The *Unabomber* vs. the *Nail bomber*: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of Two Murder Trials

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We are taught that journalists’ work is shaped by norms; unwritten rules which help to construct the articles that are published everyday in our newspapers. Furthermore, newspaper readers are conditioned to have certain expectations of the articles they read, including objectivity, timeliness, and the inclusion of basic accurate information. Within the democratic framework which we too often assume to be the dominant paradigm, we expect journalists to inform their readers of the “who, what, where, when, why and how”.¹ But as journalism scholars continue to argue, news is a product; the product of competing social, economic, political and cultural forces. As Roger Fowler asserts, news is “not a natural phenomenon emerging straight from reality”.²

Journalism studies have been simultaneously strengthened and weakened by the fact that it belongs to no one discipline. It is clearly a strength that the subject matter has been of interest to many social science scholars, and the result is a rich and diverse collection of research from sociologists, political scientists, historians, and linguistics scholars. But it has also been a weakness that too many academics have studied journalism through their own individual lens ignoring the lessons and traditions of other fields. There is now far more leakage across disciplines and gradually there is more appreciation for the need to work together in an attempt to create a more sophisticated kind of scholarship. It is this belief in the importance of inter-disciplinary approaches to the study of journalism which drives this research, acknowledging the argument that the academy “needs alternative frames through which to consider journalism.”³

¹ James Carey talks about the 5 “w’s and the “h” as the expectations we have for journalism but in his piece outlines how that is not the case. James Carey, “The Dark Continent of American Journalism,” in Robert Manoff and Michael Shudson (eds.), Reading the News (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 146-196.
This study draws on the work of sociologists who believe perpetuating ideology is often a driving concern of journalists, the techniques of linguists to consider the importance and relevance of discourse, the impulse of the political science community that journalism should be used to provide citizens with information that could improve society, as well as the acceptance in the cultural studies literature that journalism is in itself a form of popular culture.

This research focuses on the newspaper coverage of two criminal trials from different countries, that of the Unabomber in the United States and the Nail bomber in the United Kingdom. The way criminal justice issues are shaped in the media is an important topic, but one that has been under-studied in the field of communication. The way society discusses crime and particularly those who commit crime is crucial for understanding how a society defines its moral boundaries, and reinforces the power of the law in democratic systems. Durkheim emphasized the centrality of crime and punishment in understanding society, writing, “We all know that it is society which punishes…If it is society alone which exercises repression, it is because it is harmed even when the harm is done to individuals, and it is the attack upon society which is repressed by punishment.”

Through these very similar case studies, I attempted to ascertain whether the coverage in three different types of newspapers in the two countries was more different or similar, and what the results suggest about the influence of journalistic news norms in contemporary reporting.

The Cases

Kaczynski was the perpetrator of a letter bombing campaign which lasted sixteen years between 1979 and 1995 and resulted in three deaths and twenty-two serious

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injuries. He was spared the death penalty, as a result of a last minute plea bargain in which the diagnosis of his paranoid schizophrenia resulted in the prosecution accepting his guilty plea in exchange for life in imprisonment without the possibility of parole. In April 1999, David Copeland unleashed a wave of terror on Britain planting three bombs packed with nails in busy areas of London on three consecutive weekends. The bomb blasts killed three people and injured over one hundred. In Copeland’s trial, his guilt was always assumed, as just like Kaczynski, he was arrested in his home surrounded by overwhelming evidence that he was the culprit. And just as the U.S. trial discussed whether Kaczynski did have a mental condition and how that would affect the method of punishment, the British trial also focused on whether Copeland suffered from a mental illness and whether that was a justifiable mitigating circumstance, which would lessen the severity of the conviction. The jury ultimately decided his mental condition did not excuse his actions, and he was convicted of first degree murder.

