

Child Victims as Symbols:

Media, Crime and Ideology

Authors: **Mark Williams-Thomas MA & James Found MA**

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As we have moved from the 20th century into the 21st century we have seen a protracted growth in communication technologies, its relative channels and outlets, and a growth in media structures and institutions. Today we are now able to access a wide variety of media interactive technologies which have completely revolutionised the ways in which we are able to access and receive information. The use of television, which now offers 24 hour news channels, satellite, telecommunications, including mobile phones, the internet (websites and blogs), radio and newspapers, have completely reconstructed our concepts of time and space as we are now able to access first-hand information from around the world. These new technologies have also completely restructured the way in which the media 'does' news reporting. Now the media is able to present global news stories to a wide variety of viewers from a range of respective cultural backgrounds. The media's ability to transmit live images through satellite to an ever-present audience has completely changed our perspective on news reporting. We are now constantly inundated with news, images, reporting and discourses, which have only sought to develop our perspective of the media as an information 'tool'.

This relative 'revolution' in communication technologies, systems and media structures has also been met with a protracted growth in media discourses towards crime.

In the modern context, crime has continued to represent a considered proportion of news reporting, with dedicated crime reporters giving detailed, up to the minute accounts of recent cases on Television news shows. Newspapers give ever increasing column inches to the latest crime headline and internet websites provide sources of information and dedicated blogs for members of the public to indulge.

We have also seen a growth in both fictional crime programmes and crime documentaries, both on Television and through Film, with film-makers following Police on their latest case, so-called 'cop' shows gaining high TV ratings, and the show Crimewatch becoming a regular part of British evening viewing.

These recent developments have, in essence, turned crime into what Kidd-Hewitt and Osborne (1995) would describe as 'the post-modern spectacle' in that:

'media portrayals of crime and violence have become part of the spectacle of everyday life. We have become voyeurs of factual programmes that entertain and frighten us with reconstructions of violent crimes, and amaze us with the sheer audacity of wily confidence tricksters. We view all manner of police, uniformed, undercover, secret or special, in partnership groups, organisations or as loners. We see them as cosy, ill disciplined, tough, violent, reasonable, idiosyncratic, racist, sexist, quirky, honest and corrupt. We encounter personal lives, lives 'on the job', the clash of gender tensions, and sexual dilemmas.'

With these developments, we have also seen a growing sophisticated body of criminological analysis which has examined the media-crime relationship. These analyses have continued to reflect upon how crime news has been presented through the media, often focusing upon how it is constructed and to what purpose the media has reported them. What we have subsequently been left with is a rich tapestry of literature and examinations which have continued to represent that the relationship between crime and the media has become as central to criminological discourses as its usual focus on law and order institutions, social control mechanisms, and social deviancy.

Our examination is focusing upon recent media portrayals of child victims in the UK, with one of the authors having provided expert opinion for each of the cases we focus on, and in particular the case of Madeleine McCann. Consequently it is offering an exploratory analysis of the relationship between the mass media and crime, and therefore this paper should be seen as largely attempting to develop some common themes towards the issue of child victimisations and its representation within the mass media. We will attempt to show, within our examination, how conservative ideologies have continued to play a prominent role in mass media representations of child victims, including its selection of child victim cases, its construction of the case and its dissemination of details to the public.

Through media representations of child victims, we will subsequently show how the media is able to construct and re-affirm pre-existing conservative ideologies within the public realm. Therefore, our examination is centring itself within critical discourses towards the media-crime relationship, by attempting to analyse the complex relationship between the media, crime and social ideology.

The term 'mass media' is meant to reflect a generalised concept of the media and its respective communication technologies. It takes, as its main focus, the concept of the media as a single stable unifying force, which gives consistent representation of crime news stories. This, on reflection, is misleading, as the mass media is a dynamic force of differing communication technologies and organisations. Its contrasting use of images, literature, language and discourse, is reflective of alternative approaches to presenting crime in particular news stories. Therefore, an examination of the media as a single unit is both limited and limiting in examining media representations of crime. Further to this, the mass media does not continue to collect information regarding specific stories through unilateral channels and sources.

