

NEWSPAPER REPORTING AND THE PUBLIC CONSTRUCTION OF HOMICIDE

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This paper outlines the distorted nature of press reporting of English and Welsh homicides. We investigated the reporting of 2,685 homicides in England and Wales in three national newspapers: The Times, the Mail and the Mirror in the period 1993–97. By systematically charting the nature of reporting distortions, we explore the contribution of newspapers to the social construction of homicide. The study analysed a wide range of variables to explain homicide story salience: the circumstance of the killing was found to play a crucial role in whether a homicide is reported, with sexual homicides and motiveless acts being more likely to be reported. Homicides involving young children are highly likely to be reported, but infant homicides are not. These public narratives construct homicide differently to the reality of illegal killing, highlighting particular versions of ‘otherness’ and danger. Such distorted contributions to framing criminological problems may, we argue, foster political and social responses to homicide that are not based on statistical reality but media representations of reality.

Introduction

In this article we examine how print reporting contributes to the ways in which societies frame criminological problems—in this case, illegal killing. Ericson *et al.* (1991: Ch. 1) have argued that what newspapers pick out as exceptional or newsworthy is predicated on an assessment of what is currently morally acceptable. Moreover, they see the news values represented as part of the agencies which actively reproduce social order; the exceptional, then, arises out of a conservatism which defines acceptable behaviour. If this is so, the selection decisions made in the reporting of crime cannot be neutral, for in this sense, reporting of crime is best understood as a part of defining ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’, rather than about debating issues of justice and equity. If, as Ericson *et al.* argue, news values represent the agencies which reproduce social order, then how they report illegal killing has a dynamic place in the social construction of this particular criminological problem.

A ‘criminological problem’, in this context, is a social issue which focuses on crime; it is a society’s agreement about the nature, threat and solutions to criminal matters which, at any given moment, are defined as problematic. The framing of a criminological problem, then, is the way in which a complex society comes to (roughly) accepted definitions and shared understandings of the issue. In this paper we consider the social construction and the reality of homicide in relation to each other and as social phenomena rather than as separate, analytical frames. In this sense, we occupy a similar

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space to that of Beckett and Sasson (2000) in that we are interested ‘in the rhetorical practices through which crime-related problems are constructed’ (p. 7), and situate these in a political and social context. Furthermore, it is, we contend, only on a basis of detailed evidence about the actuality of homicide that one can move on to analyse how society defines illegal killing as a criminological problem.

We do not, however, move on—as Beckett and Sasson do—to an analysis of social policy, but explore in more detail the contribution of newspapers to a public understanding of homicide. In this process, newspapers have a unique place in contributing to the framing of criminological problems, regularly reaching large readerships in a highly accessible form. The process of framing criminological problems may occur in response to outstandingly alarming or shocking crimes, and move from being framed as a public problem to being more pressing, or even a matter of panic (cf. Thompson 1998). In this paper we use the example of homicide to explore some of these issues: all homicides are shocking, but not all lead to a social acceptance or recognition of the ‘need to do something’. While all homicides are disturbing, not all cases make societies reconsider where their values lie as, indeed, some major murder cases might be described as having done. Newspapers remain an easily accessible source of information, part of the means by which some murders become infamous, while others go unnoticed in the wider world.

There is now an extensive literature on media representations of crime, most particularly discussion of how media contribute to or provoke a fear of crime (cf. Reiner 1997). In this paper we echo elements of Ericson *et al.* (1991); Schlesinger *et al.* (1991); Schlesinger and Tumber (1992) in so far as we argue a need to recognize the complex, interactive—indeed, even iterative—processes that surround newspaper reporting of major crimes. Altheide and Johnson (1980) have argued that ‘impression management’ and the need for organizations to sway specific groups of people (not just the whole of society) leads bureaucratic propaganda to actively shape culture, rather than being only a cultural outcome (see Chapter 1). Hence, they note: ‘...how the use of such media as official reports and ‘objective’ studies can directly influence decisions that in turn can directly affect the public domain.’ (pp. 18–19). Beckett and Sasson, also situating their analysis of penal and social policy in the American political system, chart the development of specific political discourses from president to president and through party political debates. The main thrust, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, was one of eschewing social and welfare policy for tough stances on crime (see especially ‘The Politics of Crime’, Chapter 4, pp. 47–74).

Garland (2001) has theorized the nature of change in policy and thinking about social order and control that, he argues, has occurred since the 1970s. More usefully for us, Garland has done this within a less culturally specific framework than Beckett and Sasson, and is one that includes British developments. A key part of these changes has been the emergence of a highly politicized, populist policy-making process which has overturned accepted ways of thinking and previously acknowledged expertise. Hence, a ‘highly charged political discourse now surrounds all crime control issues, so that every decision is taken in the glare of publicity and political contention and every mistake becomes a scandal’ (p. 13). Presentation of crime issues and the development of crime policy are theorized here, then, as a matter of political advantage within an era that emphasizes the drama of crime, criminality and fearfulness.

At first glance, homicide is too serious a crime to be a part of a discussion about social construction and crime. Yet the judgements made about the crime and the

offenders are situational and focus on supposed intent. In other words, society does not really believe killing to be wholly wrong on every occasion; or, at least, that every illegal killing is not always defined as homicide. Once it is agreed that, for example, a homicide has occurred, then a society can unite in condemning both act and actor. But the route from sudden death to a conviction for homicide is more complex than one might first imagine. There is plenty of room, then, for public debate and for public construction of criminological problems, informed by reporting of any stage in a particular homicide case. Hence, Ericson *et al.*'s conservative agenda, when combined with newspapers' need to entertain and engage readerships, can result in the framing of a powerful public narrative about homicide that might result in a social construction of this criminological problem that is far adrift from the actuality of life.

We have argued elsewhere that the emotions surrounding crime should be taken seriously along with fictional accounts, for both contribute to the public narratives surrounding criminological issues (Peelo and Soothill 2000). The public gaze is needed to observe the practice of law as part of a process of democratic reflection. The public, which once observed hangings, is now observing trials, watching the implementation of law at one stage removed. Newspapers, in this sense, are the new 'public scaffold' (see Erikson 1966; Foucault 1977). In moving from the public scaffold as the site of 'the crowd' to the provision by mass communication of more information, more speedily, there is a greater possibility of misinformation and distancing of the public gaze. In distancing ourselves more effectively from the reality of disorder it becomes possible for us to lose sight of how criminological problems are constructed by a society, even in the case of so serious a crime as murder.