Six newspapers were analyzed, one from each of the genres; *The New York Times* and *The Independent* as examples of high quality broadsheet newspapers, *USA Today* and *The Express* as mid-market newspapers and *The New York Post* and *The Sun* as examples of tabloid journalism. 133 articles from this period were retrieved.\(^5\)

All of the articles were coded for information which fell into two categories: firstly, whether the piece relied on simplistic descriptive shortcuts for describing the complexities of these two characters and their stories. For example in Copeland’s case he was frequently referred to as a Nazi, while Kaczynski was often described as a mountain

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\(^5\) See Table 1 in the Appendix. Although the articles studied were all published during the trial, some of them concentrated on the crimes themselves rather than the trial and could have been mistaken for articles published just after the original crimes took place.
hermit. In addition to these trends, articles from both trials often left the important questions unaddressed while focusing on more broad based narrative tools such as concentrating on family feuds, the battles between lawyers and the ‘story’ of how the crimes were committed. Secondly the articles were examined for any contextual information that was included (the five “w’s” and the “h”). Contextual information refers to whether the story included information about the victims, whether there was a detailed description of the crime, whether a motive was discussed, whether punishment options were explored and whether mental illness was mentioned in the articles, specifically paranoid schizophrenia and an explanation of that condition.

**Theoretical Framework**

Before explaining the results of the study, a discussion of the theoretical framework through which this research was undertaken is included, in an attempt to clarify why the news coverage displayed such narrative patterns, causing the absence of other significant information.

Firstly, we must accept the role newspapers play and the norms we acknowledge. The most pervasive is the “man bites dog” concept. As Robert Park described in his 1940 article, “News as a form of knowledge”, news should “startle, amuse or otherwise excite the reader so that it will be remembered and repeated”.  

The emphasis in the British coverage of the story of Copeland’s parents singing the *Flintstone’s* theme song to him and the impact he said it had on his concerns about his sexuality is a perfect example of this. Secondly, the impact of ideology on journalism is a question which has received significant attention from the sociological community, and appears to be relevant to this

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6 Robert Park, “News as a Form of Knowledge”, *American Journal of Sociology* 45 (1940):678
question. As Gaye Tuchman writes, “journalists practice value exclusion. … journalists try to exclude values…as preference statements about nation and society.”7 By choosing which aspects of the stories to include and which to ignore, journalists are making value judgments about society, while hiding behind the ultimate in journalistic behavior: objectivity. This position is supported by Mark Fishman whose analysis relates perfectly to this study, particularly the U.S. case. He writes, “Routine news advances a definite interest: it legitimates the existing political order by disseminating bureaucratic idealizations of the world and by filtering out troublesome perceptions of events.”8 In the U.S. coverage, the narrative focus was on the institutions and bureaucracy and as a result ignored wider questions about the role of these institutions in society in terms of challenging the problem of crime. And in both countries the troubling nature of convicting mentally ill defendants was “filtered out” to avoid the more difficult questions surrounding these cases.

However, this question ultimately rests on the impact of culture. As Schudson writes so eloquently, “the news is produced by people who operate often unwittingly within a cultural system, a reservoir of stored cultural meanings and patterns of discourse.” “…News as a form of culture incorporates assumptions about what matters, what makes sense, what time and place we live in and what range of considerations we should take seriously.”9 As a result, however much the coverage is analyzed and reasons for inclusions and exclusions are sought, essentially the reporters covering these stories in both countries were part of a culture and society that has distinct beliefs about crime and

punishment. This comparison of coverage demonstrates clearly how the influence of
culture manifests itself in reportage. And in addition to appreciating the influence culture
has on the reporters, the role of culture on decoding the coverage must not be forgotten.
As Stuart Hall stated, “news events are made intelligible against the background of
culturally shared knowledge.”\(^{10}\) Reporters are writing for their particular audience.

Carey provides the most useful analysis of the reasons for so much of our news
coverage ignoring what appears to be the most necessary. He writes,

How and why are the most problematic aspects of American journalism:
the dark continent and invisible landscape. Why and how are what we
most want out of a news story and are least likely to receive. Why
accounts for events, actions and actors. It is the search for the deeper
underlying factors which lie behind the surfaces of the news story. We
need the “why” as it satisfies our desire to believe that the world is driven
by something other than blind chance.\(^{11}\)

As an audience, we demand that the world makes sense, but rather than provide
the deeper, more thoughtful analysis, reporters too often rely on the simplistic;
personifying situations by focusing on the individual incident rather than the wider
causes. It was certainly the case in these two trials, with a theme song being given as the
primary cause of one and a hermit lifestyle on the edge of society as the cause of the
other. Carey explains the absence of “why” in the idea that the who, what, when and
where are relatively transparent whereas the “why is invisible”. He goes to state,

“Explanations do not lie within events or actions. Rather thy lie behind them or are
inferences or extrapolations that go well beyond the common sense evidence at hand.
Explanation, then cuts against the naïve realism of journalism with its insistence on

\(^{10}\) Stuart Hall et al., *Culture, Media, Language*, (London: Hutchinson, 1980)
\(^{11}\) James Carey, “The Dark Continent of American Journalism”, in Robert Manoff and Michael Schudson
(eds.), *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon, 1986): 149
objective fact.”12 While this analysis is a strong one, it does not excuse the absence of any attempt to find an explanation.