Instead a continuing range of individuals, organisational bodies, and interest groups, often provide information which give distinct opinions towards a given story, as Reiner(2007) rightly acknowledges 'there is more diversity, negotiation and contingency (...) not only within news organisations, but also in the sources used.'

Within our examination we have attempted to present, and subsequently address, some fundamental research questions in examining the media-crime relationship. For instance, in focusing upon the media and its relation to crime we should perhaps ask ourselves whether the mass media presentation of crime is real or a distortion? How does the mass media construct crime and why does it focus on certain cases? What does media discourse reflect within the wider public context? And does the media influence public perceptions of crime? Although such questions are forever present within any examination of the relationship between the media and crime, such questions are often relevant to contrasting theoretical and epistemological approaches to understanding media and crime. Consequently a growing body of debates have attempted to address such questions (see for example Brown, 2003 or Jewkes, 2004 for excellent overview of these debates) by placing them within different approaches to gaining knowledge. However, although we can not give such debates justice here, we should not see the contrasting epistemological approaches to understanding the media-crime relationship as a fundamental schism within the criminological field. Instead, we should see it as a growing sophistication in examination, which has produced a rich array of wide-ranging and contrasting approaches to the media-crime 'question'.

Even though such debates have continued to take an ever increasing role in media crime discourses, the predominance of criminological analysis has tended to focus upon the media's representation of crime as a form of

distortion, which leads to relative social anxieties through the application of moral panics (Cohen, 1973. Cohen and Young, 1973. Hall et al, 1978. Pearson, 1983 and Silverman and Wilson, 2002). Seminal works such as Cohen's (1973) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and the Rockers* were to signify a new wave of radical criminology which built a more holistic analysis of the inter-relationship between the media, crime and society, and led to a greater analysis of the crime-media relationship. This was later built upon by Cohen and Young's (1973) *The Manufacture of News* and Hall et al's (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, which sought to develop a theoretical framework with regards to the media, state ideologies, social control mechanisms and crime amplification. These seminal works have consequently led to a well developed field of moral panic texts and analysis which have sought to understand the media-crime relationship within wider sociological contexts. In light of such analysis, it has become no longer reasonable to suggest that the media merely reflects social reality. Instead we should see it as a complex interplay of media communications, social ideologies, social control mechanisms and the public sphere.

A recent examination upon the media's reporting of crime has seen a considered proportion of its time and resources focusing upon child victimisation cases. Although this may still pale in comparison with the reporting of other forms of victimisation, child victimisation has found itself occupying a more central role in media discourses towards crime.

As equally important as this, media discourses on child victimisation, as we shall see, have continued to inform public ideas about crime and social reactions towards crime. Consequently, what we have been left with is a growing public debate about child victims, with ever increasing measures to protect children within the public sphere.

Although media depictions of child victim cases have forever remained an ever-present within media reporting, a more casual shift towards media reporting of child victims grew during the 1990s (although Skidmore (1995) pre-dates media reporting of child sexual abuse cases to the late 1980s) following high profile cases including James Bulger, the crimes of Fred and Rose West, and a number of cases relating to child sex abuse in care homes, which helped to capture the public imagination. Despite this relative shift in media reporting, a more collective representation of child victimisation has not been realised. Instead, the media has continued to show its pre-dominance towards child victim cases of sex offences, abuse, abduction and murder. This focus on highly emotive cases has consequently only sought in playing upon existing public anxieties as Jewkes (2004) notes, *'the presentation of the atypical as typical serves to exacerbate public anxiety and deflect attention away from much more common place offences such as street crime, corporate crime and abuse of children within the family.'*