Yet we must recognize that the reporting of crime is, of necessity, selective. Newspapers do not carry accounts of each and every crime committed within a state, a county or a country. Journalists' selection criteria, therefore, have been subject to close scrutiny, along with the processes by which crime events transmute into items of news. Ditton and Duffy (1983) studied crime reporting in Scotland in March 1981 (concluding that there was an over-emphasis on crimes of violence and on crimes involving sex), a study which led to their succinct summary of the problem: it is clear that selection between cases occurs in crime reporting, but does this produce a distorted picture of crime?

There have been a small number of important studies in recent years about the gulf between the profile of actual homicides and the coverage of homicide in the media. In America, in particular, local studies have focused systematically on how there are patterns to which cases are reported and which are not reported—and illustrate how rarely the subset reported are representative of the whole profile. So, one must conclude, there are regular and repeated patterns underpinning which homicides are seen as more newsworthy than others. Hence, Sorenson *et al.* (1998) studied the coverage of homicides in Los Angeles County between 1990 and 1994. They concluded that homicides with female, child or elderly victims, where the suspect/attacker was a stranger to the victim or those in wealthier neighbourhoods, were more likely to be covered than others, such as '... those with Black or Hispanic victims or victims with less than a high school education' (p. 1510).

Johnstone *et al.* (1994) compared the 212 homicides reported in one or both of Chicago's two daily newspapers (the *Tribune* and the *Sun-Times*) with the 684 homicides known to the police. They found that the reported subset was not representative of the whole group of killings but more likely to report killings of whites (rather than minorities)

and ones in middle-class areas (rather than in poor neighbourhoods). They found this distortion of the picture of homicide surprising in that ethnic minorities are commonly depicted as more heavily involved in crime as perpetrators.

There is, particularly for homicide, an underlying recognition that public 'perception' and 'impression' are not enough: that there is a reality and actuality in crime; and that this reality exists alongside whatever the public perception of the issue may be. For Sorenson *et al.* this reality is designated 'epidemiology', and homicide is depicted, thereby, as a fatal social disease which can be measured as can any illness. Possible reporting distortion matters, to these authors, for social reasons, particularly as they see an informed public as one key to the prevention of violence (1998: p. 1510). Johnstone *et al.* recognize journalists' need to locate and select 'human interest' stories amongst the plethora of homicides available for reporting. In pointing out the patterns of distortion in these selection decisions, they comment on the dated feel of the culture informing journalists' choices. They recognize that these choices place emphasis on individual rather than social pathology and express their concerns about the social consequences of distorted reporting '... that essentially ignores the economic and social underpinnings of the problem...' and leaves the impression '... that the lives of some groups of Americans are more important than those of others' (1994: p. 870).

We would not expect the situations in the United States and the UK to be immediately comparable. First, there is a myriad of difference between the newspaper cultures of both countries. Second, the nature of homicide in both countries is different: Beckett and Sasson argue that crime is not so much a problem in America but that homicide is; this, they argue, is due to the availability of guns, intertwined with the drug trade, racial and economic inequality, and the street culture that accompanies urban poverty in American cities (see, especially, Chapter 3 'Murder, American Style'). In spite of these two important provisos, we can nonetheless recognize some shared concerns. Within both countries, homicide holds a special place in crime reporting. Within this framework, we can expect that there are selection criteria at work within editorial cultures. What concerns us is to establish if these selections represent a distorted picture and how far adrift from the 'reality' of killing is this picture? Hence we ask: are there patterns that typify exclusion and inclusion of cases?

Within our framework, method is a cornerstone of social criticism, in that the systematic examination of a known phenomenon—in this case illegal killing—is the basis on which perceptions, inter-relationships and personal accounts can, at a later stage, be explored. The notion that there is a 'reality' of crime which is, in any way, different to the experience, understanding or social response to crime is one that needs to be systematically explored and demonstrated. So, exploring if reported cases construct a public narrative of homicide at odds with its reality requires systematically relating reporting to actual homicides.

The data from this study, then, provide an account of the reality of illegal killing in England and Wales alongside their representations in the print press. As such, we are questioning the contribution of newspapers to the social processes that currently surround criminological problems. Of course, by placing method and data as the cornerstone of criticism, we engaged in comparison of methods used with other relevant studies and have found that some common features are beginning to emerge in the study of press reporting of serious crime: comparison with official statistics; coverage within specific papers over given time periods; and awareness of a need to distinguish

between 'coverage', 'nature of content' and 'intensity of coverage'. These commonalities exist even within localized studies and across potentially quite distinct cultural contexts. These common features mask, however, key differences in methodological approach and not all of these features are tackled in each study. So we start, then, by making clear the nature of the data used in this study.

The Data in This Study

This study is concerned with homicide cases in England and Wales first recorded in the period 1993–96. A homicide case is defined to be an act of murder, manslaughter or infanticide carried out on one or more victims by one or more perpetrators at the same time. We take as our sample all cases initially recorded as homicide, rather than those finally determined to be homicide, as this article is concerned with newspaper reporting of what is perceived at the time to be homicide, whatever the later outcome.

We used the Homicide Index, a computerised Home Office database of all initially recorded homicides in England and Wales, as our basic source. This contains details of all cases dealt with by police forces in England and Wales from 1977 onwards. The Homicide Index has one coding scheme up to 1994 and a revised coding scheme from 1995 onwards. In both schemes, information is collected on the victims and final suspects in a case, including gender, age, occupation, country of birth and relationship between the victim and suspect, as well as motive, method of killing, police authority and final classification of the case (murder, manslaughter, acquittal etc.). Where appropriate, we devised a composite coding frame to accommodate both schemes. From 1995 onwards, information is also collected on the ethnicity of the victim and suspect.

There were 2,685 initially recorded homicide cases identified in England and Wales in the period 1993–96. These were initially classified into 2,396 murders, 282 manslaughter cases and 7 infanticide cases. Three homicide cases¹ with a terrorist motive were excluded from the analysis. Fewer than 4 per cent of the cases (95) had a multiple victim, but 18.3 per cent of the cases where suspects had been identified had more than one suspect. Cases which had not yet identified a suspect by the end of 1999 numbered 170 (6.3 per cent).

The reporting of these homicide cases was examined in three national newspaper titles: *The Times*, representing a broadsheet newspaper title (and consisting of *The Times*, *Sunday Times* and supplements²), the *Mail*, a middle-brow right of centre newspaper (*Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday*) and the *Mirror*, a tabloid left of centre newspaper (*Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*). All stories from the start of 1993 to the end of 1997 relating to homicide were traced and examined (excluding stories on terrorist killings). For *The Times*, this tracing was carried out by using *The Times Index* (Pearson and Soothill 2003) and examining all stories indexed under murder, manslaughter and related charges. For the *Mail* and the *Mirror*, CD-ROM searches were used to identify the stories. By following up the newspaper search to the end of 1997, each homicide had the opportunity of being included for at least one year after the date of first being recorded on the Homicide Index. As we were comparing with a database on homicides in England and Wales between 1993 and 1996 (inclusive), homicides first recorded outside this period or taking place outside England and Wales

¹ The Warrington shopping centre bomb, the Bishopsgate bomb in the City of London in 1993, and the Canary Wharf bomb in East London in 1996 had five victims in total.

