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Investigating the Crisis of the Present

As we begin *Crime, Media, Culture's* fourth volume, the need for serious and sustained scholarly engagement with the intersections of crime, media and culture has never been greater. Around the world, genocidal criminality competes with global warming and a Spice Girls reunion for media attention. The United States gears up for a presidential election sure to be decided by distorted images of terrorism, gender, and crime. *The Guardian* declares that, with some 138 journalists now killed, Iraq has become a war 'no longer…accessible to public scrutiny or to democratic engagement', and so evidence 'the end of the media as a major actor in war' (Bunting, 2007: 17). In the heartland of the United States, a distraught young man murders eight people at a mega-shopping mall, and then kills himself, all in the hope that 'now I'll be famous'. Meanwhile, a little girl goes missing—and the media are mobilized.

Madeleine McCann's disappearance in Portugal has generated a torrent of international media coverage—coverage that may in fact be ushering in a dangerous extension in the hyper-mediatisation of crime and control. Images of Madeleine are ubiquitous, and can be spotted not only in the media, but in airports and other public venues around the world. Two points arising from this story are worth briefly dwelling on here. First, in November 2007, charities released figures indicating that more than 600 children have been missing in the UK for as long as Madeleine McCann, and are still unaccounted for (*Woolf*, 2007). Among them, dozens have disappeared from local authority care, and many more have been identified by police and immigration officers as trafficking victims: 40 are considered to be at particularly "high-risk" of harm. Many of these children have no parents to launch an appeal and few have achieved any kind of media visibility. None have attracted the levels of attention devoted to the McCann case. Secondly, the intensity and relentlessness of the media focus on the McCanns becomes all the more interesting when we consider the dearth of verifiable facts in the case. Indeed, all we 'know' at the time of writing is that a little girl has gone missing. No body has been found, no clear information regarding Madeleine's whereabouts has been uncovered, and no one has been officially charged with an offence. Yet Madeleine's parents – Kate and Gerry McCann – have been subjected to nothing short of 'trial by media'. Based on little more than hearsay and

speculation, readers of the UK's national press have been encouraged to participate in online voting polls on Kate and Gerry McCann's involvement in the disappearance of their daughter. One popular national tabloid invited online readers to vote on the McCanns' guilt or innocence in Maddie's death.

Another case (ongoing at the time of writing) which is receiving worldwide media attention concerns the arrest and detention in custody of three suspects – including an American student and her Italian boyfriend – for the murder of Leeds University student Meredith Kercher in Perugia, Italy. Once again, media coverage of these suspects (both from privileged, wealthy family backgrounds) has been extensive. In this case, however, an additional frisson has been provided by the fact that the suspects, like the murder victim, belonged to the Facebook generation. As a British newspaper put it:

> Locked up in separate cells in Perugia's new prison, Amanda Knox and her boyfriend Raffaele Sollecito have all the time in the world to ask themselves whether it was really wise (in Sollecito's case) to swathe himself in bandages from top to toe and pose for his Facebook site with a butcher's cleaver? Or for "Foxy Knoxy" (as she called herself) to kneel roaring with laughter at the controls of a machine gun pointed at the camera?... [W]ithin hours we knew more about them than we could ever have wanted: their naff ideas about dressing up, their lousy sense of humour…Now they had been fingered by the law, there was no need for paparazzi to catch them in moments of indiscretion, no need to badger distraught relatives for snapshots. Their exposure was already total (*Independent*, 11th November 2007).

In these ways the national and international media are testing the boundaries of legality in the reporting of criminal cases and, as we have argued elsewhere, have set a dangerous precedent. An increasingly adversarial mainstream media seems to be emerging in these and other cases as the primary players in an ideological carnival where online justice and trial by media rule, the legal requirements of due process and presumed innocence cease to be a concern (Greer and McLaughlin, 2007), and the right to privacy evaporates into the 24/7 newsmedia ether. A decade ago, considering mediated controversies surrounding rap, punk, and alternative art, we suggested that a process of *cultural criminalisation* (Ferrell, 1998) regularly trumped the legal process itself in deciding criminal identities and public perceptions. Today, this process appears more powerful than ever.

