

Britain: Media exploits death of school girls for law-and-order binge

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On August 29, Judge Nicholas Coleman took the unusual step of reminding a Peterborough court that the defendant awaiting trial was “innocent until proven guilty”.

Unusual but not unnecessary. The defendant, Maxine Carr, has been the subject of a frenzied and highly emotive press campaign, after she was charged with attempting to pervert the course of justice during the police investigation into the murder of 10-year-olds, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman.

Such has been the coverage of the case that Carr did not appear in person before the court but by video link from Holloway prison, 80 miles away. This was after her first appearance led to a 500-strong crowd gathering outside the court, screaming abuse and demanding her hanging, and attempting to attack the police van she was travelling in.

Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman went missing in their village of Soham, Cambridgeshire on August 4. Their bodies were discovered 13 days later in nearby woodland. The cause of death has not yet been ascertained.

Within days, Ian Huntley, Carr’s partner and a caretaker at the girls’ school, was charged with their abduction and murder. Carr was charged separately with giving misleading information to the police, and could face a life sentence. Solicitors acting on her behalf have denied that Carr had anything to do with the girls’ deaths.

The 10-year-olds’ disappearance had dominated the news for weeks. The trauma and torment of the girls’ families was relayed into virtually every home, with scenes of their desperate parents, grandparents and siblings waiting in anguish, and tearful pleas for any would-be abductor to let them return home to their families.

More than 1,000 people volunteered to help in the search for the girls and some 15,000 telephoned police helplines reporting possible sightings of the children. Hundreds turned up spontaneously in Soham to conduct their own search of the surrounding countryside.

Having shared vicariously in the parents’ desperate wait, with the discovery of the girls’ bodies, thousands shared in their grief. Hundreds of thousands of emails flooded into electronic condolence sites, whilst some 20,000 floral bouquets were delivered to the local church.

But if public empathy was largely heartfelt and sincere, the same cannot be said for the media’s involvement.

Despite press claims to be concerned with securing “justice” for the families, the saturation coverage only hindered the investigation. Police had to issue an appeal for people to stay away from Soham as the large body of inexperienced volunteers was impeding the search. Similarly the number of calls to police helplines meant that, however well intentioned, the search was sent off on several wild goose chases.

The large rewards for information offered by several tabloid newspapers also led to a number of suspect and misleading claims and concern that any evidence gained this way and eventually used at trial, could be thrown out of court on grounds of financial inducement.

As for press claims to be concerned with “honouring” the girls memories; its voyeuristic coverage had the effect of turning a terrible tragedy into a cheap peep show. This was particularly so when charges were issued against Huntley and Carr. Regardless of the fact that both have yet to face trial, and that Carr is not even charged in connection with the girl’s abduction and murder, every detail of their lives has been aired—no matter how tawdry, trivial, irrelevant and unsubstantiated. Stories have ranged from revelations about a lesbian fling by Huntley’s mother to the *People* tabloid titillating its readers with tales of “Maxine’s Twisted Sex Shame”.

The media’s exploitation of emotive issues to boost circulation and to win rating battles is par for the course. While this is a significant factor in the media coverage of events at Soham, something more is involved.

Why, for example, are certain emotions—fear, anger, hatred and revenge—singled out for attention and encouraged? For weeks hysterical press headlines screamed of “stranger dangers”, ignoring data that there has been no increase in the number of children killed by strangers—approximately 100 per year in the UK—and that children are most at risk from relatives.

This approach seeks to exploit parents’ anxieties for their children’s well being and to play on feelings of helplessness.

After decades in which public services and living standards have been gutted in the interests of big business and the rich, sharply polarising society, most people place little trust in politicians and once venerated institutions. But in the absence of a progressive social opposition to these conditions, many feel isolated and vulnerable, set adrift in a cruel and dangerous world.

The schoolgirls’ deaths seemed to become a focus for such feelings, which the media deliberately sought to inflame. Hadn’t these children died after all, not in some notorious inner-city back street but in the tranquil beauty of a small country village?

In this atmosphere of fear and beleaguerment the press, with the support of sections of the political establishment, hope to sideline rational, objective approach towards crime and other social problems, and inculcate a siege mentality conducive to furthering a right-wing, law-and-order agenda.

This began almost immediately after the girls were discovered to be missing, with the revelation that they had been using the Internet before they disappeared and may be victims of paedophiles lurking in chat rooms. Subsequent investigation of their computers proved this to

be groundless but not before the *News of the World* had revived its demand for sex offenders to be publicly “named and shamed”.

Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith jumped on the bandwagon demanding closer monitoring of paedophiles and the creation of a new offence of “grooming”, where paedophiles prepare victims they have found on the Internet.

Also claiming, without any evidence, that paedophiles were at work in Soham, Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* newspaper was more politically explicit—using its letters page to argue that Britain’s “liberal laws and punishment system” meant children were being “handed over” to child molesters.

