it was in the United States the minimum number of dead rose to 20; in South America 100; in Africa 200; in China 500. But people really preferred an air crash ... backed up with a story about a middle-aged housewife who had been booked to fly aboard the plane but who had changed her mind at the last moment. (Frayn, 1965: 60)

Cultural proximity also pertains to the individual actors in any crime story that receives global coverage. When individuals from different nations are involved, any country's media can appear to 'take sides' to a degree that might, at best,

be classified as patriotism and, at worst, xenophobia. In the case of American student Amanda Knox, convicted of the murder of her British housemate, Meredith Kercher, in Perugia in November 2007, it is interesting to observe the different tones adopted by the US and UK media in their reporting of Knox throughout her long court trial. While American media (relying to a large degree on her affluent, middle-class, 'respectable' parents as sources) portrayed her as a wholesome, all-American, girl-next-door, the British press and many Internet sites have persistently concentrated on the sexual proclivities of 'Foxy Knoxy' and portrayed her in an altogether more sinister light. They also made much of pictures she had posted on social networking sites of her posing with a machine gun, and fantasy stories she had composed involving drugs and rape. But Knox's fellow students at the University of Washington argue that there appears to be a thinly-disguised vendetta against Knox in some of the international media simply because she is American; or rather, she is, 'a pot-smoking, unstable, sex-crazed American' ([www.com.washington.edu/commIR/vol2/editionOne](http://www.com.washington.edu/commIR/vol2/editionOne)).

Similar contradictions and biases can be detected in relation to offenders and victims within the UK. When an individual goes missing (whether or not foul play is immediately suspected) the likelihood of the national media lending their weight behind a campaign to find the missing person depends on several interrelated factors. If the individual in question is young, female, white, middle class and conventionally attractive, the media are more likely to cover the case than if the missing person is, say, a working-class boy or an older woman. Even in cases where abduction and/or murder is immediately suspected, the likelihood of media interest will vary in accordance with the background of the victim. If the victim is male, working class, of African Caribbean or Asian descent, a persistent runaway, has been in care, has drug problems, or is a prostitute (or any combination of these factors), reporters perceive that their audience is less likely to relate to, or empathize with, the victim, and the case gets commensurately lower publicity. The compliance of the victim's family in giving repeated press conferences and making themselves a central part of the story is also a crucial factor in determining its newsworthiness, as is their willingness to part with photographs and home video footage of their missing child. Hence, the disappearances of Madeleine McCann, Sarah Payne, Milly Dowler and the 'Soham girls', Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, were all eminently newsworthy stories: attractive, photogenic girls from 'respectable', middle-class homes with parents who quickly became media-savvy and were prepared to make repeated pleas for help on behalf of the police (and in the case of the McCanns and Sarah's mother, Sara Payne, continued to court the media and political establishment, even after the story would normally be 'closed').

Even the relatively high-profile case of the murder of 10-year-old Damilola Taylor in Peckham, South London was, initially at least, constructed very

differently to the murders of the girls mentioned above. For over a week the victim remained virtually invisible as media reports concentrated almost exclusively on issues of community policing and the levels of violent crime on the streets. It was not until Damilola's father flew into the UK from Nigeria (and made press statements and television appearances) and CCTV footage was released to the media that this little boy became a person in his own right – a person worthy of media attention and public mourning and remembrance. Nevertheless, the public grieving for Damilola failed to reach the near hysterical outpourings of anger and sadness that accompanied the deaths of Sarah, Milly, Holly and Jessica.

To further illustrate this hierarchy of media interest in such cases, it is instructive to analyse similar stories from the same time period and compare the level and tone of coverage accorded to them. For example, a short time after the disappearance of 14-year-old Milly Dowler from Surrey in March 2002, the body of a teenage girl was recovered from a disused quarry near Tilbury Docks. Before the body had even been identified, sections of the tabloid press were carrying headlines announcing that Milly had been found. But it turned out to be the corpse of another 14-year-old girl, Hannah Williams, who had disappeared a year earlier. Yet it was the hunt for Milly that continued to dominate the news for the weeks and months to follow. Almost as soon as she was found, Hannah was forgotten. Quite simply, unlike Milly who was portrayed as the 'ideal' middle-class teenager, Hannah's background made it difficult to build a campaign around her. She was working class and had run away before. Furthermore, her mother – a single parent on a low income – 'wasn't really press-conference material' according to a police spokeswoman (Bright, 2002: 23).

### **Violence or conflict**

The news value which is arguably most common to all media is that of 'violence' because it fulfils the media's desire to present dramatic events in the most graphic possible fashion. Even the most regulated media institutions are constantly pushing back the boundaries of acceptable reportage when it comes to depicting acts of violence because it represents a basic violation of the person and marks the distinction between those who are of society and those who are outside it. Only the State has the monopoly of legitimate violence, and this 'violence' is used to safeguard society against 'illegitimate' uses (Hall et al., 1978/2013). However, violence has become so ubiquitous that – although still considered newsworthy – it is frequently reported in a routine, mundane manner with little follow-up or analysis. Unless a story involving violence conforms to several other news values or provides a suitable threshold to keep alive an existing set of stories, even the most serious acts of violence may be



used as 'fillers' and consigned to the inside pages of a newspaper. Yet whether treated sensationally or unsensationally, violence – including violent death – remains a staple of media reporting. According to research conducted in the early 1990s, the British press devoted an average of 65 per cent of their crime reporting to stories involving interpersonal violence, although police statistics indicate that only around 6 per cent of recorded crime involved interpersonal violence (Williams and Dickinson, 1993). Since that time, according to the Government's Office for National Statistics, violent incidents have halved and the number of homicides in 2011/2012 was the lowest since 1989 ([www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_298904.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_298904.pdf)). Yet media depictions of violence suggest precisely the opposite.