² The supplements are *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Times Educational Supplement* and *Times Higher Educational Supplement*. All are separate products from the main newspaper.

were excluded from the analysis. For example, the Dunblane Primary School case in Scotland in 1996 that attracted more stories in *The Times* than any other case during this period (Soothill *et al.* 2002) was not included in the study.

We adopted as our measure of homicide reporting whether a particular homicide case had been reported in a particular newspaper or not. This allowed us to assess newsworthiness—whether a case was judged interesting enough to report or not.

Results

Only a subset of the 2,685 initially recorded homicides were reported in the three newspapers. In all, just under 40 per cent of homicide cases appeared in at least one of the newspapers. Table 1 identifies the pattern of case reporting over the period 1993–97. *The Times* (28 per cent) reported the most homicides, but the *Mirror* (25 per cent) and the *Mail* (24 per cent) followed quite closely. There were two surprising results. Only 14 per cent of homicide cases were reported in all three newspapers, while 17 per cent were reported in just one of the three newspapers. In terms of the 1,066 cases reported in at least one newspaper, 35 per cent were reported in all three newspapers and as many as 42 per cent were reported in just one of the newspapers, suggesting that newspapers are making different decisions according to the case characteristics.

We first examined the variables singly. For some variables, an initial analysis was carried out to determine the best method of categorizing the information. For each newspaper, differences in the percentage of cases reported between categories were assessed for statistical significance by logistic regression, taking as response the binary measure of whether the case was reported and using as predictor the single categorical variable of interest. Significance was assessed by comparing the log-likelihoods of two models—one with and one without the categorical predictor (Collett 1991).

Initial classification of homicide

Most homicides are initially classified as murder, with only 10.5 per cent reported as manslaughter and only seven cases (0.3 per cent) as infanticide. Table 2 shows that all three newspapers showed significant differences in reporting according to the initial

TABLE 1 *England and Wales homicides 1993–96 reported in three national newspapers in the period 1993–97*

Where reported	No. of cases	% of cases
Reported in all three newspapers	377	14.0
Reported in <i>Times</i> and <i>Mail</i> only	97	3.6
Reported in <i>Times</i> and <i>Mirror</i> only	92	3.4
Reported in <i>Mail</i> and <i>Mirror</i> only	51	1.9
Reported in <i>Times</i> only	190	7.1
Reported in <i>Mail</i> only	120	4.5
Reported in <i>Mirror</i> only	139	5.2
Reported in <i>Times</i>	756	28.2
Reported in <i>Mail</i>	645	24.0
Reported in <i>Mirror</i>	659	24.5
Reported in any of the three newspapers	1,066	39.7
Not reported in any of the three newspapers	1,619	60.3
Total	2,685	100.0

TABLE 2 *Effect of discovery variables on the likelihood of homicide case reporting*

	No. of homicide cases	% of all cases	% reported in <i>Times</i>	% reported in <i>Mail</i>	% reported in <i>Mirror</i>
Initial classification of homicide			p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p = 0.002
Murder	2396	89.2	29.7	25.3	25.5
Manslaughter	282	10.5	15.2	13.8	16.3
Infanticide	7	0.3	14.3	14.3	28.6
Police force (standard region) dealing with homicide			p = 0.001	p = 0.013	p = 0.001
Wales	127	4.7	36.2	33.1	36.2
South West	210	7.8	34.3	29.0	30.5
London	603	22.5	32.0	23.9	24.0
South East	301	11.2	30.9	26.9	27.6
North East	155	5.8	27.7	23.9	30.3
Yorkshire & Humberside	280	10.4	26.4	23.2	19.6
East	171	6.4	26.3	26.9	26.3
West Midlands	281	10.5	24.2	20.3	19.9
East Midlands	158	5.9	23.4	25.3	22.8
North West	399	14.9	21.3	18.0	20.6

classification of homicide ($p < 0.002$). Unsurprisingly, all three were more likely to report murder rather than manslaughter.

Police force region

We expected this variable, which measures the region in which the case was dealt with (usually where the victim was found) to show a London bias in homicide reporting as the newspapers in the study were London-based. However, while Table 2 shows that police force region was significant for all three newspapers ($p < 0.02$), an unexpected pattern emerged with only *The Times* showing a higher than average reporting rate for London-based crimes. In contrast, the North West was the region that was less likely to be reported by all three newspapers, although for the *Mail* and the *Mirror*, the West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside also had low reporting rates. Perhaps harder to explain was the interest in crimes based in Wales or the South West—all three newspapers had high rates of reporting from these areas.

The other variables are discussed first in terms of those relating to the victim, then the method of homicide, then the suspect variables and, finally, the circumstances of the homicide together with the relationship of victim and suspect. The victim and suspect variables on the probability of homicide case reporting are shown as Table 3, while the case variables (that is, relationship of victim to suspect, method and circumstances) are shown as Table 4.

Victim

Age

We examined three ways of summarizing age of victim—age of the principal victim, age of the oldest victim and age of the youngest victim. Initial analysis which examined

their association with reporting outcome³ revealed that all three measures gave similar results, and this was unsurprising given that over 96 per cent of the cases had a single victim. However, age of youngest victim proved to be the best choice as it explained slightly more of the variability in the rate of reporting (for all three newspapers) and is a highly significant predictor of homicide case reporting ($p < 0.01$).

Figure 1 shows (a) the observed number of homicide cases for each year of age of youngest victim (with a fitted smoothing curve superimposed on the observed data); (b) the observed homicide reporting rate by age of youngest victim for *The Times* (with smoothing curve); and (c) the fitted smoothing curves for all three newspapers. Figure 1(a) shows that the most common age of youngest victim of killing was under one year, with 118 homicides. The number of homicides then decreases to a minimum at age 10, with 11 homicides. The number of homicides then increases to a second peak at age 25, with 70 homicides. The number of homicides then decreases to a minimum at age 40, with 15 homicides. The number of homicides then increases to a third peak at age 60, with 25 homicides. The number of homicides then decreases to a minimum at age 80, with 5 homicides. The number of homicides then increases to a fourth peak at age 90, with 15 homicides. The number of homicides then decreases to a minimum at age 100, with 0 homicides.

