

*The International Behavioural and Social Sciences Library*

---

# LAW-AND-ORDER NEWS



*Classics from the Tavistock Press*

# **LAW-AND-ORDER NEWS**

## **An Analysis of Crime Reporting in the British Press**

**STEVE CHIBNALL**



First published in 1977 by  
Tavistock Publications Limited

Reprinted in 2001 by  
Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

Printed and Bound in Great Britain

© 1977 Steve Chibnall

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

The publishers have made every effort to contact authors/copyright holders of the works reprinted in the *International Behavioural and Social Sciences Library*. This has not been possible in every case, however, and we would welcome correspondence from those individuals/companies we have been unable to trace.

These reprints are taken from original copies of each book. In many cases the condition of these originals is not perfect. The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of these reprints, but wishes to point out that certain characteristics of the original copies will, of necessity, be apparent in reprints thereof.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*  
A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

Law-and-Order News  
ISBN 0-415-26408-1  
Crime & Delinquency: 10 Volumes  
ISBN 0-415-26507-X  
The International Behavioural and Social Sciences Library  
112 Volumes  
ISBN 0-415-25670-4

*The International Behavioural and Social Sciences Library*

---

## LAW-AND-ORDER NEWS



---

TAVISTOCK

CRIME & DELINQUENCY  
In 10 Volumes

- I        Sociology and the Stereotype of the Criminal  
          *Dennis Chapman*
- II       Law-and-Order News  
          *Steve Chibnall*
- III      Freedom and Justice within Walls  
          *F E Emery*
- IV      The Subculture of Violence  
          *Marvin E Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti*
- V       Cultural Factors in Delinquency  
          *Edited by T C N Gibbens and R H Abrenfeldt*
- VI      Ventures in Criminology  
          *Sheldon Glueck and Eleanor Glueck*
- VII     Growth to Freedom  
          *Derek Miller*
- VIII    Law and Society in England  
          *Bob Roshier and Harvey Teff*
- IX      Social Deviance  
          *Leslie T Wilkins*
- X       Criminal on the Road  
          *T C Willett*

Steve Chibnall

## Law - and - Order News

*An analysis of crime reporting  
in the British Press*



Tavistock Publications

*First published in 1977  
by Tavistock Publications Limited  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4  
Photoset in Great Britain by  
Red Lion Setters, Holborn, London  
and printed in Great Britain by  
Cambridge University Press*

ISBN 0 422 74960 5 (*hardbound*)  
ISBN 0 422 74970 2 (*paperback*)

© Steve Chibnall 1977

*This book is available in both  
hardbound and paperback editions.  
The paperback edition is sold  
subject to the condition that it shall  
not, by way of trade or otherwise, be  
lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise  
circulated without the publisher's  
prior consent in any form of binding  
or cover other than that in which it is  
published and without a similar  
condition including this condition  
being imposed on the subsequent  
purchaser.*

## Preface

This is a book for sociologists, journalists, and that creature much beloved by publishers, the educated and interested layman. Writing for even this apparently restricted readership has posed considerable problems of style and presentation. First, I have had to walk an uneasy tightrope between excessive academicism, the pedantry of the scientific monograph, and the breathless prose of 'journalese'. Inevitably, I have wavered. Some journalists will find the book too academic for their taste, while some academics will find it too journalistic in style. Second, in organizing and ordering the material of the book I have had to cope with contradictory imperatives of presentation. A conventional sociological monograph begins with a review of the relevant literature and a discussion of theory and then progresses to findings and data. The conventional work of journalism, on the other hand, has an inverted pyramid structure. It grabs the reader's attention by opening with the most pertinent, important, or dramatic material in the expectation that the reader may discard the piece before reaching the end. I have attempted to resolve this contradiction by dealing with research findings at the earliest possible stage of the book's development, having briefly situated them in a theoretical context. The implications of the study are then re-examined in a concluding chapter when it is hoped that the empirical material presented will have been strong enough or colourful enough to sustain the interest of the non-academic reader through to the close.

Many people have helped me in researching and writing *Law-and-Order News* and I can only hope to acknowledge a handful of them. The principal acknowledgement is to my informants in Fleet Street and its environs for providing so much



valuable data, but my special thanks must also go to Stan Cohen (University of Essex) for his help and advice in supervising my research which was financed, in part, by the Social Science Research Council. I am also grateful to James Curran, Jeremy Tunstall, Paul Rock, Colin Bell, Graham Allen, and Peter Saunders for their criticism and encouragement in the early stages of the research; and to Graham Murdock, Steve Molloy, Lynn Makings, and Martyn Denscombe for their comments on various drafts of the manuscript. Thanks and acknowledgement are also due to the staff of the libraries of Essex University, Cambridge University, Leicester Polytechnic, and the *Daily Mirror* for their technical services; to Marion Duff and Jan Morris for their careful typing of the manuscript; and to *Time Out* and The Leicester University Centre for Mass Communications Research for their general assistance. Finally, my thanks to London Express News and Feature Services for permission to use copyright material from the *Sun* and the *Daily Express*, and to the *Daily Mail* for allowing the reproduction of one of its news layouts.