Cultural criminologists argue that crime, violence, humiliation and cruelty are objectified, commodified and desired to the extent where they are widely distributed through all forms of media to be pleurably consumed. Mike Presdee offers numerous examples which, he claims, are evidence of the consumer's need for privately enjoyed, carnivalesque transgression. From 'sports' that, having all but disappeared, are now enjoying a dramatic upturn in popularity (albeit underground), such as bareknuckle fighting, badger-baiting and dog-fighting, to 'Reality TV' and gangsta rap, the evidence of our lust for pain and humiliation is all around us:

The mass of society bare their souls to the media who, in turn, transform them into the commodity of entertainment. Confidentialities are turned against the subject, transforming them into the object of hurt and humiliation as their social being is commodified ready for consumption. (Presdee, 2000: 75)

Little wonder then, that news has followed a similarly dramatic and vicarious path. With an increasing imperative to bring drama and immediacy to news production, the caveat 'You may find some of the pictures that follow distressing' seems to preface an increasing number of television news reports. This leads us to consider the spectacle of violence as portrayed through graphic imagery.

### **Visual spectacle and graphic imagery**

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Television news is generally given greater credence by the public than newspapers, partly because it is perceived to be less partisan than the press, but also because it offers higher quality (moving) images which are frequently held to demonstrate the 'truth' of a story or to verify the particular angle from which the news team has chosen to cover it. Chris Greer has suggested that of all the changes in journalistic perceptions of news value over the last half-century, it is the visual that most emphatically marks the difference between

the criteria described by Galtung and Ruge in the 1960s and the ones described here. For Greer (2009) the primacy of the visual has been hastened by technological developments (the exponential growth of mobile digital technologies, the Internet, etc.) and consolidated by the shift to a more explicitly visual culture; we all simply take it for granted that any news story will be accompanied by images, and, increasingly, thanks to mobile phone/cameras, Facebook, etc. images that have not been approved for publication by the subject, as the earlier discussion of Amanda Knox highlighted (see also discussion below about 'citizen journalism'). Quite simply, in the second decade of the 21st century, potential news stories are only likely to make the news if they can be portrayed in images as well as words, and the 'availability of the right image can help elevate a crime victim or offender to iconic status' (Greer, 2009: 227; cf. Hayward and Presdee, 2010). Linnemann (2013) comments that visual representation of the traumatic and grotesque is designed to tap into the same human tendency that compels people to gawp when passing the scene of an accident (see Chapter 10 of this volume). The shocking is a defining feature of spectatorship (see also Brown, 2009).

As described above, violence is a primary component of news selection. But there are many different types of violence and it tends to be acts of violence that have a strong visual impact and can be graphically presented that are most likely to receive extensive media coverage. The very public murder, in May 2013, of off-duty soldier Lee Rigby on a busy London street by two Islamist extremists, captured on CCTV and on footage filmed on witnesses' mobile phones, is a prime example. A video of one of the perpetrators 'justifying' the killing, while still covered in the victim's blood, was carried by ITN's website and was visited so many times that the site crashed. However, while 'spectacular' crimes get a lot of attention because they make good copy and are visually arresting on television, it seems that those crimes which occur in private spheres, or which are not subject to public scrutiny, become even more marginalized, even more invisible. Hence, crimes like domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, accidents at work, pollution of the environment, much white collar crime, corporate corruption, state violence and governments' denial or abuse of human rights, all receive comparatively little media attention, despite their arguably greater cost to individuals and society. Similarly, long-term developments, which may be more important than immediate, dramatic incidents in terms of their effects, may not be covered because they cannot be accompanied by dramatic visual imagery.

Furthermore, TV shows like *Big Brother* which blur the line between entertainment and reality and call into question the extent to which people behave 'normally' while being watched on television, might make us question whether court trials should be televised. In some countries, court trials have made celebrities out of lawyers and judges, and led to accusations that they, too, are not immune to playing up for the cameras. In addition, 'real' footage



of the kind captured on CCTV or on video cameras by witnesses and bystanders as a criminal event unfolds, is increasingly used in news broadcasts to visually highlight the event's immediacy and 'authenticity'. Such images have graphically and poignantly contributed to the spectacle of crime and violence in the postmodern era. Many of the most shocking events that occurred in the last few years of the 20th century entered the collective consciousness with such horrifying impact precisely because news reports were accompanied by images of the victim at the time of, immediately prior to, or soon after, a serious violent incident. The video footage of black motorist Rodney King being beaten up by four white LA police officers, and the live broadcast of O.J. Simpson being chased for miles down the freeway by police following the brutal double-murder at his home, are examples from the US of graphic imagery being used to heighten the drama of already newsworthy stories.

