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CRIME, MEDIA AND COMMUNITY: GRIEF AND VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT IN LATE MODERNITY

Chris Greer

Introduction

As media proliferate and become more integral to social existence, so too, it might be suggested, their role becomes more complex and contested. Media forms and representations are instrumental in the creation of deviant identities and the subsequent stigmatisation and demonisation of whole groups of individual. They are a driving force behind the nostalgically reactionary discourse that rails against the so-called ‘culture of permissiveness’, decrying the decline in respect and the loss of community. Yet they are also an important conduit for the celebration of diversity and the articulation and advancement of alternative discourses, counter-definitions and marginalised views and interests. Finally, they present opportunities to be social in new and novel ways. They offer a source of virtual collectivism and identity in an uncertain physical world; a source of imagined community. This chapter begins to explore some of the interconnections between crime, culture and community as they are played out in old and new media.

Crime, Culture and Community: The Late Modern Context

In the past three or four decades, western society has undergone profound changes to its social, cultural and economic structures. Deindustrialisation, the globalisation of the manufacturing industries and the growth in service industries threaten to eradicate traditional forms of industrial labour. The emergence of new markets and economies has presented exciting opportunities, but also considerable problems. Sections of the traditional working class have been absorbed into the lower echelons of the middle class. Others have fared less well and face long-term unemployment and economic uncertainty. The felt sense of insecurity may be sharpest among the most socially and economically marginalised, but the middle-classes are not exempt. Much of the labour force is subject to short-term contracts, and rationalisation and redundancy are a constant lingering threat. Meaningful planning for the future becomes more difficult and, for some, all but pointless. The anxieties engendered by economic precariousness in a destabilised job market are experienced by all but the luckiest few (Hall and Winlow, this volume). As Bauman points out, the late modern human condition is characterised by 'freedom of unprecedented proportions – but at the price of similarly unprecedented insecurity' (2001: 159).

Pratt (2000: 431) notes that 'in a climate of scarce resources, in juxtaposition to the offers of high rewards to successful risk takers, one's neighbour or colleague becomes a rival or competitor; one's social habitus comes to reflect less tolerance and self-control, and a greater likelihood of aggression'. Certainly, traditional conceptions of 'community' – based around geographical and territorial borders, shared values, identities and belief systems, collective politics – seem less applicable across much of the urban landscape. Societies are openly and expressively diverse.

Identity and membership are fluid. Populations are often transient, and constantly in flux. As Hancock and Matthews (2001: 111) note:

> 'In the context of increasing contingency, ambivalence and fragmentation the search for 'community' appears more hopeless and unrealistic. The identification of consensus becomes more elusive and the ability to mobilise universal truths in order to sanction, humiliate or stigmatise becomes increasingly difficult. The construction of order begins to look more artificial and fragile.'

The problem of crime cannot easily be isolated from society's other problems (Young, 1999). Definitions of and tolerance toward deviance and criminality interact closely with shifts in the wider economic, political and cultural environment. Individualism, competition and insecurity in the labour market, for example, are intimately related to the widely observed suspicion, mistrust and intolerance of the unknown other. The development of gated communities and the relentless monitoring and surveillance of public space establish clear boundaries between those included in and excluded from mainstream social and economic life (Davis, 1990, 1994; Ferrell, 2002). Whole categories of individual are stigmatised, criminalised and excluded on the basis of their look, their style, their demeanour – their perceived 'risk' or 'dangerousness'. Citizens are anxious and untrusting, acutely aware of and concerned about threats (both real and imagined) to their well being and personal safety. Crime consciousness and fear of crime run high.

Fragmentation, surveillance, dangerousness, risk, exclusion – prominent features of late modern existence – may all be said to discourage social engagement and threaten traditional forms of 'community'. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely the atomising and isolating influence of these conditions that make the need for unity so vital. It is in this context that the role of media forms and representations is of particular theoretical and empirical interest. Amidst widespread ontological insecurity, individual life histories are structured, shaped, and made sense of within frames of reference provided, to a significant degree, by mass media, to the extent that a sense of shared (popular) culture generates 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983). One important way in which people are afforded a sense of collective identity and social cohesion is via the mediatized construction of deviant and idealised identities. These constructions achieve much of their potency through the selective creation of binaries – the 'idealised victim' and the 'absolute other', a 'utopian' past and a 'dystopian' future. Both old and new media technologies present opportunities to engage collectively in the affirmation of virtuous identities through insisting on the non-identity of those 'not like us'. These are the social conditions that serve as the starting point for this chapter.