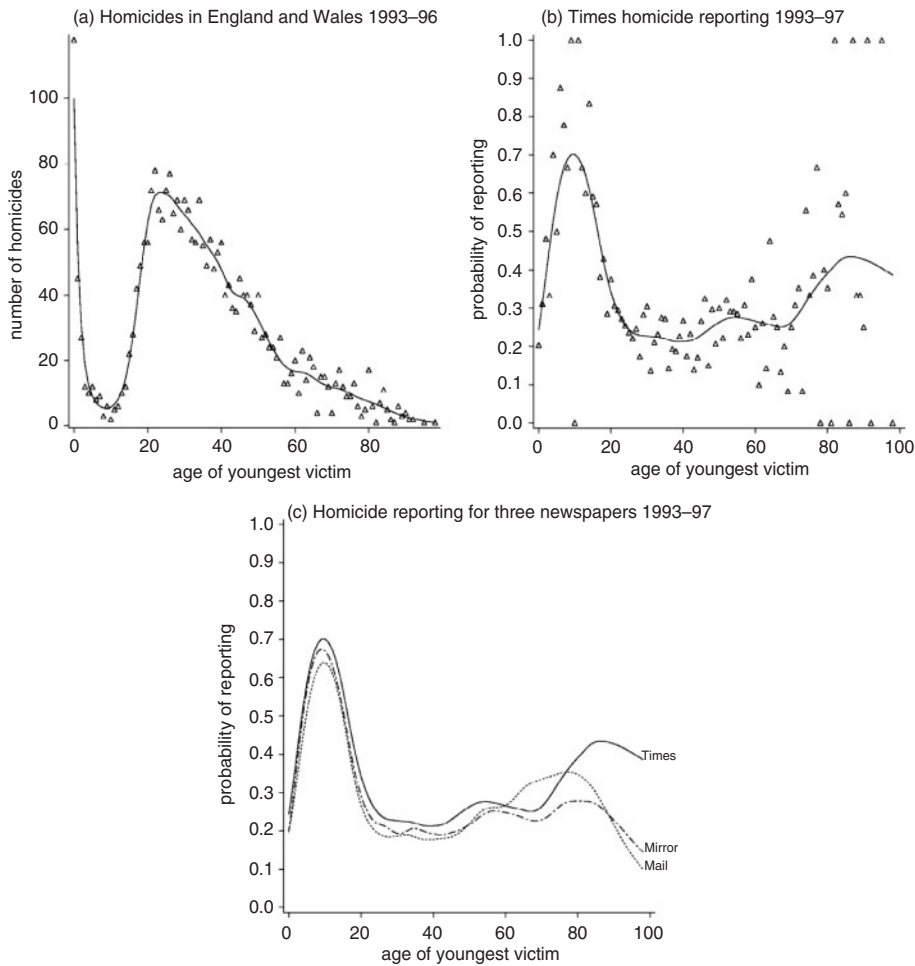


FIG. 1 Age of youngest victim

³ Generalized additive models (Hastie and Tibshirani 1990) were used to determine this, taking the proportion of stories reported as the binary response variable, and fitting a logistic age smoother with 15 degrees of freedom on each of the age measures in turn.

before increasing again, reaching a peak at age 22. There is then a further slow decline as age increases. The reporting rate for *The Times* shows (in Figure 1(b)) a mirror image of this plot, with the likelihood of reporting rates low for babies (around one in four cases), before reaching a peak at age 10 (about 65–70 per cent of cases) then declining again, reaching a plateau at around age 22, with reporting rates of around 20 per cent. Figure 1(c) shows how this pattern is surprisingly consistent over newspapers. Interestingly, for cases involving victims over 75, *The Times* shows most interest and the *Mirror* least interest. It is important to stress that Figures 1(b) and (c) focus on the likelihood of reporting, and so, while homicides of elderly people are rare, such killings do not excite disproportionate interest among the press. The opposite is the case for young victims. We categorized this variable into nine age groups for presentational purposes (Table 3), choosing the groups to broadly reflect this observed pattern.

Sex

Two measures of biological sex relating to the victims of a case were examined. The first was simply the sex of the principal victim, and the second indicated whether any of the victims were female. Initial analysis using a logistic regression showed that the second measure explained more variation in the data. All three newspapers were more likely to report homicides where a female was one of the victims ($p < 0.001$). This result is consistent with earlier studies (Johnstone *et al.* 1994 ; Pritchard and Hughes 1997; Sorenson *et al.* 1998).

Number of victims

For all three newspapers, the proportion of homicide cases reported rose significantly with the number of victims ($p < 0.001$). For *The Times*, for example, the percentage of cases reported increased from 26.4 per cent for one victim cases, to 71.0 per cent for two victim cases, up to 90.0 per cent where there were four or more victims.

Country of birth

We classified country of birth into eight geographical regions. When the country of birth of the principal victim was examined, a significant and complex association was found for the *Mail* ($p = 0.03$) and the *Mirror* ($p = 0.005$), but not for *The Times*. For both the *Mail* and the *Mirror*, increased reporting compared with the UK was found for victims born in Europe, North America, Australasia and Africa. Decreased reporting was noted for victims born in Central and South America, the Caribbean and 'other Asia'. The *Mail* had an increased reporting rate for those born in Muslim Asia; in contrast, the *Mirror* had a decreased rate compared with the UK.

Ethnicity

This was only available from 1995 onwards and the information is patchily recorded, with no information for over 15 per cent of victims and 10 per cent of suspects. Ethnicity of the principal victim was found to be unimportant for both *The Times* and the *Mirror*, with only the *Mail* showing significant changes in homicide reporting rates ($p = 0.03$), with black and Asian victims less likely to be reported.

Occupation

A six-category variable was formed to cover the four-year period. All three newspapers gave significant relationships ($p < 0.001$) between social status and homicide reporting.

