

UK television presenter Caroline Flack's suicide and the "bread and circuses" culture

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5 March 2020

Following the suicide of television presenter Caroline Flack, hundreds of thousands of people have reacted with anger and revulsion towards the British press.

A petition calling for a government inquiry into "the practices and policies of mainstream media organisations and social media platforms in their efforts to protect members of the public from harm" gained 200,000 signatures inside two days. More than 850,000 signed another petition submitted to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport calling for it to be a criminal offence "for the British Media to knowingly and relentlessly bully a person... up to the point that they take their own life."

The authors of this petition wrote that "sections of the media were quite happy to drag [Flack's] life through the wringer purely in order to sell a few more papers and it's just not right."

Flack's case is not isolated and nor is the treatment meted out to her by the media. Holly Maltby, delivering the second petition, said that campaign group 38 Degrees was collecting case studies showing that such press coverage is not confined to celebrities. "It's people up and down the country, whose lives can be completely torn apart in a moment, because of harassment, intimidation and bullying, often at very difficult times."

Nevertheless, suicide rates among celebrities run at rates many times higher than average, a tendency undoubtedly compounded by vicious press coverage of the private lives of often fragile and unstable people.

Flack's is the fourth suicide associated with the reality television show *Love Island* alone.

In 2018, Sophie Gradon, a 2016 contestant, committed suicide. Her boyfriend Aaron Armstrong, who found her body, killed himself three weeks later. In March last year, Mike Thalassitis, a 2017 contestant, was found dead in a park. He took his own life after struggling with spiralling debt.

A statement from ITV, which produces *Love Island*, said only that the deaths happened long after the appearances on the show but felt compelled to announce provision of

aftercare support for participants.

The *Jeremy Kyle Show*, which gloried in prurient coverage of family disputes, was cancelled after a guest's suicide. ITV initially suspended the show but had to axe it when other former guests were reported to have committed suicide in the absence of continued aftercare support.

Similar press campaigns hounded reality TV participant Jade Goody and singer Amy Winehouse before their deaths.

What has played out in Flack's case is symptomatic of a broader culture. Revulsion against this is a generally healthy response, but her death points to a wide and complex cultural crisis that will not be addressed simply by media regulation.

An unposted Instagram draft by Flack, released by her family after the presenter's suicide, showed how far the processes that built up her career had then destroyed her: "I've lost my job. My home. My ability to speak. And the truth has been taken out of my hands and used as entertainment."

Love Island presenter Flack was arrested in December on a domestic abuse assault charge. She struck boyfriend Lewis Burton on the head with a lamp during a row, she insisted accidentally, and also seriously injured herself, having cuts on her wrists when arrested.

The tabloid and TV coverage was uniformly sneering and vile, revelling in Flack's situation with puns and distasteful jokes, which had to be pulled when the star killed herself. Television presenter Lorraine Kelly sniggered in a live broadcast as she reported Flack stepping down from *Love Island*.

Rupert Murdoch's *the Sun* led the way, publishing photographs of the bloody scene alongside breathless quotes from "a source" who said "The photo is absolutely shocking. It's awful." Presumably this was the person who sold the pictures to the paper.

Although the coverage noted in passing that Flack had self-harmed, there was no acknowledgement that most of this blood was likely to be hers. Flack wrote in her Instagram draft that "The blood that someone SOLD to a newspaper

was MY blood.”

The press has made commodities out of celebrities. By making private lives into entertainment, the press creates their own self-fulfilling justification. Former *Sunday Mirror* editor Paul Connaw summed it up: as the facts were mostly in the public domain, because they had put them there, “you can’t blame the mainstream media” for focusing on them.

Amy Winehouse’s downfall was portrayed as “a freak show—evoking scorn and cynicism, and lurid fascination,” which her record label explicitly celebrated as “some amazing marketing opportunities.”

This attitude was used to support denying Flack any right to privacy, on the grounds that her private life had already been sold. But celebrities, like anyone else, have a right to discretion.

The government has already given the press a green light to ignore such questions. The 2011-12 Leveson Inquiry into press behaviour was intended only to whitewash the role of Murdoch and his close associates in the tabloid phone-hacking scandal. Its proposed second part, into the “Ethics and Culture” of the British press, was ditched by the government.

It was clear at the time of Flack’s arrest that she was disturbed and distressed. She admitted to police that she had injured Burton and warned that she would commit suicide. After her first court hearing, where she denied assault, she was prescribed anti-depressant medication. She was further depressed at being barred from seeing Burton, who told police and prosecutors he wished to withdraw his complaint.

Here the media exploitation combined with an increasingly repressive legal system.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decision to press ahead with a legal case came under sustained criticism. The CPS responded by citing concerns that withdrawal of complaints in domestic abuse cases may reflect pressure from the abuser (i.e., Flack!) and therefore decided to proceed. Former Director of Public Prosecutions Lord Ken Macdonald explained to press the CPS’s presumption that prosecuting domestic abuse is in the public interest.

But little or no attention seems to have been paid to Flack’s mental health during this process. Macdonald said discontinuing a case because of the defendant’s mental health would be “rare.”

Legal experts pointed to the strains imposed on any defendant. Blogger *The Secret Barrister* warned that “the strain of the criminal process—whether the allegation is true or not—can affect a person. Can break a person. And this lack of care pervades not only the system but our society.”

This is clearly worse for the vulnerable: “In cases where an accused has severe mental health problems that impact upon the legalities of the trial process, there is little

consideration for the impact of proceedings upon a defendant’s welfare.”

Celebrity culture has provided a further stimulus to the notion that social questions can only be tackled by punitive measures. This is justice as melodrama.

Chris Daw QC tweeted, “We have become obsessed with the idea that criminal prosecutions can solve these problems. They cannot. We need to look at restorative justice, counselling and support where that is what the complainant wants. Forcing him or her into court is a form of abuse.”

The press that published intrusive stories about Flack, the media companies who made the TV shows she hosted, and the management company who took their commission from her fees for such shows, all sought to blame each other for the situation.

They continued to treat this situation as normal. Press reported “friends” saying Flack “felt her career would never recover” from the court case. In her Instagram draft, however, Flack wrote of a more existential problem: “I’m not thinking about ‘how I’m going to get my career back.’ I’m thinking about how I’m going to get mine and my family’s life back.”

As a way of channelling the instinctive reaction against such incidents, Flack’s death was followed by a concerted press campaign for greater “kindness”—focused on her appeal on Instagram in December, “In a world where you can be anything, be kind.”

This was actively promoted by the same television companies that broadcast shows like *Love Island* and serves to devolve responsibility away from their own involvement.



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