In the UK, the last moments of the lives of Diana, Princess of Wales leaving the Ritz Hotel in Paris, James Bulger being led out of a Bootle shopping centre, Damilola Taylor skipping down a Peckham street, and Fusilier Lee Rigby crossing a street in Woolwich, only to be mown down by a car and then hacked to death with a meat cleaver in broad daylight and in front of numerous passers-by, are all forcefully etched on the British psyche. Combining the mundane ordinariness of everyday life with the grim inevitability of what is about to unfold, CCTV footage – played out by the media on a seemingly endless loop appeals to the voyeuristic elements in all of us, while at the same time reinforcing our sense of horror, revulsion and powerlessness. Indeed one of the remarkable aspects of Madeleine McCann's abduction (to a UK public at least who have become used to being watched in nearly all public spaces) was that there was no CCTV footage of her being carried away, thus contradicting Haggerty and Ericson's (2000) famous maxim that in today's surveillance-saturated society we have witnessed the 'disappearance of disappearance' (see Chapter 8 for further discussion of CCTV and surveillance).

## Children

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Writing in 1978, Stuart Hall and his colleagues argued that any crime can be lifted into news visibility if violence becomes associated with it, but three decades later it might be said that any crime can be lifted into news visibility if children are associated with it. In fact, Philip Jenkins (1992) argues precisely this, suggesting that *any* offence, particularly those that deviate from the *moral* consensus, are made eminently more newsworthy if children are involved. This is true whether the children at the centre of the story are victims or offenders, although Jenkins concentrates on child victims who, he says, not only guarantee the newsworthiness of a story, but also can ensure the media's commitment to what might be called 'morality campaigns'. This amounts to

what Jenkins describes as the 'politics of substitution'. In the 1970s, those who wished to denounce and stigmatize homosexuality, the sale of pornography or religious deviation (for example, satanism) found little support in the prevailing moral climate. But the inclusion of children in stories about these activities makes it impossible to condone them within any conventional moral or legal framework. Thus, we have witnessed over the last 50 years a process of escalation whereby morality campaigns are now directed 'not against homosexuality but at paedophilia, not pornography but child pornography, not satanism but ritual child abuse' (Jenkins, 1992: 11). The focus on children means that deviant behaviour automatically crosses a higher threshold of victimization than would have been possible if adults alone had been involved (1992: 11). Nevertheless, despite Jenkins' assertion that the involvement of children guarantees news coverage of a story, this is not necessarily the case. Sexual abuse within the family remains so low down on the media's agenda as to render it virtually invisible, and as we shall see in later chapters, the mass media persist in preserving the image of the ideal family and underplaying or ignoring the fact that sexual violence exists – indeed, is endemic – in *all* communities, and that sexual abuse of children is more likely to occur within the family than at the hands of an 'evil stranger'.

Children who commit crimes have arguably become especially newsworthy since the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year-olds in 1993, which was the first case for at least a generation in which the media constructed pre-teenage children as 'demons' rather than as 'innocents'. The case also proved a watershed in terms of criminal justice and crime prevention. The 10-year-olds were tried in an adult court and the case was the impetus for a massive expansion of CCTV equipment in public spaces throughout the country. But at a more fundamental level, it presented a dilemma for the mass media. Childhood is a *social construction*; in other words, it is subject to a continuous process of (re)invention and (re)definition and, even in the modern period, has gone through numerous incarnations from 18th-century romantic portrayals of childhood as a time of innocence, to more recent conceptions of childhood as a potential site of psychological and psychiatric problems. But with the exception of a brief period in the early 19th century when children were viewed as inherently corrupt and in need of overt control and moral guidance (which coincided with a period when child labour was the norm among the working classes, before legislation took children out of factories, mills and mines and relocated them in schools and reformatories), the notion of children being 'evil' has not been prominent.

By and large, childhood has been seen as fundamentally separate from adulthood, and children regarded as requiring nurture and protection, whether by philanthropic reformers, educators, parents, welfare agencies, the medical profession or the law. But with the murder of James Bulger by two older children, the notion of childhood innocence gave way to themes of childhood

horror and evil. Public outrage was fuelled, in part, by sensational and vindictive press reporting which variously described the 10-year-olds as 'brutes', 'monsters', 'animals' and 'the spawn of Satan'. The reasons why children and young people are the usual subjects of such moral panics will be explored in Chapters 3 and 4, but suffice it to say here that the young are frequently used as a kind of measuring stick or social barometer with which to test the health of society more generally. Children and adolescents represent the future, and if they engage in deviant behaviour it is often viewed as symptomatic of a society that is declining ever further into a moral morass. For the media, then, deviant youth is used as a shorthand ascription for a range of gloomy and fatalistic predictions about spiralling levels of crime and amoral behaviour in society at large.

### **Conservative ideology and political diversion**

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What all the news values discussed so far have in common is their reliance on a broadly right-wing consensus which, in many news channels (especially the tabloid press), is justified as encapsulating the 'British way of life'. In matters of crime and deviance, this agenda emphasizes deterrence and repression and voices support for more police, more prisons and a tougher criminal justice system. In addition, it appears that we now live in a society where political process and media discourse are indistinguishable and mutually constitutive. The symbiotic relationship between the mass media and politicians is illustrated by the support given by the former to the latter in matters of law and order. For two decades a version of '*populist punitiveness*' has characterized British governments' attitudes to penal policy, a stance which is replicated in the US and in many other countries around the world. There seems little opposition from any political party in the UK to proposals to incarcerate ever younger children, to introduce curfews, to bring in legislation to prevent large 'unauthorized' gatherings, and to introduce new and harsher measures against immigrants, protesters, demonstrators, the homeless and the young unemployed. All these issues are most directly conveyed to the public at large by the mass media.