Media, Crime and the Deviant Other

The popular press, more than any other form of mass communication, seem obsessed with 'traditional' conceptions of community and order, routinely employing nostalgically reactionary language and narrative forms to hark back to a bygone age of better times. Stories are replete with romanticised images of the family, the school, the institutions of criminal justice, and indeed, the state.

Permissiveness and a general decline in values – falling moral standards, a lack of respect for others, individual selfishness – are advanced unproblematically as the 'cause' of society's ills, while any reference to the impact of economic restructuring and destabilised labour markets is notable by its absence. Even the most cursory search through the headlines of both tabloids and broadsheets offers up a rich trawl of populist soundbites decrying the present, dreading the future and lionising the past, while ignoring all that was harmful, unfair, discriminatory or prejudiced. This perspective was encapsulated in an editorial by the conservative *Daily Mail*'s Simon Heffer (August 20th 2002):

> 'This Government has done nothing to reverse the trend towards lethal permissiveness. It has relaxed laws about censorship and legalised acts of gross indecency with young men and women. It has relaxed the drugs laws. It has made a virtue of ' alternative lifestyles'. Its permissiveness erodes the respect of individuals for others, cheapens human life, and results in a culture where the pursuit of gratification prevails, without any sense of responsibility for its consequences.'

The *Daily Telegraph* (January 9th, 2003), the UK's best-selling daily broadsheet newspaper, insisted that society today is a much less civilised place than it was in the 'golden age' of the immediate post-war era, and listed the following evidence as proof:

> ‘One marriage in three now ends in divorce. Almost 40 per cent of children are now born out of wedlock, the highest figure in Europe. Since the 1967 Abortion Act, more than six million unborn children have been aborted. The legalisation of homosexuality has not been the end of the chapter, but merely the beginning, with an aggressive “gay rights” lobby demanding more and more concessions. The policy of early release of prisoners has had a catastrophic effect on the safety of the general public… In addition to this, we must add the hundreds of innocent lives lost as a result of the abolition of capital punishment. The self-restraint and taboos of the 1950s have all gone.’

Located at the heart of the putative problem of social decline are various categories of deviant ‘other’; enemies ‘without’ and enemies ‘within’. On the one hand, the most allegedly serious and dangerous offenders – paedophiles and fundamentalist terrorists – are the ‘absolute others’, portrayed as being *in* society, but not *of* it. On the other hand, there are those whose transgressions may scarcely border on illegality, whose actions and behaviours are criminalised on the basis of some failure to conform with the ‘proper way of doing things’ – dole scroungers, drug addicts, immigrants and asylum seekers, homosexuals, single mothers and feckless fathers. These are the ‘stigmatised others’, portrayed as being *of* society, but not *in* it. I have explored elsewhere the enthusiasm with which sections of the press merge these criminalised identities in order to tar whole categories of individual with the same deviant brush (Greer and Jewkes, 2004). The key point to make here is that the deviant categories that feature so heavily are themselves often mythical constructions, created by and contained within a cyclically reproduced, reactionary

media narrative which becomes self-perpetuating in its vitriol against marginalised groups.

Columnist Peter Hitchens gave full vent to this style of reportage. With some considerable journalistic dexterity, he managed to link sexual permissiveness, single mothers, Islamic fundamentalism, crime and disorder, and the loss of community, all in the same article. The author began by lamenting the trajectory of a once great society careering 'ever more rapidly down the path of permissiveness which began so gently in the sixties and now slopes ever more steeply downwards toward sexual chaos, drunkenness, family breakdown and the epidemic use of stupefying drugs' (*Mail on Sunday*, November 2nd, 2003). He went on to stress the dangers of the rising Islamic population in Britain, proposing that:

> 'Official Islam may disapprove of such things but there have even been signs of the Muslim intolerance towards Christianity that is a nasty feature of so many Islamic societies…[A] Brownie pack leader was attacked…by young men who snarled 'Christian bitch' at her. An isolated and meaningless incident? You might hope so, but it would be unwise to be sure.'

