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# 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.
- A discussion of the ways in which the construction of news sets the agenda for public and political debate.

## **KEY TERMS**

agenda-setting	crime news	public appeal
audience	ideology	public interest
binary oppositions	moral majority	social constructionism
celebrity	newsworthiness	
crime	news values	

The diversity of theoretical approaches discussed in the previous chapter will have alerted you to the fact that the influence of the media – the ways in which media shape our ideas, values, opinions and behaviour – 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 fictional accounts of crime (in film, television drama, music lyrics and so on) 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

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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 élite 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 over-reliance 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, prioritize some stories over others, edit words, choose the tone that will be adopted (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. It is through this process – known as *agenda-setting* – that those who work in the mass 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 may help to structure our frames of reference. Far from being a random or personal process, editors and journalists will 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 judgements 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, broadcasting is subject to a range of restrictions which are framed by notions of 'impartiality' (McQueen, 1998). The BBC is especially vulnerable to political leverage (the Hutton inquiry into the suicide of government weapons advisor, Dr David Kelly, and attempts by senior police officers and Home Secretary, David Blunkett, to ban a BBC documentary uncovering racism among police recruits are two recent examples from 2003 that serve to make the point). 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 (cf. Hillyard and Percy-Smith, 1988, for examples). 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.

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*, but their view 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. Following their classic analysis, another influential study was published in 1977 by Steve Chibnall. Despite it being nearly 30 years old, and being concerned with journalistic priorities in the post-War period from 1945 to 1975, *Law and Order News* arguably remains the most 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 (including Hall et al., 1978; Hartley, 1982; Hetherington, 1985; Ericson et al., 1987, 1989, 1991; Cavender and Mulcahy, 1998; Surette, 1998; Manning, 2001; Greer, 2003a).

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However, Britain is a very different place now than it was half a century ago. The prison population has soared from just over 40,000 in 1977 to 73,850 in April 2003 (expected to rise to in excess of 99,300 by June 2009), and contemporary news reports contain references to crimes – road rage, joyriding, car-jacking, ecstasy dealing, identity theft – not heard of 30 years ago. Conversely, non-violent crimes such as property offences which, in the post-War period constituted nearly a quarter of stories in *The Times* (Reiner, 2001; Reiner et al., 2001) are now so commonplace that they are rarely mentioned in the national media. 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, and although e-mail had just been developed it was the preserve of a handful of academics sitting in computer labs on either side of the Atlantic. The structures of ownership and control have altered and news, like all other media output, is significantly more market-driven and dictated by ever-looming deadlines than it was previously. Politics is not as polarized as it was in the 1970s when the ideological battlefield was fiercely contested between capitalists and socialists. At the same time, contemporary audiences are arguably more knowledgeable, more sophisticated and more sceptical than at any time previously, and are certainly sufficiently media-savvy to know when they are on the receiving end of political 'spin' (Manning, 2001). What is more, some critics argue that the pressure on media professionals to produce the ordinary as extraordinary shades into the postmodern, 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 download at the beginning of the 21st century. So what constitutes 'newsworthiness' in 2004?

Of course, some of the criteria identified by Galtung and Ruge in 1965 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. 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.

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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 with the UK media in mind. It is, therefore, 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

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
- 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. Such stories are often used as 'fillers' during quiet news periods and tend to be reported in waves, suggesting a widespread social problem rapidly approaching crisis point (see, for example, the *Mirror's* 'shock issue', 12 July 2002). But although serious assaults on elderly people 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 'news life' of the story (Hall et al., 1978: 72). In 2002 the British news media introduced several supplementary thresholds to give new angles to stories about assaults on the elderly. They included the 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 Hall et al., 1978; Roshier, 1973). 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 mid-summer 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. Hall et al. (1978: 71) demonstrate how mugging was characterized as a 'frightening new strain of crime' by the British press in the 1970s, and since that time the appearance of crimes such as ram-raiding, car-jacking and steaming on our shores (all of which have been imported from the US, according to the British press) has been sufficiently unexpected and novel to guarantee their newsworthiness.

But equally, a story that is *predictable* may be deemed newsworthy because news organizations can plan their coverage in advance and deploy their resources accordingly (for example, reporters and photographers). This results in a reliance on official sources such as the police, politicians, and spokes-persons from high-profile organizations who are regularly used and deemed 'reliable' by news reporters. Crime itself is frequently spontaneous and sporadic, but news media will know in advance if, for example, the Home Secretary is announcing 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 most frequently cited 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. In recent years, anti-capitalism demonstrations around the world have received similar treatment, leading many to conclude that the mass media tend to report events in the ways they have previously reported them. Another regular event that illustrates this tendency is the annual Notting Hill