Of course, the 'British way of life' that is defended most vehemently by newspapers such as the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* is fiercely nostalgic and may now only be applicable to a minority (ironically usually termed the *moral majority*) of British citizens. Despite claiming to be the voice of the people, the criminalization of certain individuals and activities by these newspapers highlights the general perceived intolerance towards anyone or anything that transgresses an essentially conservative agenda. It is also partial explanation for the vigorous policing and punishment of so-called 'victimless crimes': recreational use of drugs, sexual permissiveness, especially among young people,

public displays of homosexuality and lesbianism, anti-establishment demonstrators exercising their democratic right to protest, and spectacular youth cultures. All are activities which are subject to continuous, and sometimes overblown, repression. At times the generalized climate of hostility to marginal groups and 'unconventional' norms (to the dominant culture of journalists, at least) spills over into racism and xenophobia. The moral concerns over mugging in the 1970s was focused on young men of African-Caribbean descent; the inner-city riots of the 1980s were frequently attributed entirely to black youths; and recent media coverage of the immigration into Britain of people from other countries frequently demonstrates a shocking disregard for others' human rights, and the media's inability (or unwillingness) to differentiate between political refugees and illegal immigrants. Even people from ethnic and/or religious minorities born and raised in this country may be subjected to overwhelmingly negative press. For example, British-born Muslims first became newsworthy when a *fatwah*, or death threat, was issued against author Salman Rushdie in 1989, resulting in a great deal of unfavourable coverage portraying all Muslims as fanatics and fundamentalists. Since then, Muslims in the UK have continued to be identified in negative contexts, even when cast as victims; a phenomenon that has increased exponentially since the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, and the rail systems in Madrid and London.

The concentration of news media on the criminal and deviant activities of people from the lowest socio-economic classes and from religious, ethnic and cultural minorities serves to perpetuate a sense of a stratified, deeply divided and mutually hostile population. Some politicians have been quick to galvanize the support of an anxious and fearful public, and have undoubtedly contributed to negative reporting which has agitated social tensions. By simultaneously focusing attention on hapless victims of serious crime and calling for tougher, more retributive punishment, politicians not only promote an essentially conservative agenda, but also deflect attention from other serious social problems. Indeed, it could be argued that much of what makes up our newspapers is in fact a mere side-show, a diversionary tactic which removes attention from more serious problems in society, particularly those of a political nature. The media hysteria which has, in recent years, accompanied victims of HIV and AIDS, lone/unmarried parents, teenage and pre-teenage mothers, child abusers, satanic ritual abusers, video nasties, juvenile delinquents, joyriders, ravers, users of cannabis, ecstasy and other recreational drugs, paedophiles, homosexual members of parliament (indeed, homosexuals generally), adulterous celebrities, and girl gangs, might all be reasonably argued to constitute part of the overtly sanctimonious moral discourse directed at the institution of the family, which has characterized the media and political agendas since the 1980s. From John Major's ill-fated 'Back to Basics' campaign and Tony Blair's promotion of a 'new moral order' (prompted by studies showing that Britain has the

highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe), to the Conservatives current characterization of 'broken Britain', successive British politicians have harnessed the mass media to criminalize certain groups of people and divert attention from the systemic social problems of their making; poverty, patriarchy, and an education system that is failing its pupils, among them.

## Two examples of newsworthy stories *par excellence*

### 1. The disappearance of Madeleine McCann

A case that might be described as unprecedented in terms of the global coverage it generated and its perceived newsworthiness was the abduction of three-year-old British girl Madeleine McCann from a holiday resort in Praia da Luz, Portugal, in May 2007. It became an international news story that received saturation coverage through the summer of that year and continues to make the news regularly seven years later, thanks to the efforts of her parents and to the continuing police investigation by officers in the UK and Portugal. Madeleine's abduction provides a case study of how the 12 news values discussed in this chapter (or culturally contingent versions of them) can be applied to any potential news event. The drama of a young child being abducted from her bed while on a family holiday meets the required **threshold** of perceived interest, and the McCann family were extremely skilled at constructing further 'mini' thresholds to keep the story fresh in public minds (praying in the local church, an audience with the Pope, a tour around Europe, a visit to the US, a campaign to introduce a new pan-European 'amber-alert' system to aid police in the hours immediately after a child abduction, and countless others); a grim **predictability** is woven through the account of the crime via recourse to editorials criticizing Madeleine's parents for leaving their children alone in their holiday apartment while they went to eat at a tapas bar, and via references to stories of other child abductions in Portugal and its neighbours; many elements of the story were **simplified** in part of necessity because, under Portuguese law, there was very little information the police could disclose to the waiting world's media; the abduction was constructed as **individual** and random, a cruel act of chance; hence any of us (and our children) are at **risk**; the crimes were explained by reference to **sex** and sexual deviance as rumours circulated that Madeleine had been taken by a paedophile; the McCanns became **celebrities** as they exploited the world's media in order to make audiences in countries beyond the UK and Portugal feel culturally **proximate** to the events unfolding; the **violence** of a child being forcibly taken by a stranger was reinforced by the circulation of **graphic images** of