**Narrative Differences**

From the beginning, the expectation was that if differences were to emerge they would be between the coverage in the two different countries and that any differences would emerge in the shape of the discussion of the death penalty, a simple response to the fact that one country abolished the death penalty thirty-six years ago whereas the other still routinely uses the method as the ultimate in punishment. The final results however, produced a number of surprising results both in terms of cross-cultural comparisons, but also in terms of understanding how the content of the newspaper genres differ and how this is often in unexpected ways.

As Zelizer states, “narratives help us construct our views of the world – allowing us to share stories within culturally and socially explicit codes of meaning.”13 Humans create narratives to explain the world, and journalists have been using this tool since the inception of newspapers. Using formulaic templates, journalists use time honored methods to get readers from one end of the article to the other, wrapping the facts within a fluid narrative structure. Stuart Hall writes about narratives in television news but it is as applicable to newspaper reporting, “…to put it paradoxically the [raw historical] event must become a story before it can become a communicative event”.14 While some of the articles in this study relied on a catch-all narrative approach, attempting to include as much information as possible about the defendant, the crime and the victims, the vast

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12 Ibid, 167
13 Zelizer, referencing Barthes, “Has Communication Explained Journalism”: 83
majority of articles in both countries followed the more simplistic narrative format of writing around one basic idea and framing the other pertinent information, if included at all, through that lens.

Approximately 80% of the U.S. stories and 70% of British stories used one of three thematic emphases in structuring their narratives: the story of the crime (a re-telling of the crimes themselves or describing the impact on the victims) the story of the trial (the legal strategy of the defense and prosecution, the impact of the family of the defendant on the trail) and the story of why the crimes might have occurred (describing the defendant’s childhood as well as the impact of mental health problems).

Table 1: Use of Thematic Foci by Country

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation for the Crime</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of the Crime</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of the Trial</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Stories</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>52</td>
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While the coverage from both countries was similar in that the majority of the articles were structured around these thematic emphases, the foci were very different. Almost half of the U.S. coverage was told through the lens of the trial itself, specifically the frame of competition emphasizing the legal maneuvers between the prosecution and

15 Table 2 in the Appendix lists the breakdown of the narrative foci by newspaper genre. It is interesting to note how similar the coverage was in the middle brow and broadsheet newspapers. More interesting is the fact that comparatively the tabloids newspapers provided the most stories which used the explanation of the crime as the narrative focus. This supports work by Elizabeth Bird about tabloid newspapers who demonstrated that in terms of a standard of reporting all aspects of a story, the “why” included, the tabloid newspapers covered far more aspects of the story than the mid-market or quality press (1990:386).
defense (47% of the articles were structured around this frame of legal strategy). In comparison, only 2% of the British coverage had a similar focus. However 40% of the British coverage focused on retelling the story of the crimes, with roughly half of these stories rehashing the events themselves and the other half focusing on the victims both during the crimes or how the explosions had affected their lives since. (Comparatively, only 8% of the U.S. coverage concentrated on these themes). It is also significant to note that there were articles which were shaped around narratives which attempted to explain the crimes: 35% of the British articles compared to 20% of U.S. ones. An interesting difference was that 10% of the British coverage considered Copeland’s childhood as the most significant explanation whereas none of the U.S. articles discussed Kaczynski’s life for clues to explain his actions. This difference is highlighted later in the paper.

The differences in narrative choice are clear. In the U.S., the majority of the articles were written about the story of two competitors struggling to win. The lawyers became the central figures of the story, and their strategy and tactics became the dominant frame by which the coverage was shaped, more so than the defendant himself, his illness, the crimes he committed or the punishment he should expect. While the plotline of two competing powers is the foundation for so many fictional stories, its pervasiveness in the reporting of this trial resulted in reporting which failed many of the basic assumptions of journalism.

It should be argued the same is true of the British coverage, with the overwhelming use of all-encompassing narrative frames again resulting in the wider questions being ignored. The articles about the crimes were examples of story-telling at its most simple –

\[16\] See Table 1 in the Appendix
a re-telling of the events, sometimes in extraordinary detail. This alternative narrative theme focused upon what the victims were doing on the day of the crime, how they were affected, how their life has changed since and how they felt about the trial. The who, what and where of the trial was pushed aside, in favor of reconstructions of the events a year previously.