S.C.  
*Leicester,*  
*October 1976*

## Introduction

'The basic interests of the human race are not in music, politics and philosophy, but in things like food and football, money and sex, and crime — especially crime.'

Larry Lamb: Editorial Director, *The Sun*  
and *The News of the World* 1975.

### *Law-and-order news*

Newspapers and television do not merely monitor the events of the real world; they construct representations and accounts of reality which are shaped by the constraints imposed upon them: constraints emanating from the conventions, ideologies, and organization of journalism and news bureaucracies. Ideally, we could evaluate the influence of these constraints and the accuracy of media accounts by comparing media depictions with the reality of the events they portray. But, typically, in a highly differentiated society like Britain, the events which capture the interest of the media only become visible through their eyes. There is often no easy method of separating 'sacred' facts from 'free' comment or, more precisely, from profane interpretation. All are contained within complex frameworks of conventional understandings which identify and define news stories. If we cannot always disentangle reality from media interpretation, and if interpretations have a public reality of their own, if they come to represent reality 'for all practical purposes', we should at least be aware of the way in which they are constructed and the influences which direct the process. This, essentially, is the task confronted by this study. It examines the characteristic ways in which knowledge about situations of which the newspaper reader can have little first-hand information is socially constructed by journalists and cast in the form of news. Beyond this, it inquires

into the values, ideologies, and interests which inform the construction process. Clearly, this type of study requires a focus to concentrate its efforts, and to this end I have chosen to examine a single field of reporting in one medium, i.e., crime reporting in the press. The analysis is organized around one general theme of media discourse — law and order — which spans a number of specialist fields but is situated essentially in crime journalism and constitutes its most fundamental theme. Crime news and the ‘Law-and-order’ theme are chosen because they illustrate most effectively, the system of beliefs, values, and understandings which underlies newspaper representations of reality. There is, perhaps, no other domain of news interest in which latent press ideology becomes more explicit than in what we may term ‘law-and-order news’. Nowhere else is it made quite so clear what it is that newspapers value as healthy and praiseworthy or deplore as evil and degenerate in society. Nowhere else are the limits of newspaper values such as neutrality, objectivity, and balance revealed with such clarity. Crime and deviance represent, simultaneously, a challenge to newspapers’ liberal and consensual view of society and a source of ideological reinforcement. The growth of crime during periods of apparent ‘progress’, prosperity, and consensual politics presents interpretive problems for the ideology because it calls into question assumptions about social order and change[1]. On the other hand, as sociologists from Durkheim onwards have frequently noted, crime and the processing of offenders offers an opportunity for the celebration of conformity and respectability by redefining the moral boundaries of communities and drawing their members together against the threat of chaos. Newspapers, of course, not only seek membership of the same speech communities as their readers, they also aim to reflect and manipulate sentiments within those communities in their provision of information, comment, and understandings[2].

Crime news may serve as a focus for the articulation of shared morality and communal sentiments. A chance not simply to speak *to* the community but to speak *for* the community, against all that the criminal outsider represents, to delineate the shape of the threat, to advocate a response, to eulogize on conformity to

established norms and values, and to warn of the consequences of deviance. In short, crime news provides a chance for a newspaper to appropriate the moral conscience of its readership. Steven Box goes so far as to argue that this potential for moral enterprise constitutes the *raison d'être* of crime news:

'The reason ... why deviant behaviour occupies so much media space is not because it is intrinsically interesting, but because it is intrinsically instructive. It serves to reinforce the world-taken-for-granted by restating social rules and warning subjects that violators will not be tolerated. In this way, the wayward are cautioned and the righteous are comforted.'

(Box 1971 : 40)

The existence of crime news disseminated by the mass media means that people no longer need to gather together to witness punishments. They can remain at home for their moral instruction (Erikson 1964).

More often than not, the columns of law-and-order news are peopled by heroes and villains, personifications of good and evil acting roles in a symbolic drama. The symbolic drama may only occasionally become explicit in journalists' routine accounts of crime, deviance, and police work, but it underlies them, surfacing when once again some apparent crisis of social control develops or when a particularly sensational crime captures the headlines. At times like these crime reporting may function as an important vehicle and repository of newspaper ideology while also indexing the perceived anxieties of its readers. The anxieties it documents tend to be generalized anxieties concerned with the breakdown of order. These vague feelings of unease are repeatedly articulated through the shifting images and scenarios of law-and-order news, finding expression in concern about crime rates, delinquency, wildcat strikes, violent picketing, mugging, terrorism, and so on. But these are not seen as discrete social problems so much as symptoms of an underlying social malaise, a nameless, malignant sickness.