Madeleine, many taken just hours and days before the abduction, showing her enjoying her family holiday, and by images of her grief-stricken mother forced to confront the cameras on a daily basis to keep the story alive; and the fact that the victim of this heinous crime was an attractive **child** with a 'respectable', middle-class background, made this a cardinal news story. The presence of a **conservative ideology** manifested itself in several ways in the news media. For example, numerous journalists questioned the acceptability of children being left alone at a holiday resort where babysitters were available, and hotly debated the likely guilt or innocence of the only formal suspects named by the police (a British man staying with his mother in a nearby villa, and the McCanns themselves; all of whom were, at times, subjected to extreme vitriol by the press, even though there was no evidence to link them to the child's disappearance). At their xenophobic worst, the British media rounded on the Portuguese police for failing to uncover a credible lead and for not co-operating with English police officers soon enough to make a difference. The dominant theme was that British detectives would have 'solved' the case, while the local officers were lazy, incompetent and corrupt.

## 2. Anders Behring Breivik and the spree killing of 77 people in Norway

On July 22nd 2011 a bomb exploded in a vehicle outside a Government building in central Oslo, killing eight people inside the building. As news of the blast was being broadcast around the world, the 32-year-old man who had planted the bomb, Anders Behring Breivik, dressed in a police uniform, boarded a ferry to the island of Utøya, 25 miles northwest of Oslo, where 564 young people were attending a Summer Camp organised by the youth wing of the Labour Party. Breivik went on an hour-and-a-half shooting spree, killing 69 people, mostly teenagers, before being arrested by police.

In the UK, the large number of victims and the capture of the gunman alive ensured that the story met the required **threshold** of interest. The publication of his propagandist websites, the discovery of explosives at his house and his subsequent trial created further 'mini' thresholds to keep the story fresh in public minds; a grim **predictability** was woven through the account of the crime via recourse to stories about terrorism (e.g. in London and Madrid) and reports suggesting that his actions bore many of the hallmarks of US school shootings; many elements of the story were **simplified** – he was a 'Nazi', his complex personality disorders were presented as psychosis or schizophrenia; the murders were constructed as **individual** and random, a cruel act of chance; suggesting once again that any of us (or our children) are at **risk** from similar kinds of attack; his crimes were partially explained by reference to **sex** – his sexual frustration, lack of sexual experience and his claims that he'd seen the ravages of promiscuity and venereal disease within his own family. Such



is the attention given to mass murderers that inevitably Breivik has become a **celebrity** in his own right. The geographical and culturally **proximity** of Norway to the UK ensured its newsworthiness; in addition, the news media emphasized reported links to English far-right groups and Foreign Secretary William Hague was reported as saying that the UK stood 'shoulder to shoulder' with Norway. The **violence** of the events that day was reinforced by the circulation of **graphic images** of the victims bodies and then again a month after the attacks when news media published images of Breivik re-enacting the murders at Utøya for the benefit of police investigators. The fact that Breivik's victims were mostly young people from 'respectable', middle-class backgrounds made the story even more newsworthy and the press initially suggested that they were even younger than they were (many newspapers stated his crime as 'gunning down children on a holiday island'). The presence of a moralistic **conservative ideology** was most evident in the early reporting as events were still unfolding – initial speculation centred on the possibility of home-grown fundamentalist Muslims being responsible, reflecting a global media preoccupation with the threat of a terrorist attack, a barely disguised 'Islamaphobia' within western media, and a perception of an emerging threat from the extreme right in Europe. These fixations, which are frequently conflated, all contributed to a heightened sense of risk. However, once Breivik was captured, news media hastily sought to distance themselves from his brand of political extremism.

This brief analysis relates to UK media, but this terrible crime has been analysed by Cere, Jewkes and Ugelvik (2013) who use the case to highlight some of the subtle discrepancies underpinning crime news reporting in the UK, Norway and Italy, which themselves reflect broader social, cultural and political differences between the three countries. Among their findings is that in Italy, coverage of the Breivik case was rather subdued at the time of the events, perhaps mindful of the fact that his actions were politically motivated. Right-wing individuals and organizations have left an indelible mark on Italian political and media culture. Memories of bombings in Milan, Brescia and Bologna, and of other crimes, including the killing of two Senegalese immigrants in Florence in 2011 by a right-wing sympathizer, are always in the background of any discussion of right-wing violent actions, and hence the coverage was not only concerned with this particular individual but also with the broader international context of his dramatic actions. Unsurprisingly, Norwegian coverage of the case has been extensive and many of the normal 'rules' of reporting have been broken in this usually sober and ethically conscious nation. For example, while it is illegal to photograph or film defendants in a criminal case, an exception was made by the court in the case of Breivik, and Cere et al. argue that the opposite of simplification occurred in the reporting of the story. Rather, the news media exhausted every possible angle, producing a hugely complex and often confusing melange of contrasting

impressions – all of which must be seen within the wider cultural bricolage of stories about acts of terror. Analysing the story from a cultural criminological standpoint, Sandberg et al. (2014) argue that Breivik's crimes followed a cultural script, formed and reformed down years of reporting of campus killings in the US. In a media-saturated world, Breivik's actions on 22 July 2011 constitute an edited and re-edited performance, combining violence, fame-seeking and an extreme form of masculinity. The fact that the attacks were unprecedented in their extent and brutality for a country with little experience of political violence, a low crime rate and just under 35 murders a year on average, made the story all the more shocking, both within Norway and outside it (Berntzen and Sandberg, 2014; Mathiesen, 2013).

