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***Framing Victims of Crime: A print media analysis investigating
the portrayal of victims of crime***

Emma Finlay

Evening BA

Mainstream media play a significant role in shaping public attitudes and beliefs about the social world. 'Reality' for most of society is created by the production process of a news organisation and thus is created under the structural determinants of that framework. This study summarises a longer piece of research examining the representation of victims' of crime within print media. Adopting a framing analysis approach this research investigates how the media portray victims of crime. The findings indicate that the media can portray a person through a version of 'reality' that the journalist has created by appealing to the consensual values of their audience. They can stigmatise some victims' while glorifying others depending on the frame they choose to use. The evidence shows that the tone, language and detail provided by the print media can allow an audience member view a victim in a positive or negative light. What becomes apparent through the research is that the media dictate who matters most in society. By 'framing' a victim in a particular way a journalist can influence their audience to interpret a story in a way in which they intended them to. By making assumptions about their audience they use 'frames' to naturalise the social world in accordance with dominant discourse. This research main objective was to clearly highlight how the media can use their own bias to frame a story in a particular way on assumptions that they have made about their audiences and about the victims.

Introduction

Tunstall (1996) makes the point that all newspapers have a particular ethos with certain stories chosen over others to suit their principles. Therefore the creativity and agency of media professionals is often constrained by

organisational factors such as, ownership structure, ethos of the organisation, editorial line and the economic power of advertisers (Devereux *et al* 2011, pp.211-213). Journalists are required to provide accurate and objective information to their audience. This however does not always happen. With limited space in newspapers they have to edit the story, adopt a certain tone, and use the 'correct' language that will allow the audience to interpret the story the way they intended it to be (Jewkes 2004, pp.45). By doing this the reporter is 'framing' a story, they are selecting and discarding information to direct an audience member to certain aspects of a story but not to others (Loge 2005, p.695). The stories in print media are usually marked by brevity so the attention of the audience is not strained and to limit the possible meanings inherent in the story. News discourse is generally not open to interpretation (Fenton 2007, p.47).

According to Fenton (2007) in cases where murder is suspected, the level of media interest will vary in accordance to the background of the victims. If the journalist makes the decision that their audience will not relate or empathise with the victim the case will not receive as much newspaper space (Fenton 2001, p.56). The case analysed for this research has found this argument to be valid.

Role of the Media

Mainstream media continues to play a significant role in shaping public attitudes and beliefs about society through language and imagery seen largely on television, newspapers, computers and many other forms of communications (Devereux 2007, p.217). Therefore media professionals such as journalists, reporters, editors and sub-editors hold a large amount of power in their social construction of 'news' for the general public. They can portray news stories through their own interpretations of an event. Even in a situation where they are

using old material they can change the audiences view on an issue by adding a new or different interpretation to an already existing story (Silverman 2010, p.70). It is important to remember that news reporting is a business, and that picture of ‘reality’ that a journalist or reporter is trying to create for the public is a production process of a news organisation and thus is created under the structural determinants of that organisation any or all of which may influence the story that is being portrayed (Jewkes 2004, p.41).

The ‘Ideal’ Victim

It would be easy to assume that all victims of crime are just that ‘victims’ and therefore should be treated the same. However this is not the case. There are a wide variety of factors that determine why certain victims receive much more press coverage than others. Media resources most often allocate more press coverage to the representation of those victims who can be portrayed as ‘ideal’. This group usually includes those victims who appear vulnerable, powerless, innocent and in the reporters mind worthy of sympathy and compassion. Which leads to the question’s who is ‘worthy’ of compassion and why are all victims not worthy? Why do only certain events become thrust into the public sphere with sufficient emotional intensity to shape public fears of victimisation? Women and children are seen as the ‘ideal’ victims whereas young men, those with social problems, the homeless, people with drug problems and those living on the margins of society find it more difficult to achieve any significant ‘victim’ status (Greer 2007, pp.21-24). The media appeal to the consensual values of an ‘imagined community’. They can stigmatise offenders while glorify and sentimentalise victims. Media coverage can sensationalise a story so much that it is forever embedded in the minds of the public. Who can forget the image of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells in their Manchester United strips? These girls were two ten year olds who went missing from their homes in 2002.