In doing this law-and-order news mythologizes, i.e., it explains away the phenomena it reports by relating them to a single,

intangible entity whose existence must remain an article of faith. The malignant sickness is occasionally named. Sometimes it is called 'moral decline', sometimes 'the disease of violence'. At other times it may assume a more human form: 'communist subversives', 'the mafia', 'the criminal mastermind'. But each of these concepts functions in much the same way to provide a simple explanation of diverse and perplexing phenomena; an explanation which cannot be disproved. But again, such an explanation is rarely explicit in newspaper stories. It is more likely to be tacitly evoked by cues in the text or by powerful master labels such as 'violent' and 'criminal' which carry unambiguous connotations and meld together disparate phenomena and their meanings. In law-and-order news, complex and ambiguous reality is constantly reduced to its simplest forms. As we shall see, heterogeneity and diversity of meaning are concealed by a reporting technique which continually projects reality in the same form of binary opposition, particularly 'good threatened by evil' and 'order threatened by chaos'.

All this is the largely unconscious accomplishment of newsmen and their sources. In constructing their public interpretations of events journalists draw upon the widely shared news values of their profession. These values direct attention towards particular features of events — elements of drama, the role of personalities, and so on — and encourage their presentation in simplistic terms. News values, as I will argue later, shape and reinforce the interpretations of law-and-order news, but these interpretations receive further support from many of the 'accredited spokesmen' (Hall 1972) upon whom journalists also draw selectively in their construction of stories. Some Conservative politicians, for instance, collapse together diverse phenomena in much the same way as law-and-order news, identifying them all as symptoms of moral decline. In his major policy speech after the October 1974 general election, Sir Keith Joseph linked together increasing delinquency, truancy, vandalism, hooliganism, illiteracy, drug-taking, drunkenness, sadism, student revolt, vagrancy, and violence in the streets as multiple signs of the decadence of modern British Society. He warned that the country was being

'destroyed from inside' by a moral degeneracy nurtured by 'mischievous, wrong-headed, debilitating yet seductive' ideas. Lord Hailsham had reached a similar conclusion ten months before when he had warned the Junior Carlton Club of the immanent threat to the rule of law:

' "Gentlemen, we live in grave times. The symptoms of our malaise may be economic, may show themselves in price rises, shortages and industrial disputes. But underlying the symptoms is a disease which has destroyed democracies in the past, and the causes of that disease are not economic. They are moral and political and constitutional, and in order to cure it we must recognise them as such." '

(*The Times* 3.12.73)

As we shall see law-and-order news frequently reflects the type of definition of the situation suggested by these statements and others by police sources. They form part of the *ad hoc* montage of accounts and interpretations by which problematic events are given a widely available meaning. But, while law-and-order news tends to be a loose and imprecise piecing together of explanatory fragments, the pragmatic constructs which result are generally situated within a particular ideological framework. The men and (occasionally) the women responsible for these constructs, of course, rarely see their work as explicitly ideological. Most professional communicators feel their job is to collect and process the accounts of their sources, casting them in a conventional news form for rapid dissemination to their readers. They may recognize that the process of creating news from source accounts inevitably involves elements of interpretation and selection but this is seen as a form of intellectual craftsmanship which creates a predominantly neutral product. But when we subject those products as a whole to critical scrutiny it is possible to discern a distinctly ideological system of beliefs, values, and understandings underlying media accounts. I shall argue that, while this ideological system may not be common to all newspapers and their personnel, there does appear to be surprisingly little variation in commitment from one national newspaper to

another. The ideological system supplies a context within which the moral worth of established and emergent social groups can be evaluated and signified to the public, as well as a framework of tacit interpretations and understandings within which actions and events can be rendered meaningful.

## Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1 Crime reporting and mass communications research	1
2 Press ideology: the politics of professionalism	11
3 Blood-soaked cheque books: the golden age of crime reporting	46
4 Bombers, muggers, and thugs: the press and the violent society	75
5 Black sheep and rotten apples: the press and police deviance	142
6 Yard man speak with forked tongue?: sources and the management of news	172
7 Conclusion	206
<i>Chronology of Law-and-Order News 1945-75</i>	227
<i>References</i>	262
<i>Notes</i>	268
<i>Index</i>	279



# 1 Crime reporting and mass communications research

In selecting law-and-order news to illuminate both newspaper ideology and the professional practices of journalists this study is at odds with much of the social science research tradition in the field of mass communications. Crime reporting has habitually been rather ignored by academic researchers or treated as essentially apolitical.

It has been of interest primarily as an example of the worst excesses of journalistic superficiality and sensationalism, a curiosity of no more than marginal importance to the understanding of mass communications. The only aspect of crime reporting which had received academic consideration in Britain until the 1970s was its social and psychological effects, but this was merely a small part of a wider inquiry into the effects, usually upon children, of media portrayals of sex and violence.

This situation might well have continued if it had not been for the developments occurring in the late 1960s which saw a convergence of both style and content between social deviance and political marginality (Horowitz and Liebewitz 1968) and a concomitant 'politicization' of much criminological theory (Taylor, Walton, and Young 1973; 1975). The recognition of crime and deviance as essentially a result of, or a response to, conditions of life in capitalist society rather than as a consequence of personal inadequacy has given a new significance to crime reporting. It is this significance which is explored in this study. The established tradition of academic inquiry provides little help or inspiration in this task because it has tended to operate with a limited problematic which has handicapped attempts to confront