

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 have alerted you to the fact that the news is not just a reflection of reality, but a construction of it.

by their interplay with other features of news reporting.

News values for a new millennium

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

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

2002). These additional thresholds may, then, take many forms. In addition 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.

attracts in excess of 1.5 million people. Crime rates at the carnival remain low compared with those at other musical events attended by far since riots marred the event in 1976 and occurred less seriously. The media has consistently reported the event within a framework that emphasizes racism, crime and violence, often overshadowing the joyous aspects of the parade. For example, in 1991, the *Daily Mail* columnist Lynda Lee-Potter described the carnival as a 'sordid, sleazy nightmare that has become synonymous with death' (cited 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,

emphasizes good versus evil, folk heroes and folk devils, black against 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

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

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 representation of women. At the same time, these narratives tend to be highly individualized that offences involving females – whether as victims or perpetrators – are rarely reported by the popular media without reference to their sexualities and sexual behavior: for example, ...

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),

equally, especially if it intersects the community they serve. Here, the value of 'proximity' counts, but the recipient of news attention will normally be of high status; for example, a teacher, priest or doctor. Paradoxically, 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

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:

ilbu, . Before the body had even been found, the local 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

us:

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for pain

The mass of society bare their souls to the media who, in turn, into the commodity of entertainment. Confidentialities are turned 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

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

death with a meat cleaver... by, are all forcefully etched on the British psyche. The 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

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

as a kind of moral... of society more generally. Children and adolescents if they engage in deviant behaviour it is often viewed society that is declining ever further into a moral morass. deviant youth is used as a shorthand ascription for a range of fatalistic predictions about spiralling levels of crime and amorality then, and or in society at large.

Conservative ideology and political diversion

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,

nessed the mass media's attention from the systemic social problems of poverty, crime, and an education system that is failing its pupils, among others.

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