TABLE 3 *Effect of victim and suspect variables on the likelihood of homicide case reporting*

	Victim details					Suspect details ^a				
	No. of homicide cases	% of all cases	% reported in Times	% reported in Mail	% reported in Mirror	No. of homicide cases	% of all cases	% reported in Times	% reported in Mail	% reported in Mirror
	Youngest victim:		p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	Youngest suspect:		p < 0.001	p = 0.001	p = 0.01
Age ¹										
0-3	202	7.5	27.2	22.8	24.3	1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
4-12	61	2.3	72.1	62.3	65.6	7	0.3	71.4	85.7	71.4
13-16	72	2.7	62.5	59.7	58.3	110	4.4	47.3	34.5	37.3
17-21	275	10.2	34.9	26.5	30.2	461	18.3	27.3	24.1	23.9
22-30	619	23.1	25.4	19.5	21.5	891	35.4	25.1	20.1	23.2
31-40	566	21.1	21.6	18.4	19.8	569	22.6	29.3	25.1	25.8
41-50	385	14.3	22.9	19.5	20.3	295	11.7	26.8	26.1	21.0
51-60	213	7.9	27.7	25.4	23.0	125	5.0	25.6	21.6	21.6
61 and over	192	10.9	30.8	31.2	25.0	56	2.2	21.4	23.2	25.0
Female			p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	Any female suspect		p = 0.01	p = 0.21	p = 0.72
No	1,748	65.10	22.8	18.5	18.5	2,173	86.4	26.8	23.2	24.3
Yes	937	34.90	38.1	34.4	35.8	342	13.6	33.6	26.3	25.1
Number			p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001	No. of suspects		p = 0.09	p = 0.36	p = 0.12
1	2,590	96.5	26.4	22.4	23.1	2,056	81.7	26.7	23.1	23.6
2	69	2.6	71.0	63.8	62.3	299	11.9	32.1	26.8	30.1
3	16	0.6	81.3	75.0	68.8	101	4.0	34.7	27.7	23.8
4 or more	10	0.4	90.0	90.0	70.0	59	2.3	30.5	20.3	23.7
Country of birth			p = 0.08	p = 0.03	p = 0.005	Principal suspect		p = 0.58	p = 0.25	p = 0.72
UK	1,827	68.0	27.9	25.0	25.9	1,015	40.4	28.0	23.8	25.1
W Europe	42	1.6	33.3	31.0	33.3	24	1.0	41.7	29.2	25.0
Other Europe,	15	0.6	33.3	46.7	26.7	7	0.3	28.6	28.6	14.3
Russia										
N America	7	0.3	57.1	42.9	71.4	3	0.1	66.7	66.7	66.7
Australasia										
Central, S America and Caribbean	19	0.7	10.5	10.5	15.8	15	0.6	33.3	33.3	26.7

TABLE 3 *continued*

	Victim details				Suspect details ²					
	No. of homicide cases	% of all cases	% reported in <i>Times</i>	% reported in <i>Mail</i>	% reported in <i>Mirror</i>	No. of homicide cases	% of all cases	% reported in <i>Times</i>	% reported in <i>Mail</i>	% reported in <i>Mirror</i>
Africa	15	0.6	60.0	33.3	26.7	11	0.4	45.5	27.3	18.2
Middle East, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh	29	1.1	34.5	31.0	17.2	25	1.0	24.0	28.0	20.0
Other Asia	34	1.3	29.4	11.8	8.8	22	0.9	22.7	4.5	13.6
Not recorded	697	26.0	27.5	20.9	21.2	1393	55.4	27.1	23.3	24.0
Ethnicity (1995 on)	Principal victim		p = 0.54	p = 0.03	p = 0.12	Principal suspect		p = 0.74	p = 0.20	p = 0.22
White	946	69.6	23.0	21.5	22.5	919	72.0	22.7	21.4	21.4
Black	114	8.4	21.1	15.8	17.5	121	9.5	21.5	20.7	19.8
Asian	70	5.2	15.7	14.3	11.4	66	5.2	16.7	16.7	15.2
Other	21	1.5	28.6	23.8	14.3	31	2.4	25.8	35.5	35.5
Not recorded	208	15.3	24.5	28.8	22.6	139	10.9	24.5	26.6	24.5
Social status	principal victim		p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001					
Prostitute, vagrant	27	1.0	33.3	48.1	33.3					
Police, fire and public service	33	1.2	45.5	45.5	48.5					
Non-manual	189	7.0	45.5	43.4	41.3					
Other manual	489	18.2	29.9	26.4	25.8					
No occupation	1,578	58.8	26.2	21.4	22.9					
Not known	369	13.7	23.3	18.7	18.7					
All cases	2,685	100	28.2	24.0	24.5	2,515	100.0	27.7	23.6	24.4

¹We used the graphs in Figures 1 and 2 to determine an appropriate age grouping, adopting a nine category classification.

²170 cases with no suspects on the Homicide Index are omitted.

Generally, the higher the social status of the victim, the more likely it was that reporting would take place. So, non-manual workers, together with police, ambulance and fire crew had high rates of reporting, then manual workers, followed by those not working (this category included children and retired victims), with the lowest rates of reporting. An important exception to this rule was the above average reporting of homicides where the principal victim was a prostitute or vagrant. This was true for all three newspapers, and was the highest category for the *Mail*. This was an unexpected result as it is often said that there was no interest in the killings of the Yorkshire Ripper while the victims were known prostitutes.

For the victims, therefore, there is evidence that particular kinds of victims do attract the attention of newspapers in general, while some newspapers do feature some types of victims disproportionately.

Method of homicide

Table 4 shows that the most common method was a sharp instrument, followed by hitting and kicking, and strangulation/suffocation. Method of homicide was significantly associated with homicide reporting for all three newspapers ($p < 0.001$). All three newspapers had enhanced reporting rates for strangulation and suffocation cases, for shooting cases, for neglect cases and for arson and burning cases. Below average reporting of homicide occurred in all three newspapers for hitting and kicking cases, for poisoning cases and for those cases where the victim was pushed (or caused to fall). Other categories of method showed differences between newspapers. Homicide using exhaust fumes was more likely to be reported by *The Times* and the *Mail* than the *Mirror*; homicide by drowning showed above average reporting for *The Times* and *Mirror*, but not for the *Mail*.

Suspect

Age

As with the victims, age of youngest suspect was the most appropriate measure of age. For all three newspapers, age of youngest suspect is a highly significant predictor of homicide case reporting ($p \leq 0.01$). Figure 2(a) shows that cases involving suspects under 14 are extremely rare. From age 14 on, there is a rapid increase, with a maximum at age 23. There is then a rapid decline, and homicides involving suspects aged 65 or over are—like victims—very rare. As Figures 2(b) and 2(c) demonstrate, the likelihood of reporting rates is also strongly related to the age of the youngest suspect. While *The Times* is used as the exemplar in Figure 2(b), Figure 2(c) shows that all three newspapers display similar patterns, with a strong interest in cases involving suspects aged 14 or younger, with reporting rates declining to a constant level of around one story in four if the youngest suspect is aged between 20 and 70. For *The Times* and the *Mail*, reporting rates for homicides committed by over 70s then decline further, with little interest in homicides committed by the elderly. Age was again categorized into nine age groups so that the results could be presented in tabular form.