The media's continued pre-occupation with such extraordinary cases is, on reflection, a largely pragmatic one, given the relative emotiveness and

shock-value of the crime leading to widespread public interest and higher viewing figures, listeners and sales figures. Further analysis on the media (see for example Greer, 2003) have also reflected upon the relative newsworthiness of such cases and Chibnall's (1977) categorisation of newsworthy crime stories through: Immediacy; Dramatisation; Structured access; Novelty; Titillation; Conventionalism; Personalisation and Simplification, shows how these child victim stories meet widespread notoriety. However, such analysis continues to underplay and devalue the very important role that social ideologies play in the selection, construction, dissemination and overall discourses of child victim news stories. Central to this focus is a respective understanding of the media as a reflection of its own pre-existing ideologies through its selection of individual cases and presentation of particular details, values, voices and ultimate solutions to each case. Therefore, this examination challenges the idea that the media acts as a neutral passive observer of everyday occurrences in society.

Instead, this examination accepts that a more detailed analysis of ideological formulation within media reporting of child victim cases is needed, in order to understand the important role played by the media in constructing the crime case within the public sphere.

Madeleine McCann, Sarah Payne, the Soham Murders and Stranger Danger.

Few recent cases in living memory have received the high level of public attention and media frenzy than that of the most recent case of Madeleine McCann. The story of a small British girl who, in May 2007, went missing from her parents holiday apartment, captured the public imagination and was met with virtually unprecedented media attention and reporting (with the possible exceptions also being detailed in this examination). The media's near hedonistic reporting of the case, its round the clock updates on TV news channels, the continued presence of the story on newspaper front-pages and the considered advertisement of the nationwide (and continental) campaign to find 'missing Madie' kept the story within the public sphere and marked it out as one of the most significant 'signal crimes' (Innes, 2003) within the 21st century to date.

Given this near unprecedented level of media attention to the case it becomes pertinent to ask the question as to why the case received such high levels of media focus, and if this was as a result of a co-ordinated strategy by the Portuguese police.

Williams-Thomas (2009), *'Although the police did hold a number of press conferences in the early days, this was very much as a result of pressure from the media and not something they would routinely do. It was clear that the police had little or no experience of handling this scale of media interest that this case attracted.'*

On reflection, the media attention is hardly surprising given its usual pre-occupation with child abductions, child murders, and possible sex offences. Historically, the media, as we shall see, has continued to focus upon possible cases of stranger danger, especially if they are seen as more extraordinary within usual depictions of crime cases.

However, the Madeleine McCann case represented a stark contrast to the usual child victim cases that are normally presented, given that, due to Portuguese secrecy laws and the fact that the case remains unsolved, the predominantly British media were unable to construct a narrative of the case through the usual discursive practices i.e. a beginning, a middle and an end etc. Instead what we were subsequently left with was a relative narrative 'void' which the media seemed only too willing to fill with lurid headlines regarding possible outcomes, interspersed with equally lurid images of possible identities of the perpetrator of the crime. This was also further met with the media's need to create a villain of the piece, an antagonist or so-called 'folk devil' on who we could focus our collective moral outrage and who, through detection, would allow us to return to a collective 'order of things' (Ericson et al, 1991). Subsequently, this led to various accusations being apportioned to (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) a British expatriate, the McCann parents, the Portuguese police and, in a cruel twist of globalised news stories, segments of Moroccan communities. What we were consequently left with was a collective spectacle, a morality play (Sparks, 1992, Ericson et al, 1991) of Good vs. Evil, Right vs. Wrong, Morality vs.

Immorality- a mass of contrasting discourses, depictions, events and representations, all designed to play upon public anxieties and keep the story in the public limelight.

Although the case of Madeleine McCann offered us almost unprecedented levels of media attention and reporting, it by no means stands alone as a sight of high media attention, which has played upon public anxieties, and helped to construct and ultimately re-affirm conservative ideologies within the public sphere.