The decision to section Ian Huntley under the Mental Health Act after his arrest added further grist to the right-wing mill. During the 96 hours he was held in custody without charge, Huntley became incoherent and incapable of responding to police questions. This led to the recommendation that he be transferred to Rampton high security hospital where, under the Mental Health Act, he can be detained for 28 days, and then possibly for a further six months, whilst psychiatrists monitor his condition. If Huntley is found incapable to plead, he may be held in a secure hospital indefinitely or until he is considered fit to stand trial.

The press claimed that Huntley had been given a “soft option”, even going so far as to describe Rampton, which largely houses those with personality disorders and the mentally ill who have committed criminal offences, as a holiday camp. Much of the media regard any kind of hospital treatment as a diversion from the real object of the criminal justice system—retribution and punishment.

In reality, Britain imprisons more people per head of population than virtually any other country in Western Europe and, in the last decade particularly, there has been a significant erosion of civil liberties and legal safeguards on the grounds of “victim rights”.

Still this is not enough for sections of the ruling elite who demand nothing less than the restoration of the death penalty, abolished in 1965. Once again the Conservatives led the way, with former Home Office minister Ann Widcombe calling for the return of hanging in the most serious cases.

Columnists in the *Sun* and *Daily Mail* followed suit, with Simon Heffer claiming that Jessica and Holly “were murdered in part by a liberal society that breeds so many people who can do such a thing, who lack the inhibition of human decency.”

Writing in the *Times* newspaper, August 21, Neil Clark set out what he described as the “liberal case for restoring the death penalty”. Blaming the young girls’ deaths on an “outdated and socially damaging 1960s libertinism, which places the rights of the wrongdoer above those whose rights he has infringed”, Clark argued that Soham meant that finally, “after years of being forced on the back foot by all this nonsense, it is time for those of us who believe in the humanitarian case for capital punishment to strike back”.

Execution was humane, he continued, first because it meant the “malefactors [were] swiftly put out of their misery” rather than forcing them, “at huge expense from the taxpayer, to live on for countless years with their inner demons and tormented souls”.

Secondly, the death penalty acts a catharsis for the victim’s families “giving all concerned a better chance to move on with their lives in the belief that justice, in the best symmetrical way, had been done. The long process of healing could begin”. According to Clark, state execution is the hallmark of a civilised society.

Such claims are absurd. Those countries exercising the death penalty are not crime-free safe havens. On the contrary, evidence shows in the

US, for example, that, notwithstanding the increase in state executions over the last few decades, the rate of child murders has increased over the same period. Besides its ineffectiveness as far as crime prevention is concerned, state-sanctioned execution only brutalises the very society it is supposed to protect, deadening its rational and more sensitive capacities and cheapening human life.

The subsequent condemnation by the press, police and political establishment of the scenes of violent hysteria outside Peterborough court last week are hypocritical to say the least. The crazed crowd was only seeking to mete out what some in official circles had been insisting for weeks was only right and proper. But when Widcombe and Clark speak of “taking matters into our own hands,” their demand is for the state—not the mob—to be freed from all concerns of democratic rights and due process.

In this respect it is worth noting the allegations of collusion between the police and media during the Soham investigation. News reports quoted a senior spokesman for Cambridgeshire police stating that, “One of the peculiarities of this investigation has been how very close to the operational strategy the media strategy has been. They have completely dovetailed. The media strategy has been a very distinct operational tool at the hands and disposal of the senior investigating officer.”

Cambridgeshire Detective Chief Inspector Andrew Hebb was given over to full-time liaison with the media during the search and it has also been noted that the decision to initially hold Huntley and Carr for days on grounds of “suspicion” was an unexpected gift to the media as it freed them temporarily from the reporting restrictions that usually exist under British law.

Precisely why these decisions were made is not clear. But the unprecedented degree of collaboration established between the police and media in Soham was underscored by the BBC’s agreement to hand over unseen film to the criminal investigation.

Huntley had given several interviews before his arrest claiming that he had been the last person to see the friends alive, and describing his distress on hearing of their disappearance. Sky, ITN and the BBC had already handed over all transmitted footage at the request of Cambridgeshire police but the BBC’s decision to provide footage previously unseen goes a step further.

In the past, media organisations have resisted handing over material to the police on the grounds that it may betray sources or put staff at risk. Police usually have to apply for a court order to gain access. But the BBC argued that in the case of Soham, there was a “clear public interest” in handing the tapes over.

Just as significant is the Home Office decision to convene an emergency police summit in the wake of the Soham killings to discuss the possible establishment of an FBI-type national criminal squad. Precise details are sketchy but similar proposals have been opposed previously because of the centralisation of domestic police powers involved and the inevitable consequences for civil liberties. Were such a force to be initiated on the grounds of “public interest” and child protection, however, it is clear it would receive little opposition from the media.



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