Sex

There was little difference between the two measures of the sex of the principal suspect and whether the case had any female suspect, so for consistency with the victim analysis

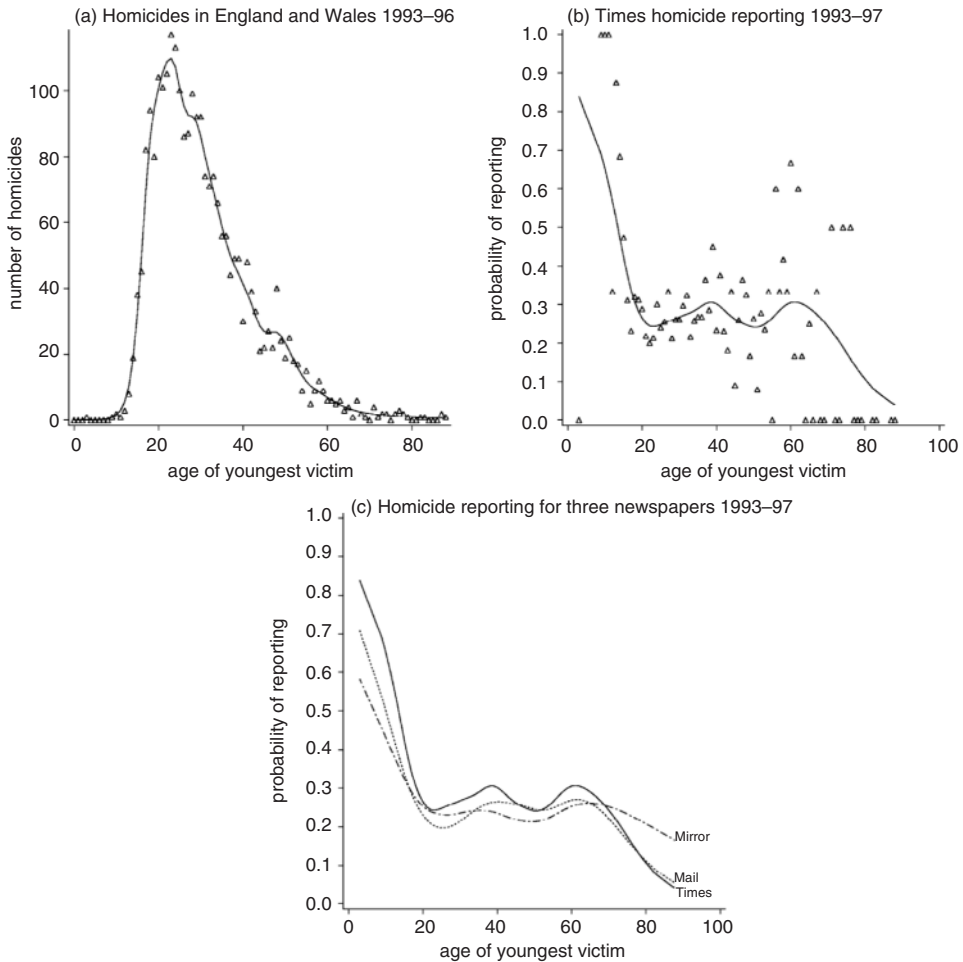


FIG. 2 Age of youngest suspect

we used ‘Any female suspect’ as our measure. Differences between newspapers were found. For *The Times*, stories involving female suspects were more likely to be reported ($p=0.01$). However, for the *Mirror* and the *Mail*, the biological sex of the suspects had no significant effect on homicide reporting.

Number of suspects

The pattern here was far less clear and, indeed, there were no significant relationships. Around one-quarter of cases involving just one suspect were reported in each of the three newspapers.

Country of birth and ethnicity

There was no significant relationship between homicide reporting and country of birth of suspect or between homicide reporting and the suspect’s ethnicity for any of the three newspapers.

Social status

There was no information available on the social status of suspects.

Circumstances of the homicide

The circumstance or motive for the homicide is thought by some commentators to be an uninformative variable on the Homicide Index. This is partly because so many homicides are classified as ‘rage or quarrel’—in our sample 42.0 per cent of homicide cases were so classified. However, circumstance was highly significantly associated with homicide reporting for all three newspapers ($p < 0.001$). Very high homicide reporting rates of around 70 per cent were found for all three newspapers for sexual homicide—these are classified by the Home Office as crimes involving either a sexual attack or sexual mutilation. Jealousy and revenge killings, robberies and thefts and irrational and motiveless acts all had high reporting rates in all three newspapers. In contrast, reckless acts, rage or quarrel cases and, surprisingly, child abuse and neglect cases all had below average rates of reporting. *The Times* and the *Mail* were both more likely than the *Mirror* to report racial, faction and football violence homicides—the *Mirror*’s rate was close to that for all homicides. However the *Mirror* was more likely to report arson cases than either the *Mail* or *The Times*.

Relationship of victim and suspect

A fine classification was used for measuring the relationship of principal victim to principal suspect. This allowed categories with small numbers of cases to be identified and their media interest assessed. Relationship was highly significant for all three newspapers ($p < 0.001$). Police officers as victims had the highest rate of reporting—all four cases were reported in all three newspapers. Other categories with a high rate of reporting in all three papers were commercial homicides (where the relationship is that of a client or business partner), prostitute-client homicides and stranger killings. Ex common-law spouse homicides were also unaccountably highly reported, and husband-wife homicides and killings of an offspring by a parent also had reporting rates above the average. Those relationships with below average reporting rates in all three newspapers included that of ‘common-law spouse’, ‘other family’, ‘lover, ex lover and friend’, and ‘other acquaintance’. Other relationships showed differential reporting patterns—there was evidence that the *Mail* was not likely to report homicides involving homosexual relationships, and evidence that the *Mirror* reported homicides involving the spouses of lovers more than the other two newspapers.