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Carnival held in London over the August Bank Holiday weekend. Since riots marred the carnival 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. This is despite the fact that crime rates remain relatively low compared with those at other musical events attended by far fewer people (the event currently attracts in excess of 1.5 million people each year). The imposing police presence that accompanied the carnival for many years engendered a feeling of hostility on both sides which the media were eager to exploit. As Gary Younge explains:

Thanks largely to the press, carnival moved from being a story about culture to one about crime and race. For years after, carnival stories would come with a picture of policemen either in hospital after being attacked or in an awkward embrace with a black, female reveller in full costume ... [In 1977] riot police were briefly deployed. The next day, the Express's front page read: 'War Cry! The unprecedented scenes in the darkness of London streets looked and sounded like something out of the film classic *Zulu*'. Calls for carnival's banning came from all quarters. Tory shadow home secretary Willie Whitelaw said, 'The risk in holding it now seems to outweigh the enjoyment it gives' ... The Telegraph blamed black people for being in Britain in the first place, declaring: 'Many observers warned from the outset that mass immigration from poor countries of substantially different culture would generate anomie, alienation, delinquency and worse' ... As recently as 1991, following a stabbing, *Daily Mail* columnist Lynda Lee-Potter described the carnival as 'a sordid, sleazy nightmare that has become synonymous with death'. (Younge, 2002: unpaginated)

Even today, the British media emphasize trouble or potential trouble when reporting on the carnival, and the broadsheets are as culpable as the tabloids in this respect. For example, 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).

### **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.

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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). Thus, not only does news reporting privilege brevity, clarity and unambiguity in its presentation, but 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 cases (for example: the murders of Lin and Megan Russell by Michael Stone, who was classified as suffering from a Dangerous Severe Personality Disorder; the terrorist attacks in New York on 11 September 2001; the massacre of children in their Dunblane school by Thomas Hamilton; the murder of a toddler by two schoolboys from Liverpool), notions of potential 'dangerousness' have come to be applied indiscriminately to whole sections of society. In this oversimplified worldview of popular journalism, 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 come to be seen as 'evil monsters' with no hope of rehabilitation (Greer, 2003c). 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'.

A further feature of the simplification of crime news is that 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.

Personalization is another aspect of the process of news simplification, which simply means that stories about people are favoured over those concerning abstract concepts or institutions, the result of which is that events are frequently simplistically viewed as the actions and reactions of individuals (see 'Individualism' below). This is one element of a wider trend in which the British press in particular are unwilling to take up valuable column inches in explaining the background to an event. Sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and acts of terror and genocide the world over are thus frequently presented as spontaneous acts, with little or no attempt at contextualization.

Furthermore, the trend towards graphic and spectacular imagery (which is explored in more detail below) and – in broadcast media – audience participation, leaves little room for informed commentary or expert analysis. The absence of criminologists' voices from crime news discourse is a concern of many in our

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field (Barak, 1994b). Neil Postman comments that as each new media technology develops it creates:

[A] peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense; a world that does not permit us to do anything ... [yet] is also endlessly entertaining. (Postman, 1985: 78–9)

A final aspect of the simplification of news reporting is that the mass media are inclined to deal in *binary oppositions*; a tendency that is as true of crime reporting as any other form of reportage. Thus, stories involving crime and criminals 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. 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***

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The news value *individualism* connects *simplification* and *risk* (see p. 47). Individual definitions of crime, and rationalizations which highlight individual responses to crime, are preferred to more complex cultural and political explanations. As described above, 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'. As Fiske notes, 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 on the construction of offenders in the television programme *Crimewatch UK*). Most offenders are viewed as exhibiting signs of individual pathology, but one study that examines what most people would consider to be the 'worst' type of crime explains serial killing as the consequence of a culture which glorifies violence

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as 'an appropriate and manly response to frustration' and which stresses individualism and the freedom to explore one's self and one's impulses (Leyton, 1989: 364, cited in Coleman and Norris, 2000: 109).

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 (Norfolk farmer, Tony Martin, who killed a 16-year-old intruder, being a prime example). In other words, immediate, micro-solutions to crime are sought with little time for reflection or critical analysis. Consequently, the mediated image of crime is dominated by the figure of the dangerous predator or psychopath, and those who try and protect themselves from being the victims of crime are frequently portrayed as 'have a go heroes' (although it should be noted that the Tony Martin case divided press and public alike). Such representations are in contrast to victims who are killed in the commission of an offence. Victims who can be constructed as 'tragic innocents' are usually firmly located within familial and social contexts, thus enhancing even more strongly the impression of the offending 'outsider' acting alone (see Chapter 6). Meanwhile, as discussed in the previous chapter, institutions, corporations and governments may be literally getting away with murder. Media reports of crime may encourage us to fit security locks, take out expensive insurance policies and avoid going out alone at night, but they do not cause us to cancel our holiday plans or avoid travelling by train (Slapper and Tombs, 1999). 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 was one such complicated, technical case which might have seemed somewhat abstract to the general public. To avoid complex explanations, the media constructed the story around the figure of Barings employee, Nick Leeson, the 'rogue trader' who was single-handedly held responsible for the loss of £869 million (cf. Tomlinson, 1997).