The case of Sarah Payne, a small British girl, who, in 2000, was murdered near her home in Sussex, has become as big a part of the collective public conscience as any case which has proceeded or preceded it since. The murder, committed by a convicted sex offender who had been released back into the community, led to widespread public outrage and culminated in a 'naming and shaming' campaign led by the News of the World, in which details and photos of convicted sex offenders were printed in their pages. It also led to a nationwide public campaign to introduce 'Sarah's Law'¹, a community notification scheme, which ensures that the public are notified when a convicted sex offender is released into their community. Although the threat of such notification schemes to the long-term safety of children has been well presented (see for example Silverman and Wilson 2002) the public campaign for such a scheme remains prominent within the public sphere.

¹ Named after Megan's law, a community notification scheme introduced in the USA after the death of Megan Kanka at the hands of a convicted sex offender who was living in her community.

Anxieties regarding 'stranger danger' and the supposed threat it poses, together with the media's pre-occupation towards the subject, has kept the issue to the fore of the public conscience. Fundamental to these anxieties and the subsequent public campaign, were general depictions through the media's portrayal of the case that something was fundamentally wrong in British society. Central to this depiction was the notion that sex offenders were not being placed under enough social control, and were thus continuing to pose a very serious threat to society's safety and well-being.

Consequently, the prevailing media discourse was representative of wider conservative ideologies given its pre-occupation with family security, social control mechanisms, and the need to construct a coherent 'moral majority' against an external social other.

In 2002 the issue of stranger danger and sex offenders in the community once again rose to prominence within the media following the tragic deaths of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells in a small Cambridgeshire town called Soham. Their deaths, again highlighting the perceived threat of stranger danger, was (like Madeleine and Sarah) met with a collective outpouring of public grief and high media attention with round the clock updates of the case, extended column inches in newspapers, and the inclusion of expert analysis.

The media, with ever growing public interest, continued to use traditional discursive practices, a relative 'story narrative' in which individuals became actors on a stage, each detailing their experiences of the case for public consumption. What we were again left with, as was the case for Madeleine McCann, was a collective spectacle, the modern morality play of Good vs. Evil, in which victims, offenders, the Police and the public became actors and we the viewers.

The considered media attention given to the murders of Jessica and Holly, the lurid details of the background of the man charged with their murders, Ian Huntley, and the media's detailing of systemic failings within the Police Force and Social Services, all led to growing pressure to introduce reforms to protect children in the future. The resulting inquiry, the Bichard enquiry, was ultimately a product of such media pressures, and introduced extensive reforms, including a national information system for Police in England and Wales, and a new registration scheme for those who wish to work with children.

Such distinctions consequently again show the obvious linkages between the media and formal control mechanisms (see for example Hall et al, 1978) and the influence that the media has in constructing such issues within the public sphere.

Although the cases of Madeleine, Sarah, Jessica and Holly, stand alone in their relative emotiveness, collective public interest and media attention, the obvious common threads in the media's construction and discourses

towards each case are plain to see. Given that each girl was white, photogenic, from a respectable middle class home, and was the victim of a stranger (thus was a prime example of stranger danger), only colluded in making each case equally more newsworthy and the victim more 'deserving' of media attention. Fundamental to the media's selection, construction and consequent dissemination of each story were underlying conservative ideologies with regards to family structures, victims and stranger danger.

The media's continued pre-occupation with the threat of stranger danger, its continued focus on victims of strangers, has only sought to re-affirm pre-existing conservative ideologies within the public sphere. It does this by firstly constructing an image of the ideal family (or individual) that is under threat from a demonised 'other', an alienated individual, who lives in the margins and no longer plays a central role in 'normal' family life. The contrast is consequently centred upon the family who offer security and sanctity through parental responsibility, good homes and discipline, and those who no longer abide by these rules and seek to destroy it. Secondly, the media re-affirms conservative ideologies by focusing on cases, which deflect attention away from the more obvious sites of child victimisation and thus 'underplay or ignore the fact that sexual violence exists- indeed, is endemic- in all communities and that sexual abuse of children and infanticide are more likely to occur within the family than at the hands of an evil stranger' (Jewkes, 2004).

As a result, the public is left with a presentation of child victims which only seeks to construct, and thus understand them, within the tightly defined parameters of conservative ideologies.