And beneath these clearly defined narrative structures is the powerful delineation between good and evil. In a closing paragraph in one of the articles from *The Independent*, under the headline “Nail Bomber Is ’Bad’ In The Old-Fashioned Way, Not Ill”, a quote from one of the defense witnesses states: "Please do not approach this case as if Mr. Sweeney [the prosecutor] is presenting this case for the angels and I am presenting it for the devil."\(^{17}\) Although this language was not prevalent throughout, the idea that these cases were ultimately a fight between good and evil, whether it was the lawyers, the defendants or the victims was apparent in many of the articles.

The British papers grounded their coverage in a focus on human interest by re-telling the crimes over and over again, and focusing on the experiences of the victims. In comparison the U.S. coverage focused on bureaucracy, institutions, and the legal system. And while the a priori assumption had been that detailed descriptions would be a positive element of reporting (answering the most basic “what happened” element of a story), the detailed descriptions only appeared in the articles which focused on the story of the crime. These articles substituted other elements of the trial in the place of re-telling the past, covering ground which had been saturated during the coverage of the events themselves and the arrests of the defendants.

\(^{17}\) Andrew Buncombe, “Nail Bomber Is ’Bad’ In The Old-Fashioned Way, Not Ill”, *The Independent*, June 29, 2000: 12
The focus of the U.S. coverage on strategy has been found to be a dominant frame in reporting for some time. Schudson in his argument of “News as Public Knowledge” comments that there are four kinds of bias that are frequently cited against news organizations, one of these being negativity, another technical. In support of the first he writes, “News tends to emphasize conflict, dissension, and battle; out of a journalistic convention that there are two sides to any story, news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instances of relative consensus.” In support of the second, he argues there is “an emphasis on strategy and tactics…, the mechanical rather than the ideological.”

Carey supports Schudson’s argument, claiming that “the press reduces politics to a clash of personalities, will and ambitions.” All of these points apply clearly to the coverage of the Unabomber trial, in which many aspects of the story were ignored in preference for an emphasis on the key players and the idea of the trial as a competition between the prosecution and defense.

**Narrative Similarities**

Beyond these differences, there were a number of similarities in other narrative topics chosen by the newspapers in both countries; the victims’ opinions, the defendants’ families, and the impact of the defendants’ mental health on the trial. Both focused on the experiences of the victims, though this was more common in Britain than in the U.S. The use of victims in coverage was interesting because their views provided a rare occasion to explore some of the moral dimensions of crime and punishment in society. Significant however, is the fact that their voices may be perceived as biased by readers and could be

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19 James Carey, “The Dark Continent of American Journalism” : 188
dismissed as outside the objective norms of reporting. There are examples of this practice from both countries.

One example is from *The Express* where the mother of one of the women who was killed in the Soho blast stated: “I want to get hold of him and do awful things to him and to make him suffer in the way that we have….Hopefully he will be in prison for the rest of his life. I just hope that he will be treated very badly in jail.”²⁰ *The New York Times* also used victims’ responses on occasion. One example was from Dr. Epstein, one of Kaczynski’s victims, who was giving his opinion on the diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, saying “it doesn’t take away the fact for me that he’s evil. There are many psychotic people in this world that don’t spend their time in a cabin plotting to kill people.” But in a later paragraph, the *New York Times* chose to run another comment by Dr. Epstein: “I never felt that, for me, I needed to see him executed.”²¹ What is significant in these cases is that there were so many victims of the crimes that the reporters had to make conscious filtering decisions about which victims’ views they would report. While in cases where there are one or two victims, their views become clearly newsworthy, the lines become blurred when the journalists are making gatekeeping decisions about which views should be included.