### **News production and consumption in a digital global marketplace: the rise of the citizen journalist**

Finally in our analysis of crime news, it is worth mentioning the impact of new media (although in advanced, industrialized nations, satellite and digital media can hardly be called 'new' any more). One of the most profound changes of recent years is that many of us now consume much of our news online and the democratic nature of Internet communication, together with its global penetration and immediacy, have given rise to the *citizen journalist*. '*User-generated content*' or UGC, as it is known in the media industries, encompasses images taken on mobile phone cameras, texts and emails sent by audience members to media outlets, and contributions to Internet sites such as Twitter and YouTube.

Twitter has particularly captured the imaginations of mainstream journalists (see Chapter 9). BBC journalist Rory Cellan-Jones describes the benefits of the micro-blogging service, as 'like a very fast, but not entirely reliable news agency', which he uses to gain immediate notice of breaking stories and file his reports before many of his competitors ([www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/technology/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/technology/)). Although now frequently associated with the celebrities who use it, Twitter first came to many people's attention when pictures were posted of a US Airways plane making a forced landing into New York's Hudson river in January 2009. Although not a story about crime, it met most of the news criteria outlined in this chapter, and was notable for the novelty of a major air incident in which every one of the 155 people on board survived. But it was the incredible *images* of Airbus A320 submerged in the freezing water with its passengers standing along its wings that brought home the drama and spectacle of this event. A passenger on a passing ferry took a photo of the stricken airplane on his mobile phone and posted it on Twitter. By the following day,



over 97,000 people had viewed the image and its owner was doing interviews with many of the major global news organizations.

Personal, mobile communication technologies have not only added a new dimension to the manufacture of news but, in a few cases, they have had far-reaching consequences for democracy. In May 2008 it was reported that the Chinese Government had responded to the devastation caused by an earthquake in the Sichuan province, in which tens of thousands of people perished, by moderating its control of the Internet. This meant that those affected by the tragedy could use video sharing sites, blogs, chat rooms, instant messaging services and the like to circulate graphic pictures and accounts of their experiences. For these new citizen journalists the Chinese Government's relaxation of its generally tough stance on Internet content brought an unprecedented level of freedom (see Chapter 9). Another example of an event brought to the attention of a global audience by a citizen journalist was the killing of a young Iranian woman, Neda Agha-Soltan, who was shot during an anti-government protest in Tehran on 20 June 2009. A University student, Neda was a bystander watching the protests when she was shot by a man believed to be a member of the pro-government militia (himself later 'identified' when photographs of his ID card were posted on the Internet and then published by newspapers). With journalists forced to stay in their hotel rooms, or even leave the country, these amateur recordings quickly became the only means of getting uncensored news about the protests and the murder of Neda out of Tehran. Within hours of Neda's death, graphic scenes captured by an unknown eyewitness showing her bleeding to death on the street had been posted online and were being published and broadcast in newspapers and bulletins around the world. The shaky video footage even received a Polk Award, one of the highest honours in journalism, representing the first time such a prize had been awarded to an anonymous individual.

Of course what these illustrations from China and Iran also demonstrate is that, although undoubtedly true that major crimes or disasters now generate more material from ordinary eyewitnesses, the extent to which news production and consumption has fundamentally changed can be overemphasized. As Cellan-Jones illustrates, technologically savvy journalists are learning how to access that content and turn it into mainstream media fodder. Furthermore, the relationship between citizen journalism and mainstream media outlets is symbiotic; many of the contributions to Twitter and YouTube are simply regurgitating reports from 24-hour news stations and, while they provide instant information about anything that is happening in the world and are a brilliantly effective way of sharing information, they cannot be relied on to be entirely accurate or impartial. For journalists like Cellan-Jones, that makes the work of mainstream media outlets and professional reporters all the more relevant.

Presenting more of a dilemma for traditional media companies are the forums that encourage the public to express opinions about events in the news.

For example, the assassination of Pakistan's Opposition Leader, Benazir Bhutto in 2007 resulted in several contributions to the BBC news website that were anti-Islam and which prompted discussions at the BBC about whether the 'Have Your Say' facility should be temporarily withdrawn. The issue was not just that the comments might be deemed offensive by some visitors to the site; they also raised questions about their editorial value and how far they should influence the BBC's coverage more widely. In a lecture at Leeds University in January 2008, Director of BBC World Service, Peter Horrocks explained the process of sifting through the vast amount of opinion expressed by ordinary people:

The top 20 or 30 recommended posts all had variations on the theme, attacking Islam in comprehensive terms. Most of them weren't making distinctions between different aspects of Islam, they were simply damning the religion as a whole. To be honest it was pretty boring wading through them and wouldn't have added much to anyone's understanding of the causes or consequences of the assassination. Buried amongst the comments however... were insights from those who had met Benazir or knew her. And there were valuable eyewitness comments from people who were at the scene in Rawalpindi. Our team that deals with user content sifted through the chaff to find some excellent wheat. ([www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/01/value\\_of\\_citizen\\_journalism.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/2008/01/value_of_citizen_journalism.html))

