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Crime Reporting

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



Crime was a very important theme in the nineteenth-century newspaper. Although news of murders, assaults, robberies, petty thefts and frauds had already begun to feature in metropolitan and provincial newspapers of the eighteenth century, key changes in penal law from the late eighteenth century onwards meant that the presentation of crime news became more orderly and to some extent standardised across nineteenth-century journals. Moreover, as editors became more ambitious and the physical size of newspapers grew, coverage of crime not only increased, but also became tied to sales as this category of news was marketed as a source of entertainment. And, by the last third of the nineteenth century, the newspaper had both incorporated and replaced other forms of popular print, becoming the predominant and almost sole location for the dissemination of news about crime for all social classes. As such, the nineteenth-century newspaper, through the selection of crime content and its presentation, actively shaped popular perceptions about crime.

1770-1830: The development of nineteenth-century crime reporting

During the eighteenth century, as widespread interest in crime and its punishment collided with the proliferation of print, there emerged a popular literature which, in its wide range of genres, catered for all. Cheap broadsides, pamphlet and multi-volume biographies of criminals, and accounts of trials at criminal courts (particularly the Old Bailey in London) were sold and distributed throughout Britain. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, the newspaper became increasingly important in the dissemination of

information about crime. As eighteenth-century Britain was very lightly policed and responsibility for the capture and prosecution of criminals fell largely upon the victims of crime, newspapers, with their high percentage of advertising content and potentially wide circulations, became ideal notice boards where, for a small fee, victims were able to draw attention to their stolen property and attempt to secure its return. Furthermore, as newspapers included accounts of recent crime of many types, summaries of the business of a number of criminal courts and even up-to-date information on the fate of those who had been sentenced to death, they offered readers a much more complete and potentially accurate view of crime across the country than other forms of print available.

Between 1770 and 1830, crucial changes in penal law, including the increasing professionalization of law enforcement, and the decline in popularity of some of the traditional genres in the popular literature of crime, meant that crime content in newspapers was expanded and re-organised. First, the unprecedented growth of urban centres, especially London, perceived rising crime rates, incidents of political unrest and the increase of wealth amongst middle-class town dwellers led to calls for the establishment of a professional police force. Late eighteenth-century metropolitan newspapers reflect a growing interest in the business of the magistrates' (or petty) courts and the activities of the officers attached to them, both in the summaries of court proceedings and in the growing involvement of the authorities in crime advertising. The 1792 Middlesex Justices Act, which established seven police offices for the metropolitan area, each with three paid magistrates and a small force of paid policemen,

provided the basis for a formal police force in London, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, London newspapers published daily reports on the business of the police courts typically under a specially titled column of news. At the same time, as the police became responsible for chasing criminals, crime adverts placed in newspapers by members of the public became redundant. However, there emerged a new specialist newspaper, the *Hue and Cry and Police Gazette* (1797-2003), which was entirely devoted to announcements of recent crimes and escaped prisoners and circulated almost exclusively amongst the police.

At the same time, peculiar market forces meant that newspapers began to incorporate other genres that had existed in the popular literature of crime. For instance, for most of the eighteenth century, the proceedings of the Old Bailey, London's premier criminal court, had been printed as a distinct, profitable publication and sold to affluent men or circulated in urban coffee houses. From the 1770s onwards, however, the *Old Bailey Proceedings (OBP)* faced direct competition from newspapers. As increasing official involvement delayed the publication of the *OBP* after every session, and the mounting number of captured criminals and successful prosecutions inflated its size, the London press, through the canny use of reporters and summaries of selected cases, was able to supplant the former as the public organ of the trials heard at the Old Bailey. Like the police court reports, the business of the Old Bailey, in addition to that of other criminal courts in Britain, was organised in titled columns for readers to find quickly and easily.

In addition to these regular columns, reports of crime continued to appear scattered throughout the newspapers. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, as the size of newspapers grew with the declining costs of printing and paper, the volume of these reports expanded. Furthermore, in the case of high-profile crimes such as murders, newspaper reporting became more reliable and regular, and, with the contemporaneous decline of criminal biographies, more attention was paid to specific details about the crime, offender(s) and victim(s). The popularity of this style of reporting was demonstrated by the rise of the circulation rates of many titles on the occurrence of a particularly gruesome murder, a phenomenon which would intensify during the second half of the nineteenth century.

There is no doubt that these early nineteenth-century newspapers were widely read. Even though their prices, in part inflated by government taxes, placed them well beyond the working-class purse, copies of the leading journals were available to read in coffee houses and public houses. Workmates and neighbours might have also pooled resources in order to purchase a copy. But it is important to note that during the first half of the nineteenth century, these expensive publications continued to face competition from the rising tide of penny and half-penny broadsides in the dissemination of crime news to a large section of the population. It was during the second third of the nineteenth century that printers and publishers of newspapers aimed at working-class readers began to recognise the potential profits to be made from crime news and directed their efforts towards converting the broadside audience into newspaper purchasers.