The two families of the defendants also stimulated coverage in both countries. In the U.S., Kaczynski’s brother became a focus because of his role in the capture of the defendant by phoning the FBI after recognizing his brother’s tone in the manifesto printed in the *New York Times*. He made a number of statements declaring his

²⁰ John Twomey, “Six Life Terms For Bomber Who Found In His Place In The History Of Evil” *The Express*, July 1, 2000.
disappointment that the prosecution continued to ask for the death penalty when David
Kaczynski felt he had been made a promise by the Federal authorities that this would not
happen. Some of the few discussions about the morality of using the death penalty in this
case revolved around the morality of doing so against the wishes of the brother who had
been central to catching the defendant in the first place. One example is from an opinion
piece by a law professor, printed in the New York Times “David Kaczynski made a
painful decision for our protection. Although the F.B.I. may have eventually caught his
brother, Mr. Kaczynski's help saved not just time, but possibly lives. Do prosecutors owe
it to him not to seek the death penalty? I think not.”22 The potency of this dynamic of the
two brothers was not lost on the New York Times who admitted the influence of that
narrative on their reporting, “The story of brother turning in brother is a tale of literary
dimensions that has become the central narrative of the case.”23

In Britain, one of the aspects of the crime that received significant coverage was
the role of Copeland’s parents in shaping a future killer, and their subsequent public
arguments about that. A common theme was the story, based on evidence given by the
Defense, that Copeland had blamed the actions of his parents for his own concerns about
his sexuality and ultimately his homophobia. In addition, much attention was made of his
mother walking out on the family when Copeland was nineteen years old. With no expert
analysis in the newspapers, these stories were carried as part of the continuous re-telling
of the events, resulting in subsequent stories about public arguments between the parents
about what was being alleged in the newspapers. Just as the U.S. coverage was
sidetracked by the role of the brother, the British coverage became obsessed with the role

of the parents, but rather than couching it within a wider discussion of the responsibilities of parents, it was reduced to theme song lyrics and public confrontations. The result again was the absence of the crime and the defendant from the reporting.

The other ‘story’ which found itself included in the coverage from both countries was mental illness. Both men suffered from paranoid schizophrenia but this was rarely mentioned infrequently and hardly ever explained. The editorial in The Sun just after the sentencing exclaimed “He isn’t mad. He’s bad.”

While this example was the most simplistic analysis, the emphasis on trying to differentiate between whether the defendants were mentally ill or evil, as if it was a dichotomy, was a significant focus of articles in both countries. In the U.S. the distinction was critical as the decision about the defendant’s mental illness would decide whether or not Kaczynski’s plea bargain would be accepted, and therefore prevent him from receiving the death penalty. In Britain, a decision by the jury that it was his mental illness that caused him to commit the crime was a way for Copeland to avoid conviction altogether. Supporting Shudson’s theory the coverage was very much emphasizing the technical, ignoring the wider philosophical questions about how the legal system should consider people with mental illnesses.

Use of Stereotypes

The use of stereotypes goes hand in hand with the dominance of narrative structures in reporting. They were used liberally in the stories encountered in this study, but more so in Britain that in the U.S. The content analysis measured whether in their opening paragraphs, journalists relied on stereotypical depictions of the defendants. In the case of the Unabomber, the overwhelming stereotype was the mountain hermit, which

24 “Rot in Hell”, The Sun, August 11.
25 Schudson, “News as Public Knowledge” :9
26 See Table 3 in the Appendix
appeared in about a quarter of the coverage, whereas in the Nail bomber case it was the stereotype describing him as a Nazi, which appeared in just under half of the articles.

The stereotypes used in these two sets of coverage were the simplest attempts at explaining the crimes. The label of hermit is one that activates mental schema about loners and those who live on the edge of society. Even before any mention of mental illness, the inclusion of that label helps the reader to build a picture of the defendant. Writing about how “out-group membership is often emphasized retrospectively to an act of deviant violence”27, Karen Cerulo in her book Deciphering Violence uses Kaczynski as an example of a wider trend in reporting. She writes that journalists “highlight the stranger-like qualities of a perpetrator’s past, thus supplying reasons for heinous, inexplicable behavior.”28 The simplistic description of Kaczynski as a hermit certainly falls in this category.

In the case of the British coverage, the term Nazi is such a loaded one that simply including that as a characterization has such shared cultural significance about his lifestyle and motivations. Teun Van Dijk discusses how discourse “may activate particular scripts or attitudes” and can lead to biased conclusions.29 The use of the term Nazi is surely an example of when previous beliefs and attitudes become activated. Roger Fowler concludes that, “…categorization is a discursive basis for practices of discrimination”, and it can certainly be sustained that the use of stereotypical depictions

28 Fowler: 19
of the defendants were particularly unhelpful by simplifying what were very complex cases. 30

**What was missing?**

With this emphasis on narrative structures and stereotypes, significant details about the defendant, the crime, the trial and the wider context were covered minimally, if at all. In particular, I want to focus on the absence of any substantive discussion of possible motive, mental illness and crime, the role of punishment and societal causes of crime.