Victoria Climbié and 'Baby P'

Few cases in recent memory have been able to reflect the contrast in deserving and undeserving victims and the racial bias of a predominantly white, ethnocentric media (Jewkes, 2004) than the recent case of Victoria Climbié. The story of a small girl, who died in February 2000 after prolonged and extensive abuse at the hands of her Great Aunt, Marie Therese Kouoa, and her Aunt's boyfriend, Carl Manning, failed to capture the public imagination and spark the high level of media attention that followed the cases of Madeleine, Sarah, Jessica and Holly. This low level of media attention was made especially circumspect given that her death led to an extensive inquiry by Lord Laming and culminated in the creation of the Every Child Matters Agenda (ECM) and the appointment of the first ever children's commissioner. However, despite its wide-ranging effects on children services, its relative emotiveness and 'shock-value', the case has received only a small fraction of media discourse. Consequently, we should perhaps ask ourselves why some cases receive greater levels of media attention than others?

When attempting to understand the relative differences in media reporting of the Victoria Climbié case and that of the other girls, it is perhaps better to understand the case as a form of ideological

construction. Given that Victoria herself was a black African immigrant from an impoverished background, who died at the hands of a close relative, the circumstances of her case all colluded in making it non-newsworthy as her own identity did not fit the usual characteristics of deserving victims, and her case could not be constructed within the terms of the current moral panic over paedophiles (Jewkes, 2004).

Fundamental to the media's reporting of the case, was the inability that the media had in constructing the case through predominantly conservative ideologies. Given that this was a story of intra-familial abuse, involving an immigrant child as a victim, only sought to highlight the obvious difficulties faced by children in relative deprivation receiving support or assistance. The media were unable to construct the case through pre-existing ideologies with regards to family structures, immigration and social class. As a result, the story became left behind as the various media outlets simply were unable to construct the case and the public were equally unable to produce a collective emotive response.

The Victoria Climbié case has, however, in recent times found itself receiving higher levels of both media and public attention following the recent case of Baby P, who in August 2007, died after suffering from a year long abuse and violence at the hands of his mother, her lover and their lodger. The connection between each case is obvious given that they were both cases of prolonged intra-familial abuse, they both took place in the same district of London, and they both represented the collective

failure of services designed to protect them. However, what has become distinguishable in both cases is that they seemingly represent a development in media reporting, with a greater collective representation of child victims and a developing discourse on the nature of intra-familial abuse.

Despite this development, however, the media's presentation of each case, its decision to bring the Victoria Climbié into the public spotlight, and its construction of the causes of the crime, once again represented its prevailing conservative agenda and its presentation of conservative ideologies within the public sphere. The dominant media discourse in the Baby P case, its obvious media attention, focused on the failings of the local Haringey Social Services in protecting the child from the extensive abuse he received at the hands of his killers.

Even though each case came to represent a collective failing of Social Services, the local GP and the Police Service, in protecting and safeguarding the child, the prevailing debate within media discourses focused on a general criticism of social services, its inability to protect children, and its seeming lack of willingness to reform following the Victoria Climbié case. Therefore, the Victoria Climbié case was brought into the public spotlight not because of a general need to highlight intra-familial abuse but rather as a means to evidence the failings of welfare institutions in protecting children.

The debates arising within media discourses on both the Baby P case and the Victoria Climbié case consequently focused upon a general criticism of Social Services as a controlling body. Fundamental to this debate was a general public anxiety with regards to the welfare society and its respective institutions and mechanisms. At the heart of this anxiety lies a form of class conflict between those who seemingly benefit from a welfare society, and those who seemingly do not. As each case came to be constructed within the public sphere, little debate was to be given to respective cultural and social attitudes towards children and violence, and therefore the media was able to deflect attention away from prevailing patriarchal and conservative ideologies, which are unable to see families as sights of conflict and violence. In addition, little debate was given within the media discourse on the lack of resources given to welfare institutions, which has led to them being under-staffed and under-trained and completely incapable of meeting the demands placed upon them by the growing economic inequality.