1830-1870: Crime news and the popular press

After the Great Reform Act of 1832, the editor-proprietors of cheap radical newspapers, now explicitly targeting the British working class, had begun to understand the importance of crime reporting. As the popularity of various political movements fluctuated, these proprietors began to include sensational accounts of crime and disasters, real or imaginary, to keep their journals afloat. The value of sensationalism had obviously been learnt from the successful broadside trade. But they also attempted to seduce this audience by offering yet another attractive feature, police court reports. From their establishment in the late eighteenth century, police courts had come to play a key role in the lives of working- and lower-middle-class men and women in urban centres. They were regularly used by the working classes to solve disputes arising between them, and also operated as centres for advice and charity. Hence labouring men and women would read columns of police intelligence for useful information, not just for amusement. Of these radical newspapers, the most successful was John Cleave's *Weekly Police Gazette* (1835-36), which achieved a circulation of about 40,000 in 1835.

However, the focus on politics continued to cap profits, and so during the 1840s, when a new generation of publishers sought to capture this market, they largely dampened political opinion and increased the focus on crime in order to make money. Leading the pack was Edward Lloyd, a canny and successful penny fiction printer, who had also tried his luck with broadsides before establishing a penny newspaper, *The Penny Sunday Times* and *People's Police Gazette* (1840-42). This

first experiment was ultimately a failure. Government taxes on the publication of news forced Lloyd to publish fictional news stories in order to sustain the low cost of the journal. However, the popularity of *The Penny Sunday Times* demonstrated that an appetite for sensation and crime in large quantities existed among readers. And the lessons learnt meant that his factual weekly newspaper, *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* (1842-1902), launched at the end of 1842, became a roaring success. Over the course of the decade, several other cheap weeklies also appeared: *News of the World* (1843-present), *Weekly Times* (1847-85) and *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* (1850-1967.) As demonstrated by their individual circulation rates, each attracting around 50,000 purchasers by the early 1850s, these newspapers quickly captured an unprecedented share of the market.

All of these popular, weekly newspapers, but especially *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, were viewed by respectable commentators as fairly lurid journals which satisfied their readers' tastes for crime and violence. While it is true that these newspapers did publish more reports on crime in proportion to their whole content when compared with the establishment press (for example, *The Times*), the actual content of reports hardly differed at all. And this holds true both for the regular columns detailing the business of the criminal courts and for longer sequences of reports on infamous murders. In other words, reports of crime consumed by many working- and lower-middle-class readers were not so very different from those that the respectable classes were devouring in their fashionable West End clubs and semi-detached villas in suburbia.

Yet the proportion of sensation offered in weekly newspapers, the reporting styles used and the cheap price, especially when weeklies were able to drop their price to 1d with the abolition of newspaper taxes, did go a long way towards converting former broadside purchasers to newspaper buyers. Eight- to sixteen-page newspapers certainly offered much better value for money. But the transition was not completed until the abolition of public execution in 1868, as this meant that the supporting framework for broadsides was ultimately dismantled.

1870-1900: Crime and the New Journalism

Therefore, by the last third of the nineteenth century, almost all news about crime was disseminated to the British public via the newspaper. As a result, newspapers became hugely influential in shaping popular perceptions about crime. The high proportion of crime news could encourage readers in the belief that they were living in a particularly violent or even anarchic society, in spite of official statistics which demonstrated a steady decline in the crime rate after the 1850s. Moreover, in the selection of news to publish, some newspapers were instrumental in sparking moral panics, for example, in the case of garrotting during the 1860s.

Most of all, the last third of the nineteenth century witnessed the amalgamation and intensification of processes in the presentation of crime news mentioned above. The cultivation of mass audiences and the nationalisation of some newspapers meant that crime content became much more standardised. The

phenomenon of the "New Journalism" pushed this even further. As some newspapers joined together in conglomerates and agencies became responsible for the transmission of wire service summaries, reports across several different newspapers could be identical. Although a number of newspapers continued to have a reputation for publishing a higher proportion of crime news, for example, *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, in terms of content there was very little difference between mass circulation dailies and weeklies that catered for different audiences. If anything, the crime content of established "respectable" newspapers increased, as Parliamentary and political news declined in favour of shorter, digestible and colourful articles designed to amuse the modern commuter. The ability to make money from crime reporting only grew in these years. For instance, *The Star* (1888-1915), a new, and struggling, evening paper, became a highly competitive publication through its coverage of the Ripper murders in 1888, an event which newspaper editors across Britain sought to capitalise on. Finally, the growing use of headlines and cross-heads, for reports as well as regular columns of criminal intelligence, drew the attention of readers, helping them to rapidly locate reports of recent murders and robberies.

Any conclusion needs to mention the emergence in these years of a more specialised press devoted to crime reporting. A new generation of "police gazettes" became available to the public, the most famous being the *Illustrated Police News* (1863-1938), a four-page weekly paper priced at 1d and run by the infamous but rather shadowy publisher, George Purkess. With its often lurid front page, which illustrated recent crimes in significant detail, and with its risqué advertisements,

including some for volumes of criminal biography, the Illustrated Police News seemed to bring together and present in an updated form some of the older genres of crime literature, such as the crime broadside and the histories of famous criminals. Hence, there is a need to balance the elements of change and continuity in our assessment of crime reporting over the course of the nineteenth century.

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