In terms of motive, it was assumed a priori that this would be a requisite category for any criminal justice story. Significantly, there were cultural differences in the results. In the U.S., only 11% of stories made any mention of a possible motive, whereas 73% of the British coverage did mention the motive. 31 It should be stated at this point that there was no clear motive in either of these cases. Possible motives that were suggested by the Unabomber, his lawyers or the prosecution were fame, gaining revenge on society, hatred and political motives. In the Nail bomber case, possible motives were very similar: political motives, hatred, fame and also destiny. It is therefore not immediately apparent why the coverage would have been so different.

In Carey’s discussion of the five “w’s” and the “h”, he argues that reporters rarely deal satisfactorily with the “why” and if they do, it is normally only the motive. Here it seems even this is not always a given. Explaining the motive, or even explaining that the motive is unclear or unknown, gives crimes a necessary foundation upon which we can base our attempts at understanding deviance. It is virtually impossible to gain even the

30 Fowler, “Discrimination in Discourse” :93
31 See Table 4 in the Appendix
most simplistic understanding of a crime or trial without this basic fact. Although it is
difficult to explain these stark differences between the reporting in Britain and the U.S., it
does seem that describing the motive supports the narrative structures more prominent in
the British press, focusing on the crimes themselves and its possible causes. There were
certainly more attempts to provide a context for Copeland’s crimes, and to understand
why he decided to commit the crimes in the first place. Searching for a motive falls
within this sphere. In comparison, the U.S. press rarely sought explanations for
Kaczynski’s behavior and as a result there was little room in the articles for mention of a
possible motive.

While mental illness was covered, as discussed earlier, in almost all articles it was
about the legal definition of who could be described as mentally ill. The fact that both
men had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia acted as a crucial element of both
defenses. Paranoid schizophrenia is a mental condition about which a significant amount
of medical information is known, in particular that the condition leads the sufferer to
experience delusions and to believe they are being controlled by a higher power.
Unsurprisingly, the content analysis showed that very few articles offered an explanation
of paranoid schizophrenia as a condition, (15% of U.S. articles and 4% of British ones),
despite the fact that the defense case of both men rested on this fact and was being used
as the reason for why the crimes were committed. On the rare occasions that this was
addressed in the newspapers (in both cases, this only appeared in the broadsheets) it
appears that both men felt they were being controlled by another force and that had led
them to commit the crimes. In the Unabomber trial, the Defense stated Kaczynski thought
he was being “controlled by satellites”\textsuperscript{32}, while David Copeland’s lawyer explained his defendant’s belief that he was “a prophet from God.”\textsuperscript{33} Any attempt to explain the condition, whether it could be defined as a good or bad explanation was coded as positive. In both countries, the overwhelming pattern was that even if the condition was mentioned, very few attempts were made to explain the mental illness.

These results are particularly interesting as they demonstrate that the underlying pattern was to avoid the subject of mental illness altogether, particularly in the United Kingdom. While an avoidance of the wider subject of the death penalty was the key feature of the U.S. coverage, in the British coverage it was the invisible nature of any serious discussion regarding mental illness and crime. One possible explanation for the newspapers’ failure to discuss either of these subjects could be the problematic combination of mental illness and criminal justice. To a greater extent than the U.S. justice system, the British system is founded upon the principle that rehabilitation is possible. But in cases where crimes have been committed because of mental illnesses, this concept is challenged. In the U.S., although support for the death penalty remains high, the idea of executing criminals who suffer from a mental illness raises important questions about the role of the death penalty in a civilized society. Rather than discuss these anomalies, the newspapers followed the patterns described so far; supporting the status quo and avoiding what does not fit the dominant explanations.