Conservative disapproval is ubiquitous in the popular press, and the impact of its unremitting articulation cannot be dismissed lightly. It is also important, however, to acknowledge that there are those who are trying to tell a different story, and that alternative viewpoints do find resonance. The *Independent*, for example, a liberal British daily newspaper, recently declared, 'Newspapers Can be Dangerous at Times Like These… A Xenophobic Agenda Means Twisting Almost Any Story – And it's

Getting Worse' (April 4th, 2004). The narrative beneath this headline cautioned that linkages between issues like race, crime and immigration are often 'tenuous and even dangerous' and, further, that they can create 'an overall tone which can stick in the public consciousness, particularly if there is an inclination there to make unjustifiable connections'.

In stark contrast to Peter Hitchen's representation of all Muslims as potential thugs, criminals and terrorists, some journalists highlight the experience of Muslims as victims. 'The Rising Tide of Islamophobia in Britain' (*Independent*, June 3rd, 2004) called attention to the 'upsurge in attacks on Muslims and their places of worship'. The article was critical of the 'sensationalist press' for fuelling animosity, and of the police for being 'quick to claim credit for foiling terror attacks, but when all the suspects are released without charge… they seem to have little interest in setting the record straight'. It continued, 'while Osama bin Laden and his acolytes may consider themselves devout Muslims, there is nothing Islamic about the carnage they have caused. Britain's Muslims know this to be true, and it is high time everyone else accepted it too.'

This level of media reflexivity provides a useful corrective to the reductionist stance – the construction of deviant identities, and promotion of simplified binaries – evident in so much reportage. Alternative discourses create a vital space within which counter-definitions can compete and find resonance in the public imagination. They encourage the selective celebration of diversity and difference, rather than its fearful condemnation. In a climate of heightened sensitivity to the risk of terror attacks, the issues of immigration and asylum, crime and disorder, and wider social decline are all too easily linked in stigmatising and exclusionary polemics, and in the

public imagination. Those commentators who would present alternative views, including those who themselves are the focus of stigmatisation and exclusion, continue to face an uphill struggle. But it is in precisely this context that the importance of their contributions increases.

Media, Crime and Victims

The media stigmatisation and demonisation of marginalised groups is not a new phenomenon, though the characteristics of particular deviant categories and how they are constructed and merged may vary over time (Pearson, 1983). The increasing focus on victims of crime, however, is comparatively recent. Over the last twenty years in the UK, victims have moved from the margins to centre stage in political and media discourses. The victim-centricity of current crime talk and policymaking reflects the general rise in crime consciousness and concern about personal safety. It also reflects wider social and political concerns about victims needs and rights which gathered momentum throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Maguire and Pointing, 1988; Garland, 2000).

The foregrounding of crime victims in the media is one of the most significant qualitative changes in representations of crime and control in the post-War period (Reiner et al., 2000a, b). Contemporary narratives, whether print or broadcast, broadsheet or tabloid, conservative or liberal, not only invite, but actively encourage consumers to identify and empathise with victims of crime: to see what they are seeing and feel what they are feeling; to become involved emotionally and join in the condemnation and punishment of the offender, who is increasingly portrayed as evil and beyond redemption. These emotional and expressive adaptations –

empathising with the victim, demonising and denouncing the other, both articulated and reinforced in mediatized discourses – comprise key constituents of the repertoire people use to negotiate the problem of crime, and the wider and inseparable problems of anxiety and uncertainty, that late modernity throws up. The playing out of these adaptations in the context of an uncertain physical world raises interesting questions about membership, identity, collectivism, and community.

The current phase in our history, as a number of commentators have observed, is characterised by people living together in segregated fashion, mixing but not socialising, sharing physical space (to a point), but little else. Sennett (1991) describes the indifference with which urban dwellers regard one another, the palpable sense of detachment and separation as they go about their daily lives. Taylor (1999: 64) has noted the 'startling decline in the level of any form of voluntary activity (and indeed any kind of shared public activities other than sport) 'in the community''. The rugged individualism of neocapitalism, it is suggested, has contributed to the creation of societies inhabited by 'lightly engaged strangers' (Young, 1990). To the extent that this is true, the collective expressiveness and emotionality essential to social interaction – and the empathising with crime victims actively encouraged in media discourses – would seem to risk suffocation beneath insecurity, indifference and social withdrawal.

