

The Reporting of Hate Crime

Rachel Baird points out problems and shortcomings in newspaper coverage of hate crime.

The recent press coverage of asylum seekers has proved just how hysterical, vindictive and irresponsible newspapers can be, especially towards people who are not 'like us'. The reporting of hate crime is not so frequently outrageous, but there are problems with it, which I will sketch out and try to explain. I shall also argue that the reporting of hate crime should not be seen in isolation from wider press coverage of the people who are often its victims.

Press coverage of hate crime has improved over the last decade or so according to Chris Myant, a senior communications officer with the Commission for Racial Equality who states that: "public concern about racial violence over the 1990s has been very much a function of the greater concern given to it by the print media". Furthermore, Mr Myant believes that police have helped, because since the

members of the Asian community might lack faith in the police and believe it was not worth reporting crimes.

More subtly, some reports of hate crime lack the moral opprobrium which screams out from reports in tabloid newspapers about attacks on, say, pensioners. The implicit suggestion is that crimes against the minority group in question matter less. Max Manin of gay rights campaign Stonewall says that while a story of an assault against an old woman might condemn the attack as 'despicable', if a gay man were the victim it would be more flatly factual. "There is a really strong authorial view point which is condemnatory, whereas it is straight reportage if it is a gay attack," he says. "There is often no sense of 'what an outrage'."

Another problem is that hate crime often goes completely unreported. Some Muslims feel that the

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early 1990s they have announced early on in investigations if they believed crimes were racially motivated — and that in turn has been reported. He also reckons that newspapers are not systematically biased in favour of white victims of racist crimes: "one has to understand some of the limitations, but on the whole my feelings would be that I don't think journalists have done too badly". More on those limitations below. But first, here is an example of how bad reporting can still be.

News stories about the vicious attack on 76-year old Walter Chamberlain in Oldham last April are thought to have contributed significantly towards the riots there the following month, not least by encouraging white racist thugs to congregate for 'revenge'. Newspapers and even the BBC claimed the crime against Mr Chamberlain, which was blamed on Asian youths, was a racist crime. His family denied it was racially motivated, but that got little publicity. The reports of the attack on the old man came soon after articles stating that 60 per cent of victims of recorded racial crimes in Oldham were white.

Critics of the media say that far too often, the figures were reported without any explanation of why attacks against people from ethnic minorities might have been underestimated — for example,

wave of attacks against them since September 11 has been woefully under-reported by national newspapers. Inayat Bunglawala, media secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, draws an unfavourable contrast between extensive coverage of recent attacks on the Jewish community and coverage of similar violence against Muslims. "We do have concerns that the amount of anti-Muslim prejudice out there is not sufficiently reflected in the press," he says.

Some problems with the reporting of hate crime are inevitable because of the 'limitations' mentioned earlier. There are individual reporters and editors who are prejudiced against particular groups of people, and that affects the way stories get written, or even if they are written at all. More often, I suspect, reporters and editors are not themselves prejudiced, but decide that the newspaper ought to reflect the assumed prejudices of their readers.

For all that editors say about upholding the 'public interest' - which surely includes good relations between different social groups - they are in the business of selling newspapers. They may feel there is a conflict between securing sales by pandering to readers' prejudices, and doing the right thing. Prejudice and assumed prejudice might be less of an issue if there were more newspaper journalists from ethnic minorities, although they would still have to

contend with the views of editors, and their editors' views about what secures sales. 'News judgement' – or an editor's decisions about which stories are most important on a particular day – also affects the way hate crime is reported, or whether it is covered at all. When the Queen Mother died, to take an extreme example, many important stories were immediately spiked.

News is generally understood by journalists as what is new and, preferably, also shocking or remarkable. Since hate crimes, like almost all other crimes, are terribly common, news editors have to be selective about the ones they report. That said, they ought also to find room for stories which show important trends in hate crime.

Another influence is the pressure to sensationalise — something which is especially strong on tabloid newspapers. It exists because reporters are expected to make their stories 'grab' the reader and keep them interested — if a story is deemed too dull, it simply will not get into the paper. But it is a problem because it can mean that important caveats to the main idea of the story are left out, either by reporters or later by sub-editors cutting copy to fit a page. As a result, police figures about racial attacks in Oldham were reported in an uncritical way. Some of this is simply laziness on the part of

of the above-mentioned grounds." That brings me back to stories about asylum seekers, as well as to reporting generally about people from ethnic minorities, people who are gay and people from religious minorities. The reporting of hate crime cannot be seen in isolation from wider reporting about groups who are the targets of hate crime.

If a newspaper is systematically unsympathetic and critical towards, say, gay men and women, its reports of hate crimes against them are likely to reflect this. Even if they don't — and newspapers are capable of incredible hypocrisy — readers' views about hate crime will surely be influenced by what newspapers say from day to day about victims. If we care about how hate crime is reported, we should care about wider coverage too.

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individual journalists. But a journalist on a daily newspaper may have only half an hour in which to write their story and may not have time to discover that there are important qualifications to include.

There are no published rules for all journalists specifically about hate crime. However both the NUJ Code of Conduct and the Press Complaints Commission's Code of Practice say that reporters should not mention people's race, religion or sexual orientation unless it is 'relevant' to the story. The NUJ Code also says: "A journalist shall neither originate nor process material which encourages discrimination, ridicule, prejudice or hatred on any

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