The right to freedom of speech – even if it prompts views based on some form of hatred – is always going to prove controversial and all media organizations must tread a careful line. It is arguable that forums which encourage audience participation promote a particularly emotive brand of *populism* whereby the views of a small minority who get sufficiently outraged to bother texting or emailing a news organization, radio station or Internet forum, come to represent the editorial line taken by those media outlets. While Horrocks is generally positive about UGC, saying: 'There is no doubt that the stronger voice of the audience is having a beneficial effect on the range of stories and perspectives that journalists cover', he also admits that the average 10,000 emails or posts the BBC receives on its 'Have Your Say' site each day represents fewer than 1 per cent of its users, and he asks rhetorically: 'What organization – a political party, a business, a trades union – would allow its stance to be totally driven by such a small minority?' (ibid.).

What this discussion highlights is that the proliferation of new media – far from encouraging a plurality of news channels – may simply have augmented the dominance of traditional media and forced them to become more competitive. As a senior manager within the BBC, Horrocks gives a fascinating insight into the way that news production has changed since the advent of digital mobile communication technologies. Not only does the BBC have a dedicated User-Generated Content (UGC) Unit working alongside their conventional journalistic resources, dealing solely with information and opinion

from the audience – and being able to cope with ‘spikes’ in such material when a particularly newsworthy event occurs (Horrocks gives the example of a high-school shooting), but the corporation has also invested in personal social media in locations that are difficult to report from:

In northern Nigeria, for example, we are using mobile phones which we provided to villages. In each village there is one person who is known as ‘the keeper of the mobile’. This was a way we learnt about a government confrontation with a village about land rights. We looked into that story, and used BBC journalistic rigours to cover that story. ([www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2010/feb/10/peter-horrocks-social-media](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/pda/2010/feb/10/peter-horrocks-social-media))

It would appear, then, that far from being the anarchic, decentralized ‘counter-cultural’ space we might assume it to be, the Internet replicates the dominance of established media organizations with the BBC, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Telegraph*, and *Sun* being the most popular websites for news and public affairs (Curran, 2010). This may not be surprising given the steep costs of establishing, maintaining and promoting high-profile sites. However, Pratt suggests that, despite established news organizations being the primary news sources online, their drive to be more attractive to audiences and advertisers has resulted in the picture of crime becoming even more skewed, as they feed audiences an escalating diet of serious, violent, unusual offences and trivia involving celebrities and scandals. In some senses, then, while we might be broadly optimistic about the role of new information technologies in giving ordinary citizens a voice and bringing news from remote corners of the world, we should exercise caution because of the types of crime most likely to be regarded by journalists, editors and directors as newsworthy (Pratt, 2007).

### **News values and crime news production: some concluding thoughts**

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While the possibility of a direct causal relationship between media consumption and behavioural response (for example, between violent screen images and real-life violence) is downplayed by most media academics in the UK, it is nonetheless widely accepted that those who work in the media do have some degree of influence in terms of what potential stories they select and how they then organize them, defining or amplifying some issues over others. The time and space available for news is not infinite and journalism is, of necessity, a selective account of reality. No story can be told without judgments being made about the viability of sending costly resources to film, photograph and report it, or without implicit suppositions being made about

the beliefs and values of the people who will be reading, viewing or listening to it.

The desire to accommodate public tastes and interests has prompted some critics to accuse the British media of pandering to what the first Director General of the BBC, Lord Reith, used to call the 'lowest common denominator' of the audience. Since the British media went through a process of deregulation in the late 1980s and early 1990s criticism has intensified, and both broadcast and print media have been accused of 'dumbing down' their news coverage and measuring newsworthiness by the degree of amusement or revulsion a story provokes in the audience. The news values that have been discussed in this chapter seem to support this view. They illustrate that the news media do not cover systemically all forms and expressions of crime and victimization, and that they pander to the most voyeuristic desires of the audience by exaggerating and dramatizing relatively unusual crimes, while ignoring or downplaying the crimes that are most likely to happen to the 'average' person. At the same time, they sympathize with some victims while blaming others.

Moreover, the pressures of having to succeed in such a fast moving, commercial environment might (if one were being generous) help to explain the demise of the best-selling Sunday newspaper, the *News of the World* in 2011, 168 years after it was established. When it – and its daily sister paper the *Sun* – were bought by Rupert Murdoch's News International in 1969, a tabloid or 'red-top' press was created to rival the quality broadsheets and both titles firmly established themselves at the heart of British political and cultural life. However, the enforced closure of *News of the World* followed allegations of extensive phone hacking of high-profile individuals, including murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler and families of victims of serious crime; a method of news-gathering which, for reporters and editors working on these titles, had the dual benefits of saving huge amounts of time which investigative journalism inevitably involves and satiating a public appetite for immediacy and excess. According to some, this press, with its strong focus on sex, celebrity and sensation, has become the single most detrimental influence on British cultural life and standards; one social commentator, Will Self, describes it as a 'tectonic shift' which is 'eating holes in the British social fabric' (*Guardian*, 11 July 2011). For Self, the following equation follows: 'if anyone can be a celebrity then anyone can be exposed. The hacking into the 7/7 victims' phones, or the relatives of servicemen killed in Afghanistan, or even the phone of a murdered schoolgirl is the only logical continuation of this process' (*Guardian*, 11 July 2011). However, so serious are the allegations concerning phone-hacking by private investigators hired by sections of the press (and prompted by practices uncovered at *News of the World*), that the British Government established a wide-ranging inquiry into press standards, practices and ethics, chaired by Lord Justice Leveson. After more than a year of hearings and considering the evidence,