Their disappearance attracted international media attention and gave way to the biggest ever manhunt in Britain. However in 1996 Patrick Warren and David Spenser two boys of similar age also went missing from their homes but their disappearance failed to register outside of the local press. Why was this? Well certainly Holly and Jessica fitted the archetypical description of the 'ideal' victims. They were young, beautiful, photogenic girls from stable middle-class backgrounds while David and Patrick were from working class backgrounds and grew up on a rough west midlands estate (Greer 2007, pp.23-24).

Victimisation

Unfortunately for victims of crime who have already been caught up in the criminal justice system and therefore have already been branded an offender the media coverage is never as copious. Even more so if that person is from a working class area, has a history of family involved in crime, involved with drugs or really anything that is perceived by the press and public to deviate from dominant cultural norms (Pritchard and Hughes 1997, p.51). In some cases these victims are almost regarded as simply reaping the rewards of their own culpability. When Adam Rickman aged 14 died under the care of the British Penal System in 2004 his death was described in the paper as 'the closing scene in a black tale of family breakdown'. The press also mentioned how he had been involved in petty theft, underage drinking and drug taking just to compound the fact that he deserved what he got (Greer 2007, p.39). In some cases it is those who suffer the pain of victimisation most severely who are often the individuals whose voices we do not hear rather than those that we do in the media.

Framing

Cohen (1963) argues that 'the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling its readers

what to think about' (Cohen 1963, p.13) (emphasis added). This is the basis of framing it works to shape the audience members interpretations and preferences. Framing defines issues through the media that are worthy of public attention which encourages or stimulates schemas that encourage affective responses from the audience members allowing them to think and feel in a particular way (Entman 2007, p.164). Individuals working in the media sift through and select news items from assumptions they have made about their audiences, prioritising some stories over others. They will then edit it, adopt a certain tone and decide on the visual imagery that will accompany the story, together all of this constitutes 'framing'. By doing this people in the media can associate certain groups with a particular type of behaviour, convey a meaning to a certain story, offer solutions to an important issue and provide pictures which all help in structuring societies frame of reference to what is happening in the world. News discourse is generally not open to interpretation those writing the story want the audience members to come to the same consensual conclusions. The audience member is encouraged to suspend their critical interpretation of a story and respond to it the way in which the person who wrote it intended them to respond (Jewkes 2004, pp.41-47).

Stigmatising Victims and Places

The significance of the way in which a story is framed is extremely important to the victims of that event as it portrays them in either a negative or positive way which in turn allows the general public to also judge them in that way. Negative media portrayal of local authority estates, and those that live in them, have significantly contributed to their poor image and have been a strong influence on public opinion (Devereux *et al* 2011).

Devereux *et al* (2011) argues that once journalists hold a stigmatised view of a certain area, stories about that area are framed in terms of what way they perceive the area to be. For example if they view the area as one associated with crime they will frame the article on that view. The negative media portrayal of such places can have a profound effect on the life chances and self image of those that reside there. The media, while not completely to blame for this stigmatising of certain neighbourhoods are certainly at least partially to blame (Devereux *et al* 2011, pp.125-126). By continuously reporting certain areas as being overrun with drugs and crime can have a long term damaging affect on those areas and more importantly and even more seriously on the residents that reside there.

Framing within Journalism

It is fair to assume that the media should on the basis of a social contract provide honest, fair and comprehensive reports based on informed and accurate facts. However many sociologists argue that the reflections of society portrayed through the media is distorted and only reflect the agenda of the powerful (McQuail 2005, p.83). A quote from Vincent Browne (an Irish print and broadcast journalist) at a recent symposium held by the University of Limerick, highlights how he feels about the Irish National Broadcaster RTÉ in relation to providing the public with informed and accurate facts:

“RTÉ got one billion from the public in subsidy in the last six years and it has a special social responsibility to portray our society properly and to tell their viewers and their listeners fairly what is happening in our society, and in respect to crime in my opinion it noticeably fails to do that.” (Hayes 2011).

Gitlin (1980) argues that within their daily routine journalists strive to naturalise the social world in accordance with certain dominant discourse. They frame the news to make the world look natural by using traditional everyday assumptions

and it is through this everydayness of news discourse that frames acquire a natural or taken for granted status (Bell and Garrett 1998, p.120). Journalists select the information and they decide what the audience reads. They can choose to highlight and direct attention to some aspects of a story while ignoring others (Devereux 2007, p.137).