Building Regression Models to Predict Newsworthiness

The previous analysis found some results that were difficult to explain—such as the increased likelihood of a homicide case from Wales being reported. However, such results may just be due to the case mix which occurred in Wales over the period of the study—if the Welsh homicide cases had a higher number of cases involving stranger homicides, then this finding might be explained. We investigate this by using logistic regression, but now taking the full set of variables as potential predictors. The ethnicity variables were however excluded from this analysis as they are only available for half of the period under study. Age of youngest victim and age

TABLE 4 *Effect of case variables on the likelihood of homicide case reporting*

	No. of homicide cases	% of all cases	% reported in <i>Times</i>	% reported in <i>Mail</i>	% reported in <i>Mirror</i>
Method of homicide			p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
Sharp instrument	895	33.3	25.8	21.0	24.0
Blunt instrument	286	10.7	28.0	25.2	21.7
Hitting or kicking	360	13.4	17.2	14.4	14.7
Strangulation, suffocation	350	13.0	37.4	36.9	37.1
Exhaust fumes	18	0.7	50.0	33.3	16.7
Other poisoning	78	2.9	21.8	17.9	16.7
Shooting	241	9.0	44.4	36.9	31.5
Negligence, neglect	20	0.7	30.0	25.0	35.0
Arson, burning, scalding, explosion	90	3.4	32.2	26.7	34.4
Drowning	28	1.0	42.9	25.0	42.9
Causing to fall	139	5.2	15.8	7.2	10.8
Struck by motor vehicle	54	2.0	29.6	24.1	25.9
Relationship of principal victim to principal suspect ¹			p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
Son, daughter, stepchild, adopted	210	8.3	33.8	26.2	26.2
Parent, step parent	91	3.6	29.7	24.2	20.9
Spouse, ex-spouse	273	10.9	33.7	27.5	28.2
Common law spouse	114	4.5	11.4	9.6	16.7
Ex-common law spouse	13	0.5	38.5	38.5	30.8
Lover, ex-lover, friend etc.	305	12.1	19.0	15.7	19.0
Lovers' spouse etc.	23	0.9	8.7	13.0	26.1
Longterm homosexual lover or ex-lover	15	0.6	20.0	6.7	20.0
Casual homosexual lover	15	0.6	33.3	13.3	26.7
Other family	83	3.3	19.3	12.0	13.3
Criminal associate	12	0.5	33.3	8.3	33.3
Prostitute-client	7	0.3	42.9	85.7	57.1
Commercial relationship	79	3.1	45.6	40.5	46.8
Other acquaintance	525	20.9	21.3	18.7	18.9
Police/prison officer	4	0.2	100.0	100.0	100.0
Stranger	601	23.9	35.3	31.8	29.0
Circumstance of homicide			p < 0.001	p < 0.001	p < 0.001
Rage, quarrel	1,128	42.0	17.5	14.0	15.6
Jealousy, revenge	154	5.7	36.4	30.5	36.4
Child abuse and neglect	141	5.3	21.3	16.3	21.3
Sexual	79	2.9	69.6	70.9	68.4
Robbery, burglary, theft, other gain	191	7.1	40.8	39.8	36.1
Faction, racial, football violence	38	1.4	50.0	34.2	26.3
Arson	33	1.2	27.3	27.3	39.4
Reckless act	126	4.7	22.2	18.3	19.8
Irrational or motiveless act	163	6.1	41.1	34.4	34.4

Cases where the variable of interest was not recorded are excluded from this table.

¹ 170 cases with no suspects on the Homicide Index are omitted.

of youngest suspect were both included as categorical variables. We determined which variables to include in the model by using a forward search method, at each stage taking the variable that explains the greatest amount of residual variation as measured by the change in log-likelihood in relation to the number of extra parameters, but still giving a significant change in log-likelihood. See Collett (1991) for further details.

Three separate logistic regressions were carried out, one for each newspaper. The results are shown in Table 5. Parameter estimates are not shown as they show similar

TABLE 5 *Logistic regression results*

	<i>Times</i> 1993–97	<i>Mail</i> 1993–97	<i>Mirror</i> 1993–97
Variables entered, in order of importance	12 variables Circumstance Number of victims Relationship Youngest victim age Female victim Initial classification Occupation of victim Female suspect Police region Youngest suspect age Method Country of birth of victim	10 variables Circumstance Number of victims Youngest victim age Occupation of victim Method Relationship Female victim Initial classification Youngest suspect age Female suspect	9 variables Circumstance Number of victims Female victim Youngest victim age Relationship Method Police region Occupation of victim Country of birth of victim
Change in minus 2 log likelihood compared with constant probability model	608.4 on 85 df	587.0 on 68 df	506.9 on 74 df

results to the univariate analysis presented earlier. For all three newspapers, the circumstance of the homicide was the most important variable, with the number of victims as the next most important. In all, the analysis for *The Times* needed 12 variables in the model, with only the suspect's country of birth and the number of suspects being found to be unimportant. This implies that all of the included variables play some part in the determination of whether a case is reported. The final model for the *Mail* was simpler, with only ten variables—for the *Mail*, country of birth of victim and police region were also found to be unimportant. The *Mirror* needed only nine variables, excluding country of birth of suspect, number of suspects, youngest suspect age, any female suspect and initial classification.

In general, the final models were very similar across the three newspapers. It appears that victim variables and variables relating to the case are usually more important than suspect variables in determining newsworthiness.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper presents the findings of a major study on homicide reporting in the press. It considers systematically the likelihood of a homicide committed in England and Wales over a four-year period (1993–96) being reported in three national newspapers. In a field that has been dominated by work carried out in the United States, which has tended to focus on local rather than national statistics, a national study of England and Wales is an important counterweight. Unsurprisingly, the study confirms much that has been commented on previously, but it also reveals more.

Two common themes emerge. First, only a minority of homicides are reported in the newspapers in this study. Only 1,066 (or 40 per cent) of the 2,685 homicides initially recorded in 1993–96 were reported in at least one of the three newspapers. However, this is likely to be an artefact of the research designs of such studies for, if all newspapers

were included (including local newspapers), it seems likely that the majority of homicides will gain some visibility somewhere.

But it is, in fact, the second common feature that is crucial, for newspapers make selection decisions in reporting homicides that present a distorted picture of homicide rather than one that represents the actual picture of homicide. That newspapers distort is not news, but the nature of the distortion is spelt out here.

This study is unique in considering a wide range of variables (or explanators), including method and circumstance, which relate to the homicide case rather than just to either the victims or suspects. Care has been taken in analysing the effect of continuous variables, such as age, producing some unexpected results. Four examples of the approach used stand out as important: focus on circumstance, method, number of victims and age.

Circumstance (a variable not previously considered by other studies) was the most important variable for each of the three newspapers. Sexual homicides were most likely to be reported in all three newspapers, as were homicides where there was a clear motive for monetary gain, or a jealousy or revenge motive. However, crimes which appeared to be irrational or motiveless were also more likely to be reported. Homicides arising out of a rage or quarrel (where the homicide is less likely to be planned) and those involving child abuse were less likely to be reported. In this respect the contours of the media distortion become quite clear. There are types of homicide with a higher visibility than in reality, while there are others that are under-represented in media reports. Hence, within the public narrative surrounding crime, homicides resulting from some disturbed family relationships are less easy to accommodate within this framework, as is the volatile danger of out-of-control disputes.