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; cf. James, 1995; Taylor, 1999). 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

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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***

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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, 2003a). 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 (particularly the popular press) 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, 2003a; see also Chapter 6 of this volume).

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 (Bazelon, 1978). 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, and while it might be argued that the media fail to provide the public with the resources to independently construct alternative definitions and frameworks (Potter and Kappeler, 1998), 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 (see Chapter 6 of this volume).

### 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 (2003a) 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 (see also Cameron and Frazer, 1987; Sothill and Walby, 1991; Carter, 1998; Naylor, 2001). Ditton and Duffy 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 (Ditton and Duffy, 1983). 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,

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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 (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 (Greer, 2003a). 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 the victims of crime (for example, the mugging of actress, Liz Hurley, or the burglary of pop star Geri Halliwell's Notting Hill flat), perpetrators of crime (such as Gary Glitter and Jonathan King, both bastions of the British music industry, who have each been charged with offences relating to the sexual exploitation of children), or personalities who are simply famous for their endorsement of criminalized activities (for example, Brigitte Bardot, the French actress who has brought the activities of animal rights protesters to a much wider audience than they might have achieved otherwise), celebrities, their lives, and their experiences of crime 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.

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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. The conviction and imprisonment of Jeffrey Archer in 2001 thus represented a cardinal news story for the British media, as it involved a protagonist who was both a high-status person (a peer of the realm, no less) and a media celebrity, convicted of perjury after lying about money he had paid for the services of a prostitute. The extended period of *schadenfreude* enjoyed by the press is partially explained by their delight at exacting revenge on Lord Archer, who had previously successfully sued a tabloid newspaper for libel (and after the trial had to pay back the damages he had won). But it also illustrates the extent to which those who work in the media news industries are especially drawn to stories that unite celebrity or elevated status with sexual deviance and crime because they provide 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).

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. However, the fact that he will never be released into the community 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, the young killers of James Bulger), 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 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 this 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.



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However, it is not just those who represent show-business and notorious crime who are elevated to visibility in the news. High-status individuals in 'ordinary' life (business people, 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 (Greer, 2003a). Paradoxically, then, despite the media's general tendency to portray crime as a menace wrought by a disaffected underclass or 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 spectacular 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 the news. For example, the extended global coverage of two hijacked passenger jets ploughing into the twin towers of the New York World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, like earlier footage taken in Dallas in October 1965 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 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

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not of the 'First World', there have been other 'September 11ths' which have received little, if any, media coverage in the West (Brown, 2002; Hogg, 2002; Jefferson, 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 perpetrators and victims of crime 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 inter-related 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 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

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and were prepared to make repeated pleas for help on behalf of the police (and in the case of the Paynes and the Dowlers have continued to court the media, even after the story would normally be 'closed', in order to publicize public safety campaigns established in the names of their murdered children). 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**

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The news value which is arguably most common to all media is that of 'violence'. Violence fulfils the media's desire to present dramatic events in the most graphic possible fashion, and even the most regulated media institutions are constantly pushing back the boundaries of acceptable reportage when it comes to depicting acts of violence. In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, Hall et al. comment:

Any crime can be lifted into news visibility if violence becomes associated with it, since violence is perhaps the supreme example of ... 'negative

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consequences'. Violence represents a basic violation of the person; the greatest personal crime is 'murder', bettered only by the murder of a law-enforcement agent, a policeman. Violence is also the ultimate crime against property and against the State. It thus represents a fundamental rupture in the social order. The use of violence marks the distinction between those who are *of* society and those who are *outside* it ... The State, and the State only has the monopoly of legitimate violence, and this 'violence' is used to safeguard society against 'illegitimate' uses. Violence thus constitutes a critical threshold in society; all acts, especially criminal ones, which transgress that boundary are, by definition, worthy of news attention. It is often complained that 'the news' is too full of violence; an item can escalate to the top of the news agenda simply because it contains a 'Big Bang'. Those who so complain do not understand what 'the news' is about. It is impossible to define 'news values' in ways which would not rank 'violence' at or near the summit of news attention. (Hall et al., 1978: 68)

Despite its 'big bang' potential, in the years since Hall and his colleagues made this assertion, 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 (Naylor, 2001). Yet whether treated sensationally or unsensationally, violence – including violent death – remains a staple of media reporting. According to research, the British press devote 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 involves interpersonal violence (Williams and Dickinson, 1993).