In both countries, where there were discussions about mental illness it was often a reference to the defendant’s behavior as proof that the condition was not serious enough to be used as mitigating evidence. For example, in the U.S. press there were frequent

\textsuperscript{32} “Wrong Step in the Unabomb Trial” \textit{New York Times}, December 31 1997: A 18
\textsuperscript{33} Pat Clarke and Shenai Raif “Compulsive Liar Bomber Tried To Trick Psychiatrists”, \textit{The Independent}: June 16 2000: 16
discussions about how Kaczynski was deliberately manipulating the court, frequently disrupting proceedings because he was angry his lawyers wanted to use his mental illness as his defense. There was no discussion of whether Kaczynski’s denials about his condition were a symptom rather than evidence that he was sane and deliberately attempting to manipulate the system. In a similar light, The Independent quoted a nurse whom Copeland had confided in, stating he was “adamant he is not insane”.\textsuperscript{34} In another article the same newspaper reported on a letter that Copeland had sent to a reporter who had masqueraded as an admirer while he was in prison awaiting trial, that he couldn’t “believe [he had] fooled all the doctors.”\textsuperscript{35} While these references are buried in many of the articles from both countries, only one article brings up the issue of mental illness in crime, and that is in an editorial written by an eye-witness of one of Copeland’s bombing attacks. She writes in some of the most insightful commentary of both trials;

\begin{quote}
But another thing that the trial brought home to us is that we really don’t have any idea what mad is. Even the experts can’t seem to agree about Copeland’s mental state. So it is perhaps not surprising that the press understands even less. Much, for example, was made of those things he said to that hoaxer who pretended to be a lovesick secretary, about having “tricked” so many people about his illness. These statements were taken as proof that he was sane, and proof that he had indeed fooled people. No one thought to ask if such games must be common among people suffering from psychosis or personality disorders, and that at least some of the experts might have been able to read between the lines of what he was saying.\textsuperscript{36}

Mental illness was a central element of both cases, but the coverage relied on regurgitating the different positions of the medical experts paraded in front of the juries by the defense and prosecution. The wider explanations about mental illness and paranoid
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Pat Clarke and Shenai Raif, “Copeland just wanted to be a mass murder”, The Independent, June 13, 2000: 6
\textsuperscript{35} Chris Gray, “Bomber tricked into writing to journalist”, The Independent, June 20, 2000: 10
\textsuperscript{36} Maureen Freely, “Mad or Bad? A Witness Reflects on a Killer’s Mind”, The Independent, July 3, 2000: 5
schizophrenia in particular were ignored. Michel Foucault offers an explanation of how society fears mental illness and how it complicates notions of good and evil. He writes:

It is far too dangerous to evoke the notion of madness alone in characterizing the criminal. Madness still evokes a radical otherness, a possibility that the reason and predictability of human order can be overturned. There is a risk of the unleashing of an unreason that psychiatry is specifically designed to silence.\(^{37}\)

Whatever the ultimate explanation, the result was that the most important questions about how mental illness sits within society’s concept of right and wrongful action were never explored.

While discussions of motive and mental illness were limited, they did appear, but more significant is the topics which were ignored altogether. In Britain, the most obvious absence was a wider discussion of racial tensions as well as any discussion of bigotry towards the homosexual community. After the first nail bomb was planted in Brixton, a number of Far-Right groups claimed responsibility for the bomb, including Combat 18, English National Party, and the White Wolves.\(^{38}\) Significantly, the only attempts at a wider discussion came in the form of letters to the editor of The Guardian, another broadsheet. In one printed on July 3, the day after the verdict, Yasmin Khan wrote “The media coverage of David Copeland has wrongly focused on personality defects, ignoring the central issues that his bombings were not isolated incidents, but an extreme manifestation of widespread bigotry.” In another printed the day afterwards, Martin Jones wrote “…coverage of the trial of David Copeland failed to grasp the most important issue: how can we create society in which young people who are concerned about their

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\(^{38}\) Jason Bennetto, “Police Spotted Suspect While Viewing 26,000 Hours Of Video Footage:, The Independent, Jule 1 2000: 5
sexuality can get the help they need to become happy adults.” And finally, another letter on the same day stated, “before we forget the trial and conviction of David Copeland, and our relief and satisfaction gives way to indifferences, we should step back and consider our collective responsibility for the society that produced Copeland.” It is significant that the wider systemic issues sidelined by the “news” coverage, only appeared in the letters pages, and in a newspaper outside my sample, demonstrating how infrequent these discussions were.

In the U.S., the most obvious absence is a wider discussion of the death penalty. In the news articles, it is discussed as part of other stories, for example how the jury was chosen based on questions obsessed with potential jurors’ beliefs about the death penalty, or David Kaczynski’s anti-death penalty views, or whether the plea bargain would be successful in preventing the death penalty. But there was no discourse about why David Kaczynski might be against the death penalty, or whether death penalty views should be a basis for jury selection.