Media, Crime and Collectivism

That there are new and emerging relationships between people and the spaces they both produce and inhabit is undeniable. Yet to suggest that people no longer take an interest or demonstrate any active involvement in their geographical communities is

to overstate the case. The thesis of the ‘stranger society’ should not be taken too far. In a climate of uncertainty, people tend to congregate around those issues which offer them some sense of unity and cohesion. Sport is one obvious example. Crime is another. While the identification of consensus and the ability to mobilise universal truths in order to sanction and stigmatise may appear increasingly difficult (Hancock and Matthews, 2001), some crimes are viewed as so utterly and unconditionally heinous that they take on an almost sacrilegious status. Child sexual murders are an interesting case in point.

Though all cases of child sexual murder are horrific, most capture neither media attention nor the public imagination with any force or longevity, and some barely register at all. Jewkes (2004), for example, notes that during the search for missing 14-year-old Milly Dowler in 2002, the body of a teenage girl was recovered from a disused quarry. Just as sections of the press were speculating that Milly had been found, the body was identified as 14-year-old Hannah Williams, who had disappeared a year earlier. Yet it was Milly who still continued to dominate the headlines, while Hannah was forgotten almost immediately. Milly matched the profile of the ‘ideal’ middle class teenager. Hannah was working class and had run away before. According to a police spokeswoman, her mother – a single parent on a low income – ‘wasn’t really press-conference material’.

Thus it is only those cases featuring a particular type of victim that will attract sustained media attention and collective public outcry. Those cases that journalists feel do not communicate the binaries of ‘innocence’ and ‘guilt’, ‘purity’ and ‘evil’ with sufficient force and clarity – even in the absence of a known offender – may scarcely feature in media discourse. Those child sexual murders that do, however,

have the capacity to invoke within media, public and politicians alike an intensity of reaction unrivalled by most other crime types. High profile and highly mediatized crimes of this nature provide a focal point around which people can unite to express collective feelings of empathy and suffering, sadness and hatred. In so doing, they present opportunities to establish a sense of membership and belonging – underpinned by the affirmation of virtuous and deviant identities – through the collective mourning of the 'idealised victim' and denunciation of the 'absolute other'.

The murder in 2000 of Surrey eight-year-old Sarah Payne – a bright, photogenic girl from a stable and loving family background – by convicted sex offender Roy Whiting invoked near-hysterical media outpourings, and resulted in public protests and a series of vigilante-style attacks on suspected paedophiles (Silverman and Wilson, 2002; Evans, 2003). The killing in Soham in 2003 of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman – school friends, again highly photogenic, with similarly bright futures and stable pasts – by school caretaker Ian Huntley also attracted sustained media coverage and public outcry. This tragic event is most notable, not for ensuing public violence, but for the sober observation of a semi-official minute's silence nationwide. In both cases, many who were physically proximate left flowers and gifts, queued to sign books of condolence, and gathered in remembrance of the loss of sacred life. When the journalists and camera crews eventually decamped, physical artefacts of shared suffering defiantly proclaimed the togetherness of a community torn apart by tragedy. But messages of anger and sadness came from much further afield. In the midst of these tragic events those so inclined could go online to collectively offer their sympathies and support, and express their outrage, through specially established websites. Contributions came from around the world.

Media, Crime and Imagined Community

Anderson (1983: 18) proposes that 'All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined'. At a time when face-to-face interactions in physical space and time appear to be negotiated with growing caution, notions of imagined community are especially resonant. The advancement and proliferation of communication technologies presents opportunities to be social in new and novel ways. In the network society (Castells, 1996, 2004), members of the 'global village' can engage instantaneously and continuously, sharing interests, building relationships, challenging or reinforcing values and belief systems, both marginal and mainstream. McLuhan (1964/2002) predicted that new electronic media, and the global flow of images, texts and meanings that they permit, would lead to the restructuring and reconceptualisation of relationships, and the re-evaluation of how people interact (see also Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004). It is now possible to create virtual networks of connectedness neither bounded by geographical borders, nor subject to conventional restrictions of space and time (Rheingold, 1994). New forms of closeness and proximity are generated. New forms of collectivism and community are established .