Sample Selection and Justification

The newspapers chosen for this investigation were the *Irish Independent*, the *Limerick Post*, *Limerick Leader*, and the *Irish Times*. *RTÉ News* website was also used as a source. According to circulation figures released by ABC at the end of 2011 the *Irish Independent* is Ireland's largest selling newspaper with the *Irish Times* the second largest (ABC 2011), it is for this reason they was chosen for analysis. The *Limerick Leader* and *Limerick Post* are the local newspapers sold within Limerick City and County and were chosen on that basis. *RTÉ News* was chosen as it is Ireland's national broadcaster and therefore it was of interest to investigate their portrayal of the cases under investigation. For the purpose of this research a comparison of local and national news coverage of the victims of crime in question was required. This helped to achieve a complete analysis of how these victims were portrayed through the media both on a local and national level.

Data Collection and Analysis

Articles were gathered using the Nexis-Lexis database for print media publications. For some of the sources such as *RTÉ News* and the *Limerick Post* the articles were taken directly from their websites as the Nexis-Lexis database did not include these publications. The names of the individuals being researched were placed in the search engine of each of the websites. The time period covered was from January 2011 to December 2011, to investigate the

print media coverage of the cases over a 12 month period. The final search yielded 46 articles for the 'Mr X and Ms Y' case. Any articles which were not relevant to this study were removed before analysis. For the purpose of this study the headlines and main body of the text were considered when coding the data. The investigation involved thoroughly analysing each article in accordance with Devereux's (2007) guidelines to frame analysis.

Ethics

This research has been carried out with the view that maintaining strong ethical standards is a crucial component of the research process. While the study did not involve human participation the author was aware the case chosen for the study was of a highly sensitive nature. It is not the author's intention to make any assumptions or opinion on the victims associated with this case.

Research Findings:

'Well Known', 'Southill', 'Criminal'

Singletary and Lipsky (1977, pp.362-364) make the argument that journalists report in an "objective" and "subjective" manner. Objective reporting reflects the actual facts of a story while subjective reporting includes the unnecessary aspects of the story that make the story more exciting and attention grabbing for the reader. In the newspaper articles analysed for this research the majority had added unnecessary information in relation to the victims' cases. For the Mr X and Ms Y case this information was usually one of a negative tone especially when referring to Mr X.

"...for the brutal murder of a young criminal and woman', 'X a well-known criminal, was released from prison last November', 'He had convictions for dangerous driving causing death, assault and burglary and was arrested last year for dealing small quantities of heroin.'" (Duggan 2011).

‘Ms Y’s name was mentioned 53 times overall with little more information given about her in the majority of articles. Out of the 46 articles dedicated to the tragic deaths of Ms Y and Mr X only one article used a headline that referred to the victims’ by name. All of the other newspaper headlines used phrases such as, ‘Double Murder’, ‘Fatal Shooting’, ‘Limerick Killings’, ‘Limerick murder inquiry’, ‘Two bodies found....’. The language is cold and detached from the victims’. Mr X’s name was mentioned 28 times in 22 related articles in the same newspapers. Out of those 28 times he was described as a ‘well known criminal’ or ‘known to Gardai’ 9 times, connected with ‘drugs’ 19 times, and ‘heroin’ specifically 16 times. Also ‘Southill’ was referred to 25 times with ‘troubled estate’ attached to it 3 times.

Reaping The Rewards

The media view victims’ of crime who have already been involved in the criminal justice system somewhat differently than other victims and thus the media coverage is never as copious. This is even more so if the victim is from a working class area, has a history of being involved in crime or involved with drugs (Pritchard and Hughes 1997, p.51). The stories are usually framed in a manner to suggest that the victim ‘got what s/he deserved’. The coverage of the Mr X and Ms Y cases spans a period between the 9th of January 2011 to December 20th 2011. The word count from the *Irish Independent* and *Irish Times* for that period was 7,426 over 22 articles. The frames used in these articles are extremely negative, the language, tone and words do not portray the victims in a positive light. In the majority of the articles Mr X ‘criminal’ history is given:

“Well known to gardai, Mr X was a heroin user and a convicted criminal who had only recently been released from jail after serving a sentence for robbery” (Hayes 2011)

“Mr X was released from prison last year, having served a five-year term for the manslaughter of 17-year-old [Name Removed], who was knocked down and killed by a stolen car that was driven by X” (Cusack 2011)

Also a friend of X’s is mentioned in some articles even though he has absolutely nothing to do with the case and his ‘criminal’ history is mentioned:

“[Name Removed] from Moyross, who was convicted for possession of a shotgun and machetes, was released from prison last week” (Duggan 2011)

Omission Breeds Contempt

The RTÉ news reports and local newspapers the *Limerick Leader* and *Limerick Post* take a different approach in their articles. RTÉ News provides the facts of the case and nothing else. Their use of language is not as negative as the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* when discussing the Mr X and Ms Y case. However the descriptions used are told in a cold matter-of- fact way.