Therefore, the media was once again able to deflect attention away from class divisions, social inequality and class conflict, and was able to present the concept that the welfare society was the cause of the problem.

By doing so, the media presented the idea that solutions can therefore not be found in the welfare society, which they conclude can only fail in protecting our children and consequently our way of life. Instead the

solution can be found in placing our trust in traditional forms of social control.

Child Victims as Symbols

On reflection of recent high profile cases of child victims, the mass-media's coverage of each case has enabled a concerted and co-ordinated social and political reaction to the implications of each case. Underpinning these reactions is a general concern and social anxiety that something is collectively wrong within British society, and that the usual mechanisms and institutions designed to protect us are at fault, and are thus in need of a corrective response. Although, the social response and media attention to each case stand alone in their depictions and representations of the case, fundamental to the proceeding arguments and debates with regards to the causes and the solutions to the problem lay over-riding conservative ideologies.

Reflectively, as each case was depicted within the media, the respective debates moved away from a general reflection on the rarity of the case, and its extraordinary place within history, to a more central debate on family structures, offenders in the community, welfare society and social control. Fundamentally, therefore, each case came to be depicted as a symbol of what can go wrong if conservative ideologies are not met by those who are perceived as being given the responsibility to instil them. In the case of Madeleine McCann, the debate moved away from the rarity

of a child being abducted whilst on holiday with her parents, to a debate on parental responsibility, permissive behaviour, and methods of policing.

The case of Sarah Payne, in itself an unusual case of child abduction and murder, became a general debate on paedophilia, sex offenders in the community, and a need for greater levels of social control.

The tragic case of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells, again a tragic but extraordinary case of child murder, became a concerted debate on the need for the growth in control institutions, mechanisms and public surveillance. And finally, the cases of Victoria Climbié and Baby P became debates, not on intra-familial abuse, but rather welfare society and its respective problems.

The formulation of these conservative ideologies are thus marked through the selection, construction and dissemination of distinctive discourses towards each case within the public sphere. Consequently, as each case received greater media attention, became a part of the collective public conscience, and became a sight for public moral outrage, the child victims themselves began to become symbols of a world where, through media depictions, conservative ideologies were no longer being met. Child victims have therefore become not just symbols of conservative ideologies but rather symbols that are used by a media with a predominantly conservative agenda in order to construct, replicate and re-affirm conservative ideologies within the public realm.

In doing so these cases have become part of the collective memory of the public and will forever be etched upon the minds of those who' consumed' the news story.

Conclusion

Within our examination we have attempted to offer an exploratory analysis of recent media representations of child victims. In the 21st century, new communication technologies have revolutionised the ways in which information and news stories can be disseminated to the public. However, despite these new forms of disseminating information, what we have found within recent cases of child victims, is that the media will still select and construct the cases through dominant existing conservative ideologies.

The media's continued pre-occupation with stranger danger, its focus on 'deserving' victims who usually represent idealised versions of youth (white, photogenic and middle-class) and its deflection away from the usual sights of child victimisation, have only sought in preserving conservative ideologies, ignoring the true dangers children face. The ways in which it constructs each case and how it attempts to present causes and solutions to the perceived problem, are an attempt to re-affirm conservative ideologies with regards to family structures, social class and social control.

Any attempts to address this issue by the media have also not been found within recent media depictions of child victims.

Its presentations of the Victoria Climbié and Baby P case, although seemingly representing a development in intra-familial reporting, were also constructed within the tightly defined parameters of conservative ideology. Its depictions of welfare and welfare institutions consequently presented an image that welfare was at fault and could not provide the solution to the problem. As a result, the children have become symbols of conservative ideology and are thus presented as cases of a society where something is wrong and conservative ideologies are no longer being met.

The media's presentations of high profile, emotive cases of child victims, have in essence been able to construct, replicate and re-affirm conservative ideologies within the public sphere.

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