In cyberspace, the negotiation of crime, fear and uncertainty merges with new media technologies in the creation of imagined communities structured around collective expressiveness, emotionality and identity. Of particular salience here are commemorative websites and global Internet books of condolence, and online petitions and discussion boards, established in response to high-profile murder of 'idealised victims' by 'absolute others'. Valier (2004) notes that online discussion

sites established in response to notorious UK and US murders are characterised by calls for excessive punitive justice and, not infrequently, threats of violence and even death to the perpetrators. Consideration of virtual engagement in the wake of those murders considered in this chapter adds further weight to this claim. When Ian Huntley was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, contributors to online discussion boards declared: 'He will receive the treatment a 'nonce' deserves'; 'I hope Huntley rots, may the bastard die of cancer'; 'Let the justice commence'; and 'Kill him'. [1] These online bulletin boards are also accessible to those who would challenge the promotion of vengeance and vigilantism, and offer an alternative interpretation of the 'appropriate' response to tragic murders. Oppositional sites are posted with a view to promoting, in the words of one website seeking to counter the dissemination of excessive online punitivism, 'reason and common sense in the UK', and to 'stop the madness'. [2] Even more than in the physically constrained, agenda-based world of the print media, messages transmitted in cyberspace are open to contest and debate. The challenge is to be heard above the resounding clamour of virtual fear and loathing.

These virtual discussion forums exist in parallel with and frequently, it would seem, in stark contrast to online books of condolence and memorial websites built around the shared suffering with and caring for victims and victims' families. 'Guestbooks' established in memory of Sarah Payne, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, and the victims of other recent tragic murders, [3] invite members of the global village to pass on their sympathies and pay their respects. As with online demands for punitive action and vigilante justice, passions and emotions run high. But what is most striking about these cyberspatial communications is the profound

sense of loss that contributors themselves – essentially complete strangers – claim to feel: 'Words cannot express our sadness (UK)'; 'They are candles in the darkness – their wee lives have touched the world (Australia)'; 'I feel I have no words to express just how I feel' (UK). The intense hostility and vengefulness invoked in so many by the tragic murder of 'idealised victims', while disconcerting, does seem to 'make sense' within the context of the wider punitive culture and penal escalation of recent decades. Why, though, in a society in which people are less inclined to engage and interact in physical space, and more inclined to be aggressive when they do, would so many wish to share in the pain and suffering of those they have previously never heard of, still less met?

Becoming emotionally involved with the victims of high profile, mediatized murders, participating in their suffering and sharing in their grief, is one way of outwardly and expressively demonstrating one's depth of feeling – of proving one's humanity – in a cynical and fragmented society. That compassionate empathy is being directed at strangers serves to amplify the expression of humanity still further. The sheer quantity and geographical diversity of contributions to memorial websites would appear to reinforce the visions of McLuhan (1964/2002) and Rhiengold (1994) of cyberspace as a forum for global interconnectedness and community based on mutual compassion, empathy and support. Indeed, virtual expressions of shared suffering may well constitute an invaluable source of strength and support for those who actually knew the victim. But while the majority of contributions are no doubt sincere, their authenticity bears greater scepticism.

Appleton (2002) likens collective involvement in mass mourning to a 'grief roadshow', and finds it deeply troubling that 'it is not enough to feel upset – you

have to show other people how upset you are, and to join in with others who are feeling the same'. Collectively engaging and expressively sharing in the intense anguish of others – unknown others – conduces the development of an economy of suffering and pain in which members may compete to appear the most hurt and, therefore, the most human. It contributes to the ritualisation and commodification of grief, where grief becomes something to be conspicuously consumed, and then discarded; another commodity in an aggressive neocapitalist economy. Signing the book, visiting the website, leaving the message, all these things provide a fast-working but short-lived antidote to the uncertainty and anxiety that characterises the late modern human condition – temporarily satisfying, but ultimately unfulfilling. The emotions diffuse, the murders are forgotten, the books of condolence close down, and the 'imagined community' dissolves away into cyberspace, only to be recreated, re-established, reconnected in the wake of the next murder featuring 'suitable' victims and offenders.