“Five people have been arrested as part of the investigation into the murder of a man and woman in Limerick earlier this year...The bodies of man and a woman have been discovered at a house in O’Malley Park in Limerick” (RTÉ news, 2011)

Devereux (2007, p.137) highlights that when journalists frame a story the facts they chose to select and those they choose to omit are crucial to the way a story is portrayed. In Ms Y’s case she is barely acknowledged in any article. There are brief comments about the facts of the case and her name is mentioned in total 53 times. There are a lot of details omitted such as quotes from her family, friends, pictures of her with her children or any insight into her life beyond the details of the night of the tragic event. These are the facts that personalise an audience with a victim, however such material about Ms Y is absent. She was a 28 year old woman, who ‘was in the wrong place at the wrong time’ according

to the *Irish Times*, who mentioned it in 4 of their 8 articles dedicated to this case.

The two local papers, the *Limerick Leader* and *Limerick Post*, did not use language such as ‘criminal’, ‘well known’ or ‘drugs’ in any of their articles on Mr X and Ms Y. The *Limerick Leader* provided 9 articles on the case. They again like RTÉ News provided a factual account of what happened on the night of the murders. There were also articles in relation to those who were arrested for the crime. The *Limerick Post* had 6 articles on Mr X and Ms Y, they were slightly warmer with the language they used when discussing the case,

“Southill was in shock following the shooting dead of local man Mr X, aged 23, and his partner Ms Y, 28”
(Coomey 2011).

Raising the Saliency

The language used in a frame can have a significant impact on the way the story is perceived by an audience. Certain words can act as a cognitive trigger that can guide an audience member to look at an issue or event in a certain way (Lens 2003, p.149). The language used in relation to the case of Ms Y and Mr X has an extremely negative tone. Certain words stand out in each article when the journalist is referring to Mr X in particular, such as; ‘known to gardai’, ‘recently released from prison’, ‘heroin user’, ‘well-known criminal’. Immediately these words encourage the audience member to think of the victim, Mr X, in an unfavourable way. Not alone is the language negative but to raise the saliency of the article even more, the journalist has named other individuals who were in Mr X’s house on the night of the 9th of January.

“At the house was [Name Removed], X's sister, and his two-month-old baby daughter. X's former partner had moved out of the terraced home with their two other children earlier that day.”

“[Name Removed]from Moyross, who was convicted for possession of a shotgun and machetes, was released from prison last week” (Duggan 2011).

This journalist made the decision to provide the audience with personal information about other people, who had nothing to do with the case, in a subjective manner as described by Singletary and Lipsky (1977). This is unnecessary information in relation to the case however it raises the saliency of the article and adds a layer of bias from the journalist (Singletary and Lipsky 1977, p.362-364).

It is obvious from the research that the stories of Mr X and Ms Y’s deaths were not written by journalists to draw sympathy and compassion from their audience. Out of the 46 articles written only one mentioned their names in the headline. This was in a local Limerick paper, the *Limerick Post*. ‘*Two remain in custody over X and Y murders*’ (Carey 2011). All of the other headlines used cold, unemotional language and most refer to the suspects even more so than to the victims.

“Prime suspects held as drugs debt blamed for double murder”

“Man shot to death may have contacted gunman”

“Man arrested in Limerick double murder inquiry”

“Two remained in custody on double murder charge”

“Gardai appeal for information following double murder” (Duggan 2011: Hayes 2011: RTE News 2011: Carey 2011: Hurley 2011)

Negative Frames, Negative Outcomes

The negative framing of the articles dedicated to Mr X leave audience members with an impression of a ‘drug user’, gangster who was ‘known to the gardai’ and had ‘previous convictions’. Greer (2007) makes the point that certain victims of crime are not seen as worthy of any significant ‘victim’ status, especially if that victim has been caught up in the criminal justice system previously (Greer 2007, pp.21-24). The second frame ‘reaping the rewards’, refers to Mr X’s history, or ‘criminal’ history as that is the only form of personal details described in any of the 46 articles dedicated to the case.