Leveson concluded 'beyond doubt' that the British press had repeatedly ignored its responsibilities and in doing so had 'damaged the public interest, caused real hardship and, also on occasion, wreaked havoc in the lives of innocent people' (Leveson, 2012). At the time of writing, a criminal investigation of senior personnel at the *News of the World* is still ongoing.

The revelations about phone hacking by journalists represented a nadir in the history of the popular press. Nevertheless, the tabloidization of news (on television and radio as well as in print) is arguably a cultural expression of democratic development, giving voice to new forms of political engagement with issues such as environmentalism, health and sexuality. And while the interests and priorities of the contemporary audience may be regarded as populist and trivial, the fact is that more people consume news today than have at any time previously. Furthermore, there is a valuable investigative tradition in journalism which continues to play an important role, not least in uncovering police or political corruption, miscarriages of justice and, as we will see in Chapter 8, whistleblowing on the extent of state surveillance of private communications.

## Summary

- News values are the combined outcome of two different but interrelated factors which together determine the selection and presentation of news. First, news values are shaped by a range of technological, political and economic forces that structure and constrain the form and content of any reported event at the point of news-gathering. Second, news values cater for the perceived interests of the audience and they capture the public mood; a factor usually summed up by news editors as 'giving the public what it wants'.
- Drawing on 'classic' studies by Galtung and Ruge (1965/1973) and Chibnall (1977), which analysed news production in the mid-20th century, this chapter has developed a set of 12 news values appropriate to the new millennium. While faithful to certain news fundamentals that were highlighted in these works, the chapter has suggested that as society has evolved, so too do the cultural and psychological triggers which condition audience responses and, correspondingly, influence the construction of media narratives.
- In addition to the news values discussed in detail, it is taken for granted that crime is inherently highly newsworthy and is usually 'novel' and 'negative' in essence. News values not only shape the production of crime news in the 21st century, but they also aid our understanding of why public perceptions about crime are frequently inaccurate, despite media audiences being more sophisticated and better equipped to see through 'spin' than ever before.
- The emergence of mobile digital forms of communication and the proliferation of Internet sites that permit various forms of 'citizen journalism' have democratized news production, but the news received by the vast majority of audiences still

comes from traditional media organizations who are becoming increasingly adept at weaving user-generated content (UGC) into conventional sources and traditional styles of reporting. The cardinal news values discussed here are as relevant to 'new' media as they are to traditional press and broadcasting.

- The 12 news values discussed in this chapter will be drawn on throughout the remainder of this book in order to demonstrate how types of crime and specific criminal cases are selected and presented according to prevailing cultural assumptions and ideologies.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How have news values changed over the last 50 years? Which of the news values identified in this chapter would you say have become most prominent recently? What do these variations tell us about the changing nature of society?
2. As the discussion of Anders Breivik's act of mass murder illustrated, news values, while broadly similar across 'western', industrialized nations, do nonetheless differ in subtle ways, reflecting the particular socio-economic, political and cultural contours of any given country. If you are studying outside the UK, or are an overseas student at a British university, reflect on how news values differ in your country from the ones discussed in this chapter.
3. This chapter has focused mainly on the news values used to set the national news agenda. What news values are most evident in crime reports in your local newspaper, or on your local radio or television news programme? How do they differ from the national and international media?
4. Using international news services accessed via 'new' media technologies, conduct a content analysis of the major crime news stories covered, and draw up a list of the news values prioritized.
5. 'The availability of an image may determine whether or not a story is run. The availability of the right image can help elevate a crime victim or offender to iconic status' (Greer, 2009: 227). What examples can you think of (or find) that bear out this statement?
6. How would each of the theoretical perspectives reviewed in Chapter 1 view the production of crime news?

### FURTHER READING

It is still worth returning to the seminal study of press news values produced by J. Galtung and M. Ruge, originally published in 1965, but most easily accessed in S. Cohen and J. Young (eds) (1973) *The Manufacture of News* (Constable). S. Chibnall (1977) *Law and Order News* (Tavistock) also still deserves close

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attention. M. Wykes (2001) *News, Crime and Culture* (Pluto) discusses news values in relation to crime and deviance and includes several fascinating case studies. P. Manning (2001) *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction* (Sage) is a useful introduction to news production more generally. J. Curran and J. Seaton (2010) *Power Without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain* (Routledge), now in its 7th edition, has been brought up to date with discussions of the impact of the Internet. At 2,000 pages long, the Leveson Report into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press (published on 29 November 2012) is too detailed and too parochial to discuss in this book, which has an international readership. However, it offers a fascinating glimpse into the practices of the popular press and how, for decades, certain news organizations were able to invade the privacy of individuals without any justifiable public interest. The Report can be downloaded at [www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780.asp](http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780.asp).