Imagined communities established in the wake of high profile child sexual murders provide a source of identity and belonging, however superficial and ephemeral, in an age of uncertainty. It is scarcely surprising that so many want to 'belong'. Yet the extent to which this new collectivism constitutes social *inter*-action is questionable. Cyberspatial communications, as Wallace (1999) points out, retain a perception of anonymity. Messages of condolence and contributions to discussion boards may be signed 'Tom, US' or 'Karen, Australia', but seldom include more personal detail than that, and often include less. The virtual expression of shared suffering provides a way of touching a stranger's life, of leaving a trace, without having to endure one's own life being touched back by strangers in any palpable

way. It corresponds with a particular conception of proximity and closeness, but it is closeness at a distance. It is individualised sociality, anonymous and largely faceless, resonating with Agger's (2004: 47) observation that 'the postmodern condition is communicating with people whom you can't see, but can imagine'. It is indicative – in keeping with discussions of social engagement, identity and collectivism in late modernity – of a climate in which people want some level of contact, and some form of interaction. But not too much.

Conclusion

As identities and meanings become more fluid and contested, populations become more transient, and citizens become more wary of face-to-face interaction, traditional forms of collectivism, sociality and community appear to fragment and disintegrate. New media technologies provide a means of achieving a sense of identity, belonging and community in this climate of uncertainty. One example of this new collectivism is the emergence of imagined communities in the wake of child sexual murders involving 'idealised victim' and 'absolute other'.

Notions of 'community' – whether relating to the physical and traditional or the imagined and virtual – are, fundamentally, about membership and identity. As such, they are inscribed with notions of inclusion and exclusion. In the context of those issues discussed in this chapter – conservative and liberal counter-discourses about permissiveness and decline, and high profile child sexual murders – community derives from the collective affirmation of virtuous identities through the distancing from, and insistence upon, the non-identity of others. The distinction between identity and non-identity, however, and the process – both symbolic and

physical – of inclusion and exclusion, is not simply the distinction between victim and offender.

Imagined communities only emerge around particular types of victim. Those victims who cannot be 'idealised' – because their image or background does not match the preferred profile – will generally attract neither sustained media attention nor widespread public and political outcry. Their deaths may scarcely result in national recognition in the physical world, still less global commemoration and remembrance in virtuality. Notions of exclusion, then, do not only apply to those vilified in the press and condemned in online discussion boards. They apply equally to those child victims who do not fit the right profile or tick the right boxes, and who are therefore overlooked, ignored, denied. Thus imagined communities are created around binaries first established in news media discourses and, in this sense, form part of a wider process of inclusion and exclusion in which whole categories of individual may be legitimated or marginalised on the basis of such arbitrary factors as background, colour, or class.

By vicariously participating in the suffering of those affected or afflicted by child sexual murders – by sorrowing with their loss, and sharing in the anger that loss may invoke – people garner a sense of community, a sense of membership and belonging, in a world where the notion of community and community membership has changed fundamentally. Though these imagined communities are based on highly selective and exclusionary foundations, they can constitute a space for the promotion of compassion and empathy, and measured penal debate. But they can also stimulate the dissemination of vengeful hate, and contribute to the generation of an economy of grief, in which humanity is measured competitively, and

demonstrated through highly expressive, yet faceless, ephemeral and, ultimately, inauthentic gestures of suffering and loss. As such, being excluded is perhaps not so bad.

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[1] See, for example, http://forums.armageddononline.org/archive/index.php/t-1281.html; http://www.analogsf.com/discus/messages/1/671.html?1082546353;

[2] See, for example, Rationalism.org.uk

[3] Websites were also established, with varying degrees of contemporaneity, following the fatal shooting of 16 school children and one teacher in Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996 by Thomas Hamilton, who then turned the gun on himself, and the murder of toddler James Bulger in 1993 by two ten-year-olds (see also Appleton, 2002; Brown, 2003; Valier, 2004).