When there was a discussion, it appeared in the editorials and op-ed pieces. Editorials and opinion pieces are so interesting as they break the ‘rules’ which govern the majority of articles which appear in newspapers, and in these cases, the editorials provided the few examples of journalism which tackled the wider questions about punishment and mental illness.

It is too easy to argue that journalistic tenets prevent wider discussion of such issues. None of the accepted norms; objectivity, accuracy, and timeliness, would have prevented reporters exploring the causes, symptoms and treatments of paranoid schizophrenia; discussing society’s position on the death penalty in terms of opinion polls
or recent trends; or even discussing the role of punishment in society in general and the roles that it plays, appeasing victims, keeping the public safe, or rehabilitation. For example in an editorial in *USA Today* it explains that surveys of jurors have shown most are reluctant to impose the death penalty if an option such as life without parole is available. This is factual evidence, but appears only in an editorial leaving the rest of the articles to assume the death penalty was the only option.

As a conclusion to this section, a comparison of the concept of justice in the two countries is particularly interesting. In a computerized search which looked for keywords including remorse, revenge, civilized and evil, all of the words appeared a similar number of times, except “justice” which appeared 62 times in the 81 U.S. articles and only 6 times in the 52 British articles. It may be that in America, the concept of justice is more powerful than the punishment itself. With the focus on justice, what form it takes is less important. The apparent absence of the term justice in the British discourse is very interesting and something which deserves further exploration.

In summary, the coverage of these trials was significant for what was excluded rather than what was included. The reliance on narratives and stereotypes caused the trials to be simplified and dominated by the ‘stories’ of the events rather than a wider explanation and discussion of the significance of the events themselves.

While this is a trend journalism scholars have noted for some time, it is particularly disturbing on a topic such as this one. The criminal justice system is one which evolves as times change, but when wider discussions about the role of punishment and acceptable ways to treat those who commit crimes while mentally ill is ignored, society suffers. As Shudson argues in his book, *The Power of News*, “The news media

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39 See Table 5 in the Appendix
should provide a forum for dialogue among citizens that not only informs democratic decision making but is, as a process, an element in it.”  

But while it is often too easy to criticize journalists for ignoring discussions of these concerns, the institutional structures of newspapers mean stories are shaped by a range of influences. While in these cases editors seemed to understand the need for wider discussion and explanation as their generally thoughtful editorial pieces demonstrated, there was less of an acceptance that coverage of criminal justice issues overall needed to be more considered and informative.

**Conclusion**

This comparison of two case studies has illustrated three important points; first the dominance of narrative and simplistic frameworks on both sides of the Atlantic, which prevented, particularly in the U.S., important contextual information from appearing in the coverage. Second, despite this similarity cultural and ideological influences shaped the coverage in important ways, producing news that reflected societal givens about the criminal justice systems. Third, the influence of the first two points resulted in almost a complete absence of wider discussions of punishment, particularly concerning defendants with mental illnesses. In conclusion, Robert Park wrote in 1940, “I have indicated the role which news plays in the world of politics in so far as it provides the basis for the discussion in which public opinion is formed.”

While this study was based on only two case studies, so much of the evidence supports previous journalism research that it seems that these were cases that support the norm rather than challenge it. What makes these cases significant is that they were about an issue that is central in society: crime and how we behave towards those who commit it. Public opinion about the criminal justice system

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41 Robert Park, “News as a Form of Knowledge,” American Journal of Sociology 45 (1940): 684
is crucial for understanding how it will evolve. While journalists continue to ignore the wider questions, they are simply perpetuating the ignorance that persists about mental illness, crime and punishment.

**Appendix**

*Table 1: Breakdown of Newspapers*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>U.S. Newspapers</th>
<th>U.K. Newspapers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>USA Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New York Post</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Express</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Express</td>
<td>Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: Narratives by Newspaper Genre*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tabloids</th>
<th>Broadsheets</th>
<th>Middle Brow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation for the Crime</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of the Crime</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story of the Trial</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Stories</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: Percentage of stories which use stereotypes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Brow</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (proportional)</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
<td>44%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4: Percentage of stories which mentioned a motive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Brow</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadsheet</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (proportional)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
<td>73%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5: Number of times certain keywords were used in the coverage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New York Times</th>
<th>USA Today</th>
<th>NY Post</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Express</th>
<th>Sun</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civilized</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evil</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remorse</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Works Cited