The results become more complex as one considers differences between newspapers. Faction and racial killings showed the greatest discrepancy in reporting—*The Times* reported half of the 38 killings of this type, whereas the *Mirror* reported only just over a quarter (26 per cent). In brief, *The Times* readers are getting an exaggerated picture of such killings, while the *Mirror* readers are presented faction and racial killings in the same proportions as all homicides (that is, around a quarter). We begin to see that, within England and Wales, different groups are exposed to subtly different narratives concerning homicide.

In examining circumstance of killing, then, we recognize that there are two levels of distortion—a general level to which all newspapers may contribute and a newspaper level in which particular newspapers distort in particular ways. These two levels are further illustrated in considering method—another variable with which other studies fail to engage. At the general level all three newspapers were more likely to report homicides involving suffocation (37 per cent of stories) than those involving poisoning (17–22 per cent). In contrast, at the newspaper level, *The Times* was most concerned about shooting homicides (44 per cent reported) with the *Mirror* least concerned (31 per cent).

After circumstance, the number of victims proved to be the second most important variable. This is perhaps unsurprising, as this is a possible measure of the seriousness of the homicide. This has been an important variable in most previous studies. The fact that circumstance emerged as the important variable in this study could be that circumstance is the more important in the British context. However, it seems more likely that the absence of the variable in other studies is the crucial feature.

Age was treated more sensitively in this study, and this produced some unexpected results. Previous authors (see, for example, Sorenson *et al.* 1998) have highlighted that

the vulnerable victims, in terms of age, are more likely to be reported. We found that the evidence is mixed. If the youngest victim is aged between 4 and 14, then the homicide is very likely to be reported, but where the youngest victim is aged less than 4, then the interest in the case appears to decline in all three newspapers. However, the incidence of reporting increased where the youngest victim was over 60. This effect persists even when we control for the effect of other variables such as relationship through logistic regression. Once again, different newspapers contribute to producing a different picture for their readers. Age of the youngest victim was an important variable for all three newspapers. The *Mail* showed greater interest from age 60 onwards, while *The Times* delayed its enhanced level of interest until age 70.

Age, then, illustrates how impression can depart from reality. If one accepts Garland's thesis that a 'highly charged political' discourse now surrounds crime control issues—more so than ever before—then Altheide and Johnson's notion of 'impression management' becomes a pressing social and political matter. It would be interesting to speculate, within this context, how a government might go about framing a crime prevention strategy that aimed to protect children under two years, and how they would promote it successfully to the electorate. Homicide encompasses society's most serious offences: yet from what easily-accessible sources might the electorate gain a clear picture of the reality of homicide risk in order to evaluate current government priorities?

Gamson *et al.* (1992) argue that media in general operate in ways that 'promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence rather than active citizenship and participation' (p. 391). It depends, of course, how one defines 'participation', whether this is crowds mobbing prison vans containing child-killers or an informed analysis of where children are most likely to be at risk. Gamson *et al.* allow for the possibility of complexity in how readers of the media interpret messages, describing the framing process as 'a locus of potential struggle, not a leaden reality to which we all inevitably must yield' (p. 384). They argue that there is room for challenge to offer 'competing constructions of reality', thereby striking a note with readers of media imagery (p. 391). While this may be so in general terms (Gamson *et al.* are arguing about the general construction of social reality, where alternative social movements can be more clearly delineated), it is harder to discern this in the case of homicide. Although such a serious crime, it hard to locate sufficiently strong or alternative sources of publicly (and easily) available information to offset prevalent and accepted images of the reality of homicide.

The methodology used in this paper is central to understanding its findings. By increasing the number of variables and taking care with the analysis (i.e. recognizing age as a continuous variable) striking results are produced. Similarly, taking three newspapers with very different audiences identifies further variations. So, while we found family resemblances between newspapers in their reporting of homicide, we also found subtle but important differences between them as well. In addition to the methodological implications for this kind of study, this finding illustrates the care that criminologists need to take when using newspapers as a research source. It is no longer enough to make generalized comments about newspaper bias, rather we need to recognize that complex processes are at work that criminologists must unravel carefully when trying to explore the public narratives surrounding crime.

If, as posited at the start of this paper, selection decisions cannot be neutral but are a part of defining 'otherness' and 'difference', then we find a complex validation of exclusion and marginalization. As we saw earlier, Johnstone *et al.* argued that selection

decisions made it seem that some American lives were more important than others. In this study, likewise, there is some evidence that all three newspapers under-report marginalized groups as victims. The *Mail* is the least likely of the three newspapers to report homicides involving a black victim, or those where a homosexual was murdered by their lover (although one needs to recognize that numbers are small). In other words, distortion makes certain groups even more invisible. In contrast, distortion can also have the opposite effect and make certain types of homicide much more visible. All three newspapers reported stranger murders much more often than husband-wife or common-law homicides. In turn, however, husband-wife murders were more likely to be reported than homicides where the players were in a common-law relationship.

Our newspapers, then, are not producing just one clear message about homicide. Certainly at one level they engage with the same types of homicides: there are ‘family resemblances’ between newspapers in selecting homicide stories. In addition, each newspaper produces its own distortion, as some homicides attract some newspapers more than others. While the messages are at two levels, the nature of the distortion is of two kinds. News coverage can endorse the invisibility of certain groups and can enhance the visibility of other groups. Both are different ways of distorting reality. As such, newspapers make a complex contribution to the public narratives that shape the criminological problem of homicide. Garland’s view of policy making as both highly politicized and populist raises questions here about how the different constituencies represented—roughly—by different readerships come to an accommodation about the social issues represented by homicide. Perhaps the social role of ‘moral panics’ in bringing about social agreement or the political edge of one agenda over another bears further examination in the light of this data.

The role of newspapers is not, of course, to educate or inform accurately, but to sell newspapers; and in this enterprise, illegal killing has long provided editors with exciting stories. Nor does exploring newspaper reporting provide the whole story of how a society frames a criminological problem, but newspapers are powerful and important contributors to public knowledge and consciousness of crime issues. They are a part of the construction of a public narrative about killing that is, as we have seen, different to its reality. By helping to validate who is included and who is excluded from public concern they contribute to a distancing of the public gaze from the actuality of crime. As criminologists, a part of our role is to understand the contours of social and political responses to crime. Sorenson *et al.* stressed the need for the public to be well informed about crime, and given its long-standing role in providing eye-catching headlines, we question if this is a possible goal with homicide. By exploring the contribution of the print press to social definitions of society’s most serious crime issues we are, in effect, asking whether newspaper reporting of homicide helps or hinders us in the quest for reasonable crime policies and for a safe and a just society.

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