Postmodernists might argue that one of the reasons for the expansion in depictions of violence to gain audience attention in crime news is that real life has become increasingly saturated with images of violence, humiliation and cruelty. For cultural criminologists like Presdee (2000), crime and violence have become objectified and commodified, and thus desired, to the extent where they are widely distributed through all forms of media to be pleurably consumed. Presdee offers numerous examples of the commodification of violence, humiliation and cruelty 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 bare-knuckle 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

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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.

### *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 pictures 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. 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. In his study of the professional codes governing popular news reporting, Chibnall (1977) suggests that the violence most likely to receive media attention is that which involves sudden injury to 'innocent others', especially in public places. Emotive language such as 'brutal thugs', 'rampaging hooligans' and 'anarchy' frequently accompany the reporting of crimes and disorder and serve to whip up public hysteria about the 'enemy' within. But such definitions serve to impose severe limitations on public discourses and debates about crime, so that it is 'spectacular' crimes (joyriding, rioting, arson, clashes between police and citizens and so on) that get most attention. They make good copy and are visually arresting on television. But 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.

The 'spectacle' of news reporting has arguably blurred the lines between 'real' and 'fake' and made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between 'fact' and 'fiction', especially in television programming. This is the age of 'fake TV'; a 'relentless and grotesque' drive towards infotainment (Osborne, 2002: 131). Channel 4 caused controversy in 2001 when it broadcast *Brass Eye*, a spoof

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current affairs programme in which celebrities were duped into condemning paedophilia in the most ludicrous terms, and the same station was prosecuted for passing off actors as 'real' participants in a documentary about male prostitution. Furthermore, not only do programmes like *Big Brother* blur the line between entertainment and reality and call into question the extent to which people behave 'normally' while being watched on television, but televised court trials in the US 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 murder of his wife, are examples from the US of graphic imagery being used to heighten the drama of already newsworthy stories. In this country, 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, Jill Dando shopping in Hammersmith, and Damilola Taylor skipping down a Peckham street, 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 (see Chapters 6 and 7 for further discussion of CCTV and surveillance). In 2001 the Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, exploited these conflicting emotions by urging Americans to watch him die at the hands of the State. Victims, relatives and witnesses were allocated tickets for a CCTV showing of his execution (McCahill, 2003); an event which many predict will soon lead to executions routinely being broadcast on US television networks.

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**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

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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 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 30 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's 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' (Muncie, 1999a: 3). The case also proved a watershed in terms of criminal justice and crime prevention. The 10-year-olds were tried in adult court and the case was the impetus for a massive expansion of CCTV equipment in public spaces throughout the country (Norris and Armstrong, 1999; McCahill, 2003). 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 (Muncie, 1999a). 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

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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' (1999a). As far as the British media were concerned, these children were not 'innocents'. Yet neither were they uniquely deviant. While the Bulger case provided 'the strongest possible evidence to an already worried public that there was something new and terrifying about juvenile crime' (Newburn, 1996: 70), it was merely the apex of a wave of hysteria that, in the early 1990s, incorporated young joyriders, truants, drug users, burglars, gang members and, memorably, 'Ratboy'; a child of 14 with a string of offences to his name who had absconded from local authority care and was reportedly living in a sewer (1996: 70). 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.

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***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



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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 (Barak, 1994b; cf. Hartman and Husband, 1974).

The concentration of news media on the criminal and deviant activities of people from the working 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 focussing 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

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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, to Tony Blair's promotion of a 'new moral order' (prompted by studies showing that Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe), successive British leaders 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.

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**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 (McNair, 1993, 1998). No story can be told without judgements 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

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF CRIME NEWS

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. 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 (McNair, 1998; Manning, 2001). 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 the spheres of crime control, crime prevention and uncovering police corruption and miscarriages of justice.

### 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 newsgathering. 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 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 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?
- 3 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. As global news outlets expand and develop, what changes do you foresee in the news values used to shape the reporting of crime news in the future?
- 4 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 Galtung, J. and Ruge, M., originally published in 1965, but most easily accessed in S. Cohen and J. Young (eds) (1973) *The Manufacture of News* (Constable). Chibnall, S. (1977) *Law and Order News* (Tavistock) also still deserves close attention. Greer, C. (2003) *Sex Crime and the Media* (Willan) considers the extent to which news values shape the reporting of sex crime in Northern Ireland, and highlights the news value 'proximity' as being especially important in this context. Wykes, M. (2001) *News, Crime and Culture* (Pluto) discusses news values in relation to crime and deviance and includes several fascinating case studies. Manning, P. (2001) *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction* (Sage) is a useful introduction to news production more generally. Finally, two websites that offer free archive searches for news stories are those provided by the *Guardian* newspaper and the BBC. They can be found at [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) and [www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk) respectively.