“Mr X had a criminal record. He killed a teenage girl in 2003 when driving a stolen car. He also had convictions for violent assault and was not long out of prison”
(Lally and Hayes 2011)

“X’s body was found downstairs near the back door of the terraced house. He was a well-known criminal in Limerick who was released from prison recently. A single shotgun cartridge was found on the stairs.”
(Irish Independent 2011)

The second quote from the *Irish Independent* perfectly highlights the negative framing of Mr X. In one sentence the journalist is referring to the dead body of the victim lying ‘downstairs near the back door’, with the following sentence announcing to the audience that he was a ‘well-known criminal’ who has just recently been ‘released from prison’. The information provided by the journalist allows the audience to almost regard the victim as simply reaping the rewards of his own actions (Greer 2007, p.39).

Fitting the ‘Ideal’ Description

The third frame refers to the omission of details in the articles dedicated to the X and Y case. Devereux (2007, p.137) argues that the facts selected, and those omitted from a story are crucial to the way that story is portrayed. Victims that

fit the 'ideal' category such as those victims who appear vulnerable, powerless and innocent are deemed much more worthy for sympathy and compassion by the media than those that do not (Greer 2007, pp.21-24). This being the case why is it that Ms Y did not receive more media attention? In fact she received even less media coverage than Mr X. Her name was mentioned 53 times in the 46 articles however the majority of articles barely gave any other information about her. It was mentioned 12 times that she was a 'Mother of three', however this was only expanded upon within two articles which provided a little information that humanised her to an audience. The *Irish Independent* provided one article and the local newspaper the *Limerick Leader* the other. Ms Y's sister gives some detail about her life in both articles.

"She was a nice girl you could get on with, she was great craic and she loved to dance and sing. She was a good girl and she had three beautiful kids and she was a good mother," she added." (Sheridan and Hurley 2011)

"She was a good girl with three beautiful kids. They don't even know their mam is dead -- how will we tell them. What can we say? "I feel terrible, terrible -- my heart is broken in two." (Irish Independent 2011)

Even though the media had nothing negative to say about Ms Y, they did not bother to say anything positive about her either. Ms Y could have been described as vulnerable, powerless and innocent the association of Ms Y with Mr X allows her to be portrayed in the same negative frame as him it seems, guilty by association.

Conclusion:

My intentions throughout this research were to provide a study of print media sources using a frame analysis approach to investigate how victims of crime are portrayed. A frame analysis technique was chosen as when applied to print media content it allows the researcher to fully investigate how the person, event

or issue concerned is being portrayed and in what way. The findings of my research support the assertion that newspapers are very powerful and influential sources of information (Lens 2002, p.139). The case chosen for investigation highlight how the media can portray victims' in very different ways. The evidence also shows how the language used by the print media can allow an audience member to view a victim in a positive or negative light. Gitlin (1980) argues that journalists strive to naturalise the social world in accordance with dominant discourse. They use language within these frames that will be taken by an audience member as natural or at least not beyond the realm of what they assume to be true or real (Bell and Garrett 1998, p.120). Therefore the findings from this research suggest that the case analysed is portrayed by the media to fit into a frame of what the journalist assumes to be 'natural' or right within society. The victim, Mr X, was described as being "known to gardai", "a heroin user" and "a convicted criminal" among other negative descriptions used within the 'frame' chosen by the media. The journalist chose this 'frame' on the basis that it best suited the intended profile they wanted to portray of Mr X. Ms Y who was murdered with Mr X was also framed this way as she was associated with Mr X and therefore the media chose to frame her in the same manner. This research supports the arguments from Devereux (2011), Jewkes (2004) and Greer (2007), among others, that the media can portray a person through a version of 'reality' that the journalist has created by appealing to the consensual values of their audience. They can stigmatise some victims' while glorifying others depending on what frame they choose to portray the individuals concerned. This research has added to the existing body of academic work on frame analysis by providing an empirical account of the use of 'frames' within the Irish print media's portrayal of victims' of crime.

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