Three decades ago another inquiry into crime, media, and culture was launched—an inquiry that reverberates as strongly as any in the current climate. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts' *Policing the Crisis* (1978) sought to deploy Stan

Cohen's (1972) moral panic thesis within a more explicitly political framework. The resulting analysis, espousing an advanced Marxism heavily influenced by the work of Antonio Gramsci, was a searing critique of the racialised (and racist) structures of authority and control in a class society, and of the ways in which the ideological state apparatus – here, following Althusser, conceived as the police, the judiciary and the media – coalesced to legitimate a shift toward authoritarianism when faced with a crisis of hegemony.

For many *Policing the Crisis* represents a high-point of Marxist theorising about crime. It is a sophisticated and highly ambitious analysis that cuts across a range of disciplines to understand the 'politics of law and order' at a particular place and time. Yet whilst the book's influence is beyond doubt, the study has not been without its critics. *Policing the Crisis* has been challenged, just as it has been widely praised, for its theoretical approach, its methodological applications, and its empirical base. The writers of the six review essays presented in this issue of *CMC* revisit this influence and these issues by way of reminiscence, reflection, and criticism. We are delighted to have among them two of the book's original authors, Tony Jefferson and John Clarke, who reflect on their experiences whilst researching and writing *Policing the Crisis*, and consider the book's role in their respective intellectual journeys since. At the same time we are pleased to include commentaries from scholars whose own work variously echoes, develops and rethinks many of the book's primary concerns: Michelle Brown, David Brotherton, Eugene McLaughlin, and Simon Hallsworth.

Given that *Policing the Crisis* emerged from the interplay of social critique and cultural theory, criminology and media studies, there seems no better place to commemorate and reconsider the book's importance than here in the pages of *Crime, Media, Culture*. The remainder of this issue likewise emerges from this interplay. At a recent panel discussion at the British Academy, Stan Cohen, Stuart Hall and David Garland debated the historical development and contemporary relevance of the moral panic thesis (Friday 9th March, 2007 – recording available at http://britac.studyserve.com/home/Lecture.asp?ContentContainerID=124). We include here a version of David Garland's presentation from that evening. Alexander Kozin's deconstruction of the criminal defence file employs rhetorical ethnography of communication to suggest new ways of understanding documented records and their roles and meanings within institutional settings. Phil Jones and Claire Wardle argue, as we have in a previous editorial, that insufficient attention is paid to the image in criminological media analyses. Their exploration of the 'visual construction' of key protagonists in a high profile murder case is a welcome response

to *CMC*'s call for a more visually sensitised criminology of media forms and contexts. The visual also has a role to play in Maggie O'Neill and colleagues' consultative investigation of the connections between the 'othering' of sex workers in the mainstream media and levels of toleration toward female street sex workers in residential communities. Simon Lindgren discusses the quantitative and qualitative methods which might be deployed to systematically research media coverage of a 'mugging' panic in Sweden. And, continuing this issue's focus on media and the politics of law and order, Andrew Millie compares the importance the public attached to crime in the run up to the UK General Election of 2005 with its prevalence in media coverage of the election campaign and the policies of the main parties.

Crises of representation and control, moral panics over missing children or sex workers or muggers, murderers and murderous conflicts made visible or invisible—all return us to the broader crisis of the present moment. Within it the deformities of globalisation surface in matters of migration and imagined community, in panics over foreign tourism and foreign justice, in the dislocated fears that course through worldwide internet communities. Within it identities remain mediated accomplishments, circulating from fly posters to websites to video clips, and yet grounded still in gendered, racialised, and class-based notions of ideal parents, ideal victims, and unknown perpetrators. Within it—as a decade before, as three decades before, and now more than ever—there can be no understanding of war, crime, or terror without an inquiry into media